

Social media, patriarchy, and women's political participation: Reimagining democratic development in Nsukka Urban, in the context of the Africa we want

Chioma Eunice **Akaebe**¹, *Godstime **Eze**² & Prisca Ogechukwu **Eze**¹

¹Department of Sociology and Anthropology

²Institute of African Studies/Department of Theatre and Film Studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State

*Corresponding author: godstime.eze@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

The expansion of social media has transformed political communication and civic engagement across many democratic societies. Yet, women's political participation remains limited and constrained by enduring structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. This qualitative study tries to understand how social media intersects with patriarchy to shape women's political participation in Nsukka urban, in the context of the Africa we want. The study was anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory and Feminist Theory, and data were elicited from 19 respondents through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were purposively selected, and data were analyzed using manual thematic analysis. Findings revealed that social media platforms provide opportunity to access political information, express political opinions, mobilize others during elections, and support female candidates. However, perceptions of social media's efficacy were mixed; while some viewed it as empowering and democratizing, many believed that online expression does not automatically translate into concrete political action. Cultural norms rooted in patriarchy, alongside socio-

economic limitations such as low income, limited digital skills, and high data costs, significantly shaped residents' perceptions and constrained women's full political participation. Challenges identified included cyberbullying, fear of reputational damage, and technological barriers. The study concludes that social media holds immense potential to enhance African women's political engagement, but its benefits are moderated by prevailing socio-cultural and structural realities. Thus, African research should be people-centered, context-specific, and transformative, in order to produce knowledge that amplifies women's voices, challenges patriarchal barriers, and promotes inclusive democratic development in line with the Africa we want.

Keywords: Patriarchy, politics, political inclusion, social media in Nigeria, political empowerment, and qualitative research

Introduction

Women's representation in political participation is a critical global issue. Globally, women represent approximately 25% in parliamentary roles, a modest increase from 11% in 1995 (United Nations Women, 2020). In sub-Saharan African societies, women's political participation is usually shaped by multiple factors, which include economic resources, technological advancements and societal norms. Thus, studies have highlighted the persistent underrepresentation of women in Nigerian politics, showing that cultural norms and systemic inequalities limit

women's access to political power and decision-making platforms, with gender gaps reinforced by structural and economic barriers (Ayuba, 2025; Rashida, 2023). According to an empirical analysis from 1963 to 2022, despite Nigeria's 35% affirmative action target, socio-economic, cultural, and political barriers continue to impede women's full participation in politics (Okoye et al., 2022). This empirical analysis further suggests reforms to tackle these structural constraints. Therefore, the persistence of these barriers warrants further investigation, particularly in relation to emerging platforms that may

influence women's political engagement. While significant strides have been made, barriers remain, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria, where women's legislative representation hovers around 6.1%, despite women comprising half of the population (Oladipo & Chukwudi, 2023; Iloka, 2021). This underrepresentation is characterised by persistent gender disparities across political and decision-making arenas, mostly in patriarchal societies. Despite widespread acknowledgement of these disparities, many initiatives aimed at addressing women's underrepresentation in politics have yielded limited results, with frameworks developed by international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) insufficient for effectively closing this gender gap.

Recognising this issue, the UN laid the groundwork with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, establishing fundamental rights for all individuals, including the right to political engagement without discrimination. Nevertheless, barriers that hinder women's active involvement in political processes persist. The foundation for women's political participation has also been established through legislative frameworks like the Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action, which emphasise equal representation in political structures (Ugwuegede & Dominica, 2021). However, despite these frameworks, societal perceptions continue to undermine women's capabilities in political domains.

Other international instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and CEDAW, have sought to remedy these inequalities, especially the severe underrepresentation of women in politics. Furthermore, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) highlighted the necessity of women's empowerment and equality as crucial for fostering democracy and societal well-being. Despite these global commitments, the gap between policy aspirations and the reality of women's political participation remains substantial, particularly in many developing societies.

In the African context, regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) have initiated various measures to rectify gender imbalances in political participation through affirmative actions and policies. The AU's Gender Policy

exemplifies a commitment to bridging the gender gap, recognising the intrinsic link between gender equality, democratic governance, and national development. Scholarship remains limited in its examination of the role social media plays in shaping women's political participation, particularly in Nigeria. Social media has emerged as a political socialisation tool and provides many with timely political information and helps shape their political opinion (Olanihun & Oloyede, 2024). It also serves as a potential equaliser for women in recent years, providing accessible platforms for political discourse and mobilisation (Subiakto et al., 2025). The women in Parliament Global Forum (2016) posit that social media democratises political conversations, enabling women to engage more actively, though this increase in engagement has not fully materialised across all demographics (Calderaro & Craig, 2020). This digital space enables women to share experiences and mobilise collective actions, as seen in campaigns like *#BringBackOurGirls* that took place in Nigeria in 2014. It was a social media movement that gained global attention after the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok by Boko Haram.

