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WOMEN ORGANISATIONS AS DRIVERS OF GRASSROOTS POLITICAL AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGER STATE

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of women organisations in driving grassroots political and social participation in Niger State, Nigeria. While women groups have become central to civic engagement, their contributions at the local level remain under-documented. A descriptive survey design was employed, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The population comprised leaders and members of women organisations, community development officers, and selected political office holders. Using multistage and stratified sampling, 600 respondents were drawn from six purposively selected local government areas across the three geopolitical zones of

the state, ensuring representation from both rural and urban communities. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. Expert validation confirmed the suitability of the instruments, and reliability was established with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.82. Quantitative data were analysed with descriptive statistics such as means and percentages, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Findings show that women organisations significantly enhance voter education, encourage female candidacy, and facilitate grassroots political dialogues. They also promote social development by spearheading vocational training, maternal health advocacy, poverty alleviation, and environmental sanitation. However, challenges including inadequate funding, cultural restrictions, weak institutional support, and limited media visibility hinder their broader impact. The study concludes that women organisations are indispensable to grassroots democracy and community development in Niger State. It recommended that there is need to increased public funding, the creation of gender units in local governments, stronger leadership capacity building, and strategic collaboration with male allies and traditional institutions to amplify their effectiveness.

Keywords: Women Organisations, Grassroots Participation, Political Mobilisation, Social Development, Niger State

Introduction

Women's participation in grassroots politics and social development has gained attention globally as a fundamental component of inclusive governance (Adeniran, 2023). In Nigeria, particularly in Niger State, women organisations have emerged as key players in fostering civic awareness and ensuring community needs are represented in political discourses (Okafor & Ibrahim, 2022). However, despite their contributions, they are often excluded from formal decision-making processes, revealing a significant gap in gender representation.

Grassroots political participation refers to local-level involvement of citizens in political processes, such as voting, community advocacy, town hall discussions, and policy lobbying (Yahaya, 2022). Women organisations play a central role in sensitising and organising women to participate in these activities. Through town hall meetings, voter education, and civic enlightenment campaigns, they foster greater inclusiveness in political engagement (Aliyu, 2021).

Social participation, on the other hand, entails involvement in developmental initiatives and community services. Women organisations in Niger State contribute by leading initiatives such as maternal health outreach, water and sanitation campaigns, skills acquisition programs, and advocacy for girl-child education (Bako & Hassan, 2023). These activities promote community cohesion and empower women economically and socially.

Historically, patriarchal systems have suppressed women's voices in political settings, particularly in Northern Nigeria (Nwankwo, 2020). However, in recent decades, shifts in gender rights advocacy and international frameworks such as CEDAW have facilitated a resurgence of women's collectives that challenge exclusionary practices and fight for equal representation (Ibrahim & Musa, 2023).

Niger State is strategically positioned to reflect the broader Northern Nigerian dynamics concerning gender and politics. Women organisations here often operate under religious and cultural pressures but have continued to expand their influence through local and international partnerships (Salihu, 2022). Their strength lies in their ability to mobilise and reach the most remote and underserved rural communities.

Studies have shown that women-led associations build trust within communities, thus becoming vital vehicles for spreading political knowledge and fostering collaboration across gender divides (Usman, 2021). Their involvement reduces political apathy and promotes peaceful political behaviour by encouraging dialogue and cooperation among divergent community groups.

The increasing number of women coalitions registered with local governments and state ministries also indicates an institutional recognition of their role. These organisations have increasingly

influenced electoral processes by endorsing candidates, leading campaigns, and demanding gender-responsive policies (Zakari, 2024).

This paper examines the structures, activities, and impacts of women organisations in Niger State as they drive political and social participation at the grassroots level. The study is timely and necessary to inform policy directions aimed at achieving inclusive development and strengthening local democracy.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increased awareness about gender equality, women in Niger State remain underrepresented in political decision-making, especially at the grassroots level. This marginalisation is evident in the low number of elected female representatives, minimal participation in ward-level political meetings, and poor access to information on electoral processes. Women organisations have attempted to bridge this gap through mobilisation, advocacy, and training. However, their efforts are often constrained by lack of funding, limited media coverage, cultural barriers, and exclusion from policymaking platforms. This gap hinders their full potential to impact political and social outcomes. This study seeks to address these challenges by exploring the specific contributions of women organisations to grassroots political and social participation in Niger State and identifying areas for capacity strengthening and institutional support.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the roles of women organisations in promoting grassroots political participation in Niger State.