Yet, the efficacy of social media in fostering women's political participation remains contingent on users' access to digital tools and socio-economic status. A critical analysis reveals a gap in existing literature where empirical research focuses on how societal dynamics and digital landscapes interact to influence women's perceptions and participation in politics through social media. The juxtaposition of women's roles in Nigerian politics against their representation underscores a gap between potential and practice. While social media's interactive nature offers opportunities for engagement, barriers such as affordability and digital literacy hinder effective participation. This study seeks to illuminate the potential of social media as a powerful tool for enhancing women's political involvement, providing insights that can inform policy and advocacy strategies aimed at empowering women politically in Nigeria and beyond. Recent findings suggest a notable shift in the use of social media to raise political awareness and civic engagement, with social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and Facebook serving as vital spaces for discussing political issues and organising advocacy efforts (Oladip & Chukwudi, 2023). These digital platforms allow

women to bypass traditional power structures and engage directly with political narratives affecting their communities (Sobechi, 2022). Moreover, the mobilisation of women's groups through these digital channels reinforces community solidarity, enabling a collective push for greater representation in political processes.

Despite increasing discussions about women's empowerment and participation in Nigeria's political landscape, significant challenges persist. For instance, a study on women's leadership and political participation in Africa (Nigeria & Ghana) employed Kanter's Glass-Ceiling Theory to examine barriers to women's political advancement (Okonkwo, 2022). The study highlighted the Nigerian women's systemic underrepresentation and recommends mentorship networks and capacity-building support for aspiring female politicians. Subsequently, discussions in negotiating access and privilege highlighted that through interviews with female politicians, research pinpointed internal party gate-keeping, intimidation, financial barriers, and patriarchal norms as key obstacles to women's participation in politics in Nigeria (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023). This suggests that these

patriarchal norms exist in many cases, especially in politics.

However, patriarchal politics often normalises aggression and violence, intimidation, where women face harassment, character assassination, and cyberbullying. According to Arum and Oluwaleye (2024), patriarchy is a social system in which positions of control, benefit and advantage are primarily held by men. Building on this perspective, authors submit that patriarchy not only privileges men in leadership positions but also legitimises aggressive behaviour as part of political competition, thereby reinforcing the notion that politics is a "male domain". In patriarchal settings like Nigeria and many other countries, violence becomes strategic – it is used not merely against opponents, but disproportionately against women who challenge gender norms. Recently, sociopolitical contexts in Nigeria illustrate these dynamics. In March 2022, there were nationwide protests as part of a push for CEDAW and gender equality, following the rejection of several gender-related constitutional amendment bills by the National Assembly. Similarly, in March 2025, a female Nigerian Senator's sexual harassment allegations sparked protests

under "We are all Natasha" (Egbejule, 2025:2). The accusations dominated conversations and highlighted prevailing sexism and women's rights issues in the country, where no woman has ever been elected governor, vice-president or president. Furthermore, women remain significantly underrepresented in elected political offices. According to reports, only four women serve in the 109-member Senate at the time of this research, a drop from the seven female senators elected in 2015 and the number of women in the 360-member House of Representatives has also declined, from 22 in 2015 to 17 in the 10th Assembly (The Guardian, 2025). The report also highlighted that the 10th Assembly in Nigeria is the current one, having been inaugurated in June 2023. The figures reflect a concerning trend of declining female representation in the National Assembly.

Despite these holistic global and continental commitments and the rapid proliferation of social media across Nigeria that reshaped political communication, civic engagement, and public discourse, significant challenges to women's political participation remain. Platforms, such as Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, have

facilitated new forms of political mobilisation and information dissemination, enabling citizens to engage directly in political conversations and activism (Suleiman & Peter, 2025). Given this growing influence, it is imperative to examine some of the benefits of social media toward women's engagement in politics. However, earlier research from Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the Nigerian context, reveals mixed outcomes regarding women's use of social media for political participation, as some studies suggest that social media provides avenues for political socialisation and mobilisation by increasing access to information and networks. Nevertheless, these digital gains do not always translate into sustained political involvement or leadership outcomes (Obiechina, 2023). Similarly, another study reveals that digital platforms can support advocacy and visibility, but online participation may still occur within patriarchal and exclusionary political structures, limiting women's ability to convert online engagement into substantive political influence (Nkoa et al., 2023). These contrasting findings highlight an unresolved debate regarding the extent to which social media can meaningfully transform women's political participation.

Moreover, existing literature primarily focuses on the general impact of social media on political discourse, often neglecting how it influences women's political participation. For instance, Iloka (2021) examined how cultural and patriarchal norms continue to constrain women's involvement in Nigerian politics, emphasising that digital tools alone cannot dismantle entrenched gender inequalities.

Similarly, Ugwuegede and Dominica (2021) explored gender inequality and women's exclusion from mainstream politics in Nigeria, identifying institutional and societal barriers but paying little attention to digital spaces. In another study, Okafor (2020) analysed the role of social media in spreading political disinformation in Nigeria, highlighting its disruptive influence on public trust, while Okonkwo (2022) examined structural inequalities and economic challenges that hinder women's political advancement. Additionally, Ette and Akpan-Obong (2023) focused on gendered intimidation and exclusion in Nigerian politics, drawing attention to women's vulnerability but without a localised analysis of how social media could empower or constrain women's political participation.

While these works provide valuable insights into gender and politics in Nigeria, they largely focus on structural, cultural, and generalised digital impacts without specifically examining the intersection of social media use and patriarchy in shaping women's political participation in Nsukka Urban, Enugu State. Hence, there remains a significant gap in the literature which this study seeks to fill. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how social media platforms interact with enduring patriarchal norms to shape women's political engagement, contributing to debates on democratic development in the region, highlighting the challenges they face, and how these platforms can serve as catalysts for empowerment and active participation in the democratic process. Consequently, there is a gap in understanding how perceptions of social media, shaped by cultural, economic, and political factors, can either facilitate or hinder women's active participation in politics within Nsukka urban, Enugu State. Furthermore, the role of local contexts, including socio-cultural norms and educational backgrounds, significantly influences women's perception of social media. Addressing this intricacy, this study aligns with the vision of the Africa we want, an Africa

that is inclusive, participatory, and self-defined by challenging dominant knowledge production, highlighting indigenous realities of patriarchy rather than merely focusing on externally imposed perspectives, identifying challenges and opportunities in digital political participation, as well as documenting women's lived experiences of patriarchy and digital engagement. The study also seeks to encourage grassroots advocacy movements and strengthen women's capacity to engage meaningfully in governance, both politically active women and marginalized ones. Hence, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do women in urban areas engage with social media as a tool for political participation?
2. How do patriarchy and other barriers limit women in utilising social media for political activism?
3. What perceptions do people of Nsukka urban hold regarding the effectiveness of social media in enhancing women's political engagement?
4. What possible measures can be taken to reimagine democratic development through the use of social media for women's political participation in a patriarchal region?

These and other questions related to how social media connect with patriarchy and women's political participation are yet to be answered. In light of this, the qualitative survey was designed to explore how social media intersects with patriarchy to shape women's political participation among residents in Nsukka urban, Enugu state, Nigeria and also to understand determinants that influence the perceptions of people in Nsukka regarding social media's role in women's political participation.

Theoretically, the study is anchored on Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Feminist Theory. These frameworks provide the conceptual foundation for examining women's perceptions of social media and their political participation in Nsukka Urban from patriarchal perspectives. UGT was propounded in the 1940s but was formalised by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in the 1970s. The theory emerged as a shift from "what media do to people" (a

passive audience perspective) to "what people do with media" (an active audience perspective). It explains women's motivations and the gratifications they derive from using social media. Feminist Theory, on the other hand, is rooted in the works of early gender scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and was later developed in multiple waves of feminist scholarship. The theory interrogates the gendered structures and inequalities that shape and sometimes constrain those gratifications. Together, UGT and Feminist Theories offer a robust lens for analysing how women perceive social media as both an opportunity and a contested space for political empowerment.

The UGT posits that media consumers are not passive recipients of content but active agents who selectively use social media to satisfy specific needs. These needs include information, entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, and identity formation. In the context of digital platforms, the theory has been extended to explain why individuals choose particular social media applications and how they deploy them for political purposes. In relation to women's political participation, UGT suggests that women adopt social media

because it gratifies their needs for political information, communal interaction, and self-representation. For instance, Nigerian women use Facebook and WhatsApp to access political news and engage in political discussions, while South Asian women turn to social media to bypass restrictive socio-cultural contexts. Feminist Theory, on the other hand, provides a critical perspective for understanding the gendered dynamics of political participation. Rooted in the works of Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and later developed by scholars such as bell hooks and Nancy Fraser, the theory argues that patriarchal structures and gender inequality systematically exclude women from political, economic, and social power. The theory interrogates how women's voices are marginalised and advocates for structural transformation to achieve gender equity.

By combining these perspectives, the study avoids an overly individualistic explanation of women's social media use (a limitation of UGT) and enriches its analysis with a structural critique (provided by Feminist Theory). Thus, the theoretical framework is well-suited to analysing how women perceive the opportunities and challenges of social media for political participation in their

unique socio-cultural context. Therefore, both theories predict the following research outcomes:

- High online political engagement may not always translate into offline political participation.
- The positive effect of social media use on political participation will be weakened by patriarchal constraints.

Methods

Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically adopting a conventional approach. This approach is justified because it enables the inductive identification of patterned meanings across women's experiences, while remaining flexible enough to capture the complex interplay between social media, patriarchy and political participation in the study area.