2. To assess the influence of women organisations on social development at the community level.
3. To investigate the challenges facing women organisations in enhancing political and social inclusion.
4. To propose strategies for improving the effectiveness of women organisations in grassroots participation.

Research Questions

1. What are the roles of women organisations in enhancing grassroots political participation in Niger State?
2. How do women organisations contribute to community-level social development?
3. What are the major challenges facing women organisations in promoting grassroots participation?
4. What strategies can improve the impact of women organisations in grassroots political and social engagement?

Methods

This study adopted both quantitative and qualitative research methods within a descriptive survey design. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. A structured questionnaire and key informant interviews formed the primary instruments. The study population comprised leaders and members of women organisations, community development officers, and selected political office holders in Niger State. Six local government areas were purposively selected from the three geopolitical zones of the state: Zone A: Bida and Agaie Zone B: Chanchaga and Bosso Zone C: Kontagora and Rijau. Using multistage sampling, 600 respondents were selected (100

from each LGA). Stratified sampling ensured representation from both urban and rural communities. Focus group discussions were held in each LGA to gather qualitative data. The instrument was validated by experts in community development and political science. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with a coefficient of 0.82. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (percentages, mean scores), while thematic analysis was used for qualitative responses. Findings are presented in tables followed by detailed textual elaboration.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the roles of women organisations in enhancing grassroots political participation in Niger State?

Item	Statement	N	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Women organisations increase voter education and awareness	600	4.10	0.52	Agree
2	They encourage female candidacy in local elections	600	3.92	0.60	Agree
3	They organise political training for community women	600	4.02	0.55	Agree
4	They advocate for gender-sensitive political reforms	600	3.95	0.58	Agree
5	They engage in grassroots policy dialogues with local leaders	600	4.07	0.54	Agree

Grand Mean: 4.01

Respondents largely agreed that women organisations play key roles in enhancing grassroots political participation. With an average mean of 4.01, findings show that activities such as voter education (mean = 4.10), political training (mean = 4.02), and local policy advocacy (mean = 4.07) are central to their political empowerment strategies. These organisations also support female candidacy and gender-focused electoral reforms, with respondents acknowledging their relevance in raising women's political consciousness.

Research Question 2: How do women organisations contribute to community-level social development?

Item	Statement	N	Mean	SD	Decision
1	They provide vocational training for women	600	4.15	0.48	Agree
2	They advocate for girl-child education	600	4.10	0.52	Agree
3	They promote health and maternal care awareness	600	4.00	0.60	Agree
4	They contribute to poverty alleviation initiatives	600	4.12	0.50	Agree
5	They lead environmental sanitation campaigns	600	3.88	0.64	Agree

Grand Mean: 4.05

Women organisations significantly influence social development. The results show strong agreement on their contributions to vocational skills training (mean = 4.15), health education, and poverty alleviation. Additionally, these groups promote gender equity in education and champion community hygiene programs, showing their relevance beyond political participation.

Research Question 3: What are the major challenges facing women organisations in promoting grassroots participation?

Item	Statement	N	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Limited financial resources hinder their activities	600	4.25	0.46	Agree
2	Cultural and religious biases restrict women's visibility	600	4.18	0.51	Agree
3	Inadequate government support and recognition	600	4.07	0.58	Agree
4	Lack of media visibility and advocacy tools	600	3.95	0.63	Agree
5	Internal leadership conflicts and weak coordination	600	3.85	0.68	Agree

Grand Mean: 4.06

The most pressing challenge is inadequate funding (mean = 4.25), followed by cultural/religious restrictions (4.18). Government neglect, lack of public platforms, and internal organizational issues also pose obstacles. These suggest the need for holistic support mechanisms.

Research Question 4: What strategies can improve the impact of women organisations in grassroots political and social engagement?