Area of the study

This research was conducted in Nsukka Urban, which serves as the headquarters and most developed part of Nsukka Local Government Area (LGA) in Enugu State, Nigeria. Nsukka Urban lies within the Nsukka cultural zone in the northern part

of Enugu State. It is well known for housing the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), which contributes to relatively high literacy and digital penetration. Women in Nsukka urban areas are engaged in diverse socioeconomic activities, ranging from academia, trade, and civil service to active participation in community organisations. The core communities of Nsukka urban are Nkpunano, Nru, and Ihe-Owerre (Akaebe et al., 2025). Nkpunano Community is one of the founding communities of what is recognised as Nsukka urban. As a traditional community, it has its own leadership structure. However, their political affairs are now managed under the Nsukka LGA structure, which is headed by an Executive Chairman responsible for local governance. The traditional leadership in the study area operates alongside the modern political system, where the LGA chairman, supported by the council, handles the political administration for the area and its citizens. Nsukka urban has produced several influential political figures and is known for its vibrant political debates. Decisions and development projects are planned and executed at the local government level, affecting all three communities.

Despite this vibrancy, women's participation in political processes, including access to leadership opportunities and decision-making structures, within Nsukka LGA remains limited by socio-cultural norms, particularly patriarchal attitudes, and institutional gatekeeping (Akaebe et al. 2026). However, the growth of digital media, especially Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) may create new spaces for women to share political opinions, organise campaigns, and challenge gender stereotypes. Nsukka urban, with its mix of educated population and traditional influences, thus provides an ideal context for studying how social media shapes women's political perceptions and engagement.

This makes Nsukka urban an important site for the study because it represents a hybrid social context, on the one hand, exposure to digital platforms and political discourse is high, on the other, patriarchal traditions and cultural expectations continue to shape women's roles in politics. The setting, therefore, provides a fertile ground for exploring the nuanced perceptions women hold about social media, patriarchy and political

participation. Thus, these factors justify the study area.

Population of the study

The population of this study consists of adults aged 18 years and above residing in Nsukka Urban, Enugu State. Nsukka Urban, as previously described, encompasses communities such as Nkpunano, Nru and Ihen' Owerre. According to the National Bureau of Statistics and the National Population Commission, the total population for Nsukka Urban is not explicitly provided. However, the most recent official figures are for the entire Nsukka Local Government Area (LGA), which recorded a population of 309,633 based on the 2006 census. Although there are projections estimating a population of 417,700 for the entire LGA in 2016, this estimate applies to the whole LGA, not just the urban area. Out of this figure, females constitute about 51.8%.

The target population for this research, therefore, comprises adults (18 years and above) residing in Nsukka Urban. Women form the core of the study because they are directly exposed to both local political dynamics and the digital communication platforms that mediate political participation. The demographic diversity

of Nsukka Urban residents ranging from students and professionals to traders and artisans, provides a rich base for understanding varying perceptions of social media's role in politics. This diversity enhances the study's ability to capture a broad range of experiences and viewpoints regarding the intersection of social media, patriarchy, and women's political participation.

Participants' recruitment

Participants were chosen from the urban region of Nsukka LGA using a stratified selection approach. Since Nsukka Urban, together with the communities of Nkpunano, Nru, and Ihe/owerre, is the only urban centre in the LGA, it was purposively chosen as the study location. A total of twenty-seven (27) respondents were selected purposively, comprising eighteen (18) women for in-depth interviews, 3 focus group discussions (FGDs) with 3 women and 3 men each from the 3 communities in Nsukka urban (9 FGDs), representing a mix of traders, students, and professionals.

These sampling strategies were chosen in light of the study's objectives and participant socio-demographics. The study covered all male and female residents of the study region who were at

least eighteen years old, married or never married, and either formally educated or without formal education. The selected age range was considered appropriate because individuals within this category were deemed capable of providing relevant insights into the subject under investigation. However, before their involvement, the recruited participants were adequately informed about the study's objectives, advantages, and risks, and they gave their informed consent. The confidentiality of all the information they gave was guaranteed, and they were informed that they might withdraw from the interview at any moment if they so desired. As a result, nineteen (19) respondents out of the twenty-seven (27) people who were initially selected for the study participated after eight (8) of them declined to take part. However, the total number of participants is adequate, as the researcher's savings were the only source of funds used to carry out and execute the study.

Data collection

The data collection methodology took advantage of the scientific rigour of the qualitative research method. However, both primary and secondary data were gathered for the study. Thus,

the latter was compiled through book and article reviews to understand the present discourse on women's expectations and the elements that produced such status in specific cultural contexts. However, direct observation and in-depth interviews were employed to collect primary data. The interviews were conducted in both the Nsukka dialect and English, depending on the interviewees' preferred language. Based on expectations of gender roles in the home, household decision-making, education, employment possibilities, inheritance, and other cultural practices, the interviews focused on participants' perceptions and experiences regarding women's roles as well as engagement in society and politics.

The researchers sampled the opinions of selected members of the study area, and every interview lasted about 30–45 minutes, while each focus group session lasted about 60–90 minutes. Data collection was carried out over a period of 6 weeks. Face-to-face interviews and FGDs were conducted in safe, accessible locations within Nsukka Urban (e.g., community halls, shops, and the university environment). With respondents' consent, sessions were audio-recorded and supplemented with

field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, which allows themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives, rather than imposing predefined categories. Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step approach, the coding process was guided not only by pre-existing theoretical expectations but also by themes that emerged inductively from the data. During the coding process, the researchers worked with a research analyst, and any disagreements were resolved by re-examining the interview transcripts and FGD notes. At the end, some local languages/dialects were translated into the English language. To ensure trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria were applied; credibility was enhanced through member checking, transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions of the study context, dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail of data collection and analysis, and confirmability was achieved by triangulating interviews and FGDs and keeping reflexive notes throughout the research process.

In addition, the researchers examined the translation notes and the transcripts of the interviews while continuously playing the audio recorder to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the transcriptions and translations. As a form of data analysis that aids in the discovery of important themes, the coded data were categorized such that codes with similar features are grouped into broader thematic categories (Umeifekwem & Okoye, 2023; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This process facilitated the systematic interpretation of participants' narratives and the emergence of meaningful patterns relevant to the study's objectives.

Results

This section presents and explains the themes formulated from the participants' narratives and triangulated across interviews and FGDs. Direct participant quotations were used to preserve voice and illustrate patterns. These themes include the ways in which women utilise social media for political engagement; the efficacy of social media in fostering women's political participation; the barriers women encounter in using social media for political activism in Nsukka Urban; and the strategies that can enhance social media utilisation for women's political participation in Nsukka

Urban. This was carried out from 24 October to 12th of December 2025. Data collected from the interviews with the respondents were categorised into themes and examined.

Women's utilisation of social media for political engagement

This theme explores patterns of women's digital political use and the types of online engagement women undertake. Women in the study area increasingly utilise social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) to access political information, share opinions, and mobilise support for community causes. Across different occupations, including trading, civil service, and artisanal work, social media has become a tool for inclusion, offering women an alternative to male-dominated physical political spaces. However, their level of engagement and confidence varies, depending on factors such as education, access to smartphones, and exposure to online discourse.

A trader at Ogige Market in Nru Community vividly described how WhatsApp has transformed her approach to politics, turning it into a vital channel for staying informed and building

connections with fellow women in her community:

communication, 43 years,
November 04, 2025)

Ah, my sister, before this WhatsApp came into my life, I didn't even bother with politics at all. I used to think it was only for men; they would shout at rallies, argue in beer parlours, while we women just focused on our market and children. But since I joined our market women's WhatsApp group, everything has changed for me. That's where I get all the information about elections, who's running for chairman or councillor in the LGA, and even what's happening at the state level with the governor or senate. Through my engagement with WhatsApp, I learnt that politics isn't just for big people in Abuja; it concerns us right here in Nsukka, and I contributed during the last election by convincing five women in my line to go vote for the candidate we discussed in the group. This WhatsApp has really opened my eyes, it feels like politics is our own backyard matter now, not just for men with big cars. (IDI, personal

This demonstrates that women in the research area use social media not only to engage in political discourse but also to increase their political awareness, mobilise electoral support, and influence voting decisions, particularly in support of female candidates.

Another respondent, a civil servant, expressed how social media has empowered her to engage in discussions on national and local political issues more openly, thereby breaking free from the traditional gender norms that often silence women in face-to-face community gatherings:

You know, in those typical town hall or village meetings here, it's always the men who take the floor, talking loudly about everything from road repairs to national budgets, while we women are expected to just sit quietly, maybe nod along or serve refreshments. But eh, with Facebook and X (what we used to call Twitter), things are different now. I can type out my opinions on government policies without anyone interrupting me because

I'm a woman. During the last general elections, I joined this active Facebook group called 'Nsukka Women for Good Governance', which had hundreds of us from different parts of the town, including teachers, traders, and housewives. We shared fact-checked articles from Punch or Vanguard newspapers, debated the candidates' manifestos, and even organised online polls to see who people supported for the House of Assembly seat. It made me realise how social media is levelling the playing field; before, politics felt like a distant thing in Abuja or Lagos, but now it's right in our palms. (IDI, personal communication, 37 years, October 24, 2025)

According to this narrative, women use a variety of social media platforms to enhance their political engagement, access political information, and participate more actively in local political processes. Another respondent highlighted how social media groups have proven invaluable for rallying

women around grassroots political efforts, particularly during local elections:

During the last council election, our women's group turned WhatsApp into our main war room for supporting one of our own, a fellow trader who decided to run for councillor in our ward. We were all excited; we shared her campaign photos, discussed her ideas for improving market sanitation and security, and even sent out messages urging other women to spread the word and vote for her on polling day. It wasn't like the old days when women just stayed quiet and let the men handle everything. Social media changed that for us. We could chat at any time, even late at night after closing our stalls, coordinating who would print flyers or talk to neighbours. We had organised ourselves properly, raised awareness about women's issues in the community, and shown that market women like us can make noise without leaving our shops. (IDI, personal communication, 46 years, October 25, 2025)

The aforementioned demonstrates how women in the study area use social media to participate in politics, particularly as a means of enhancing their political awareness, knowledge, and engagement. They also challenge the notion that politics is exclusively a male domain. However, such engagement is not without challenges. During a FGD session, a middle-aged trader voiced her reservations about active participation, citing the role of social media platforms in spreading hate speech and harmful propaganda that often deters open involvement in political discussions and activities:

You see, I often scroll through political posts on my phone during slow hours at the market, but I hesitate to comment because the online space can turn nasty so quickly. Once you voice your opinion about some issues going on in the country, especially about politics, trolls swarm in, labelling you 'enemy of progress' or worse, with insults that sting deep. So, I mostly lurk, reading to stay informed about things like the latest from the governor's office or national policies affecting traders' taxes. I

only forward verified stuff to my close circle via WhatsApp, like official INEC updates, to avoid spreading the same misinformation that poisons discussions. While social media keeps me in the know without leaving my stall, the fear of backlash from all that toxic content makes me prefer silence over sparking unnecessary wahala. (FGD, personal communication, Female Group, December 2, 2025)

From this and other narratives, it is evident that social media serves as a critical space for women's political awakening in Nsukka urban. While women in the formal sector tend to use Facebook and X for policy debates and political commentary, those in the informal sector rely more on WhatsApp and TikTok for information sharing, mobilisation, and political education. The platforms bridge physical and social barriers, enabling women to participate in politics from their homes or workplaces. Consequently, social media has emerged as an effective tool for enhancing women's political awareness, engagement, and participation in the study area.

Efficacy of social media in fostering women's political participation

The perceptions of the residents regarding the efficacy of social media in enhancing women's political participation were diverse, reflecting differences in gender, occupation, education, and personal exposure to digital platforms. Generally, most respondents acknowledged that social media has provided unprecedented opportunities for women to express their political opinions, mobilise support, and stay informed about political events at both local and national levels. However, the extent to which these opportunities have translated into tangible forms of participation, such as voting, contesting, or influencing policy, remained a matter of debate among the respondents.

Several respondents expressed strong optimism about the transformative power of social media. A young female respondent in Ihe'n Owerre community, a final-year student, explained that social media has given women a new sense of confidence and belonging in the political space:

My dear, before this whole social media wave hit us, I used to think politics was this messy, corrupt

game that only tough men in agbada could handle. Women like me should just focus on school, marriage, or business. But eh, now with Instagram, X, and Facebook on my phone, everything don change. I see all these strong Nigerian women like Funke Akindele or even that activist Chioma from Lagos posting about leadership, sharing stories of how they contested for local seats or pushed for bills on women's rights in the National Assembly. It motivates me, makes me feel say, 'If dem fit do am, why not me?' I joined this Facebook group called 'Nsukka Youths Decide,' run by some UNN students, and the women there are sharp! They don't just like or share posts; they tag politicians directly in comments, asking questions. All these gave me that boldness to speak out, even in class discussions, now politics no longer feels like a faraway Abuja matter; it's right here, in our backyard, and social media is handing us the microphone. (IDI, personal communication, 22 years, November 16, 2025)

According to the narrative, social media encourages most women in the study area to participate in and to discuss politics. In the same direction, some respondents during FGD sessions, however, maintained a more sceptical stance. A middle-aged male respondent from the Nkpunano community argued that although women are more visible online, their participation often remains confined to digital spaces and does not necessarily translate into active offline political engagement:

Ehn, all this noise on Facebook and WhatsApp about politics doesn't always add up when it comes to real action on the ground. Yes, you see women posting memes about corrupt officials or sharing videos supporting female candidates, but when election day rolls in with its long queues at polling units, many of them stay home, blaming rain or family chores. And forget about joining political parties like PDP or APC here in Enugu State, very few take that step to attend meetings or contest for positions like chairperson. For example, during the last local government polls, I saw plenty of online

campaigns with hashtags like #WomenForChangeNsukka, but at the actual rallies in Asata square, it was mostly men dominating, with maybe a handful of women showing up. It's easy to type 'We support women in politics' from your bed, but stepping out to mobilise voters door-to-door or facing the heat of campaigns is a different ball game. So, in my view, social media raises awareness, no doubt, like educating people on issues such as the poor state of our markets or healthcare, but it hasn't truly turned these women into hands-on participants; it's more like window shopping than buying the goods. (FGD, personal communication, Male Group, 52 years, October 18, 2025)

This demonstrates how women's nature as caregivers has a detrimental impact on their involvement in national politics. This suggests that digital activity does not result in tangible political engagement.

Overall, the respondents agreed that social media has opened new spaces for women's voices and visibility, but they differed on whether this digital

empowerment has fully translated into real political influence. For some, it represents a revolutionary tool that has broken social and cultural barriers, while for others; it remains a symbolic or preparatory phase rather than an active form of participation. Yet, across Nsukka's urban communities, the common sentiment was that women now see politics differently. They no longer view it as a distant or forbidden arena but as a shared civic responsibility that they can approach confidently through the power of social media. Nevertheless, respondents acknowledged that several factors continue to shape and constrain the extent to which social media can effectively promote women's political participation. These factors are discussed in the following section.

Barriers faced by women in utilising social media for political activism

This theme examines how patriarchy, cultural norms, and institutional constraints operate alongside women's digital engagement. Despite the growing presence of women on digital platforms, many respondents emphasised that the journey toward full participation in political activism through social media is riddled with significant challenges. These barriers are deeply rooted in social

expectations, economic realities, digital literacy gaps, and even more in cultural beliefs. For many women, social media serves as both a door to empowerment and a mirror reflecting the inequalities that persist in society.

A respondent, a middle-aged market trader, spoke candidly about her daily struggles with limited internet access and the high cost of internet access:

My daughter was the one who opened a Facebook account for me, but I don't even use it all the time because data is too expensive. Sometimes, when I want to join political discussions in our women's WhatsApp group, my phone will just hang, or the network will be bad. You know this, our network can be wahala. So, most times, I just wait until I go to her shop, where she has Wi-Fi, before I can read what others have posted. These things make it hard for us market women to be active online like those people in the offices who have free internet. (IDI, personal communication, 42 years, October 25, 2025)

This suggests that some women in the study area are unable to engage in politics due to a lack of funding and limited access to networks.

Another respondent, a civil servant, described the cultural barriers that come with being a woman expressing political opinions online:

There's this fear that once a woman starts talking about politics on Facebook or X, people begin to label her. They say she is too forward or that she wants to behave like a man. Some even call you stubborn. I remember when I posted something about women's representation in Enugu politics, a man commented, 'go and take care of your home instead of arguing politics.' I deleted the post out of frustration. That kind of attitude discourages many women from being outspoken online, especially married ones, because they don't want to be seen as disrespectful or controversial. (IDI, Personal Communication, 32 years, October 28, 2025)

The story above demonstrates how societal norms and cultural systems deter

certain women from getting involved in politics. Similarly, a young female respondent echoed this view, pointing out that cultural norms, coupled with online harassment and verbal abuse, constitute significant barriers to women's political participation on social media:

Social media is not easy for women who talk about politics. Once you say something strong or criticize a politician, some people will start insulting you. They'll say you're looking for attention or you don't have a husband. Sometimes, even your friends will send private messages telling you to stop posting about politics before someone uses it against you. It's like they want to silence women. I've even seen cases where screenshots of what a woman said in a group were shared publicly to embarrass her. That kind of thing makes you afraid to participate freely. (IDI, Personal Communication, October 20, 2025)

This demonstrates yet another way of preventing women from participating in politics. For others, the challenge is not only digital but also cultural. A

respondent, a widow reflected on how community norms still restrict women's political expression. She said:

In this area, if a woman is too outspoken about politics, some people see her as proud or disrespectful. Even in my church, they say politics is for men. If you post anything political on WhatsApp, some of your church members will start avoiding you or gossiping. They'll say you have joined worldly people. So, sometimes, I just keep quiet, even though I have opinions about the things happening in this country. (IDI, Personal Communication, 52 years, October 26, 2025)

Across these perspectives, it is evident that women face a complex web of structural, cultural, and technological obstacles in their use of social media for political activism. High data costs, poor internet connectivity, digital illiteracy, gender stereotyping, and online harassment collectively limit their freedom to engage. Cultural norms and family influence further compound these barriers, creating an environment where women's voices often remain subdued despite the open nature of digital

platforms. Nevertheless, several means can be adopted to achieve an optimal level of women's political participation in the study area. Despite these challenges, respondents identified several measures that could be adopted to enhance women's political participation through social media in the study area. These strategies are discussed in the following section.

Strategies to reimagine democratic development through social media utilisation for women's political participation

Despite the increasing presence of women on various social media platforms, many respondents noted that the potential of these platforms to advance women's political participation has not been fully realised. One respondent explained thus:

Many women here don't really understand how powerful social media can be. They use it for chatting, gossip, and small business, but not for political awareness. If the government or NGOs can organize trainings where women learn how to post meaningfully, verify information, and promote female candidates, it

will help a lot. We also need to teach them how to handle online criticism, so they don't get discouraged. (FGD, personal communication, Female Group, November 24, 2025)

She also stressed that without proper knowledge and guidance, women will continue to underutilise these platforms. This suggests the importance of socialising women towards active political participation not only through formal institutions but also from early childhood within the home and broader upbringing.

Another woman argued that political parties themselves have a huge role to play in promoting women's online political engagement. In her words,

Parties like PDP, Labour Party, and APC here should not just do rallies; they should take their campaigns to social media and involve more women. Every party should have a women-led media team that runs Facebook and WhatsApp pages to discuss issues affecting women and share updates about female aspirants. Even if women are not contesting, they can still manage digital

campaigns and learn political communication from there." She maintained that this would bridge the digital gap between men and women in politics. (IDI, Personal Communication, 35 years, October 27, 2025)

This implies that there is a need for full inclusion of women across all levels of the political sphere, starting from the grassroots. One respondent highlighted the role of government and law enforcement in curbing digital harassment, which often drives women away from online political spaces. She noted:

Before women can fully participate politically on social media, they must feel safe. The government needs to take online bullying seriously because many of us have been insulted just for expressing our opinions. There should be clear laws and public campaigns about online respect and digital safety. When women know their accounts and reputations

are protected, more of them will speak boldly and get involved in political discussions." She added that digital safety awareness should be included in political sensitisation programs targeting women. (IDI, Personal Communication, 39 years, October 26, 2025)

that supportive online environments would empower more women to share their views confidently. (IDI, Personal Communication, 41 years, October 24, 2025)

This narrative emphasises the need to implement the Cyberbullying Act, which would go a long way in addressing the use of harsh or insulting language on social media, particularly against women.

Finally, another participant emphasised the need to make online spaces safer for women who are interested in online political discussion and other forms of digital political participation:

The moment a woman posts anything about politics on Facebook or X, people start abusing her or saying she is too forward. That's why many keep quiet. We need to create safe online groups or communities where women can discuss political matters without fear. Maybe women's associations in Nsukka can start digital clubs that promote respectful discussions and protect female voices." She further explained

According to the respondents, maximising the political benefits of social media requires intentional strategies that empower women to navigate digital spaces effectively, voice their opinions freely, and connect with political networks. They emphasised that improving women's digital literacy, creating safe and inclusive online spaces, strengthening collaboration between female politicians and influencers, and encouraging political parties to invest in women-led online campaigns could make a significant difference. In their views, when women are supported with the right tools, knowledge, and protections, social media can become a powerful equaliser that challenges traditional gender boundaries and fosters a new generation of politically active women.

Discussion of findings

The discussion integrates participants' narratives with insights from the literature and the theoretical framework (Uses and Gratifications Theory and Feminist Theory). The study reveals that women are increasingly negotiating political meanings and practices through social media, even though their engagement is shaped by diverse factors, especially cultural realities. The nature of this engagement reflects both continuity and change, continuity in the persistence of gendered cultural norms that govern women's public behaviour, and change in the ways women tactically use digital platforms to circumvent some of these restrictions. These finding also support Akaebe et al. (2025), who submit that patriarchy continues to exist in Nsukka LGA. This section discusses the findings in relation to existing literature, highlighting areas where the study aligns with or departs from previous research.

A central finding of the study is that women actively use social media for political engagement, albeit in varied ways to follow political events, share opinions, mobilise peers, and support candidates, especially during election periods. This indicates that social media not only enhances women's political

participation in Africa but also strengthens their voting power and improves their level of political knowledge. This relates to earlier scholarship that underscores the role of social media in widening political information access for marginalised groups (Olanihun & Oloyede, 2024; Ibrahim, 2021). Studies in Nigeria and beyond similarly report that women utilise digital spaces to compensate for exclusion from traditional political structures (Goetz, 2022). These findings reinforce the Uses and Gratifications Theory, as participants' narratives show that women consciously employ social media to meet personal political needs, information, expression, connection, and identity. In contrast to the present study's finding that women in Nsukka Urban actively use social media as a tool for political engagement, Hargrave and Livingstone (2021), studying women in parts of Europe, found that digital platforms were used primarily for entertainment and domestic communication rather than politics.

The study also revealed that cultural and socio-economic determinants significantly influence women's political engagement. These factors contribute to the limited visibility and representation

of women in politics and discourage many from contesting political positions, particularly in many African societies where politics is often perceived as a predominantly male domain. This finding shows that patriarchal norms continue to shape expectations of women's public conduct, with many participants acknowledging that women must navigate complex moral judgments when they post political content online and supports feminist literature which shows that gender norms remain strong mediators of women's political behaviour, even in digital contexts (Global Feminist Network, 2023). These findings echo a growing body of work that documents the vulnerabilities women face in digital political environments, particularly in contexts where offline gender inequalities are replicated online (EU EOM, 2023). Yet the study also reveals that women in Nsukka Urban are not passive recipients of these norms; rather, they adopt creative strategies such as using pseudonyms, sharing political posts in selective groups, and engaging at specific times to avoid backlash. This adaptive behaviour aligns with contemporary feminist arguments that women actively negotiate and reshape their political spaces, even under restrictive conditions.

The study also shows that residents of Nsukka urban generally perceive social media as an effective tool for enhancing women's political awareness and visibility. Thus, this suggests that social media enable women to gain confidence and articulate political views to a reasonable extent. This corroborates previous findings from African and Western contexts, which demonstrate that digital platforms serve as an alternative public sphere where women articulate political positions more freely (GSMA, 2024). However, perceptions were not universally positive, as some respondents expressed scepticism about whether online participation translates into offline practical political action. This aligns with arguments of scholars such as Tony (2018) and Subiakto et al. (2025), who note that digital activism, may create an illusion of participation without corresponding offline engagement. The sense of empowerment contrasts sharply with studies in Middle Eastern contexts. Al