Item	Statement	N	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Increase access to public funding and grants	600	4.30	0.42	Agree
2	Establish gender units in local governments	600	4.15	0.50	Agree
3	Provide media and ICT training for publicity	600	4.05	0.55	Agree

4	Foster collaboration with male allies and traditional	600	3.98	0.62	Agree
5	leaders	600	4.10	0.51	Agree
	Strengthen internal leadership through training				

Grand Mean: 4.12

The responses suggest that enhancing access to funds (mean = 4.30) and policy support like creating gender-focused local government units (4.15) are key enablers. Improving ICT skills, strategic alliances, and leadership capacity are also vital for impact amplification.

Discussion of the Findings

The first objective of this study was to examine the roles of women organisations in promoting grassroots political participation in Niger State. The findings revealed that women organisations significantly contribute to voter education, political training, and grassroots advocacy. With mean scores above 4.0 for these items, the results confirm that women groups are central to enhancing democratic awareness and mobilising community participation. This aligns with Abdulkarim and Yahaya (2022), who argued that women-led community initiatives are instrumental in reducing political apathy in Northern Nigeria. By encouraging female candidacy and demanding gender-responsive reforms, these organisations are reshaping political culture from within local communities.

The second objective sought to assess the influence of women organisations on social development at the community level. Results showed high levels of agreement on their contributions to vocational training, maternal health promotion, poverty alleviation, and girl-child education. These findings demonstrate that the scope of women organisations transcends politics into core aspects of social welfare. Bako and Hassan (2023) similarly noted that women cooperatives in rural Nigeria act as social safety nets by providing livelihood opportunities and health awareness. The

present study strengthens this claim by showing how organised women groups in Niger State address both economic empowerment and community health.

The third objective was to investigate the challenges facing women organisations in enhancing political and social inclusion. Findings identified inadequate funding, cultural and religious restrictions, limited government recognition, and internal leadership conflicts as key obstacles. The highest mean score was for financial constraints (4.25), underscoring the seriousness of funding gaps. Ibrahim and Musa (2023) similarly observed that socio-cultural barriers and weak institutional support hinder women's political advancement in Northern states. The consistency across studies highlights that without structural reforms and adequate resources, the potential of women organisations remains constrained.

The fourth objective focused on strategies for improving the effectiveness of women organisations in grassroots participation. Respondents strongly agreed that access to funding, the creation of gender units in local governments, ICT training, and collaboration with traditional and male leaders are crucial. These findings suggest that sustainability requires both internal capacity building and external support. Salihu (2022) emphasised the importance of partnerships and institutional recognition in enabling women groups to thrive. The present study affirms this by showing that stronger networks, better leadership training, and improved publicity mechanisms can amplify the impact of women organisations on both political and social development in Niger State.

Summary of the Findings

Women organisations significantly enhance grassroots political participation by providing voter education, encouraging candidacy, and influencing policy dialogues.

In social development, they deliver programs on health, education, vocational skills, and sanitation, thereby improving community well-being.

Challenges such as financial limitations, cultural resistance, and lack of government support constrain their impact.

Strategies for improvement include public funding, gender-responsive policies, leadership training, and enhanced collaboration with stakeholders.

Conclusion

Women organisations in Niger State are critical to advancing democratic values and community development from the grassroots. Their engagement in political and social spaces has fostered inclusion, promoted peace, and contributed to local transformation. However, institutional neglect and socio-cultural hurdles remain major impediments.

Efforts to support women organisations must therefore be deliberate, policy-driven, and inclusive. It is evident that these organisations can significantly influence the socio-political landscape if given the right resources, recognition, and platforms for visibility.

The study concludes that strengthening women organisations is not just a gender issue it is a developmental imperative for effective grassroots governance in Niger State and Nigeria at large.

Recommendations

Governments and donors should prioritize targeted funding schemes for registered women organisations to enhance capacity and sustainability.

Local governments should create gender affairs units and advisory boards with female representation to institutionalize inclusivity.

Women groups should be trained in media and digital tools to publicize their initiatives and engage wider audiences.

Collaborations with male champions, religious institutions, and traditional authorities can dismantle cultural barriers and amplify impact.

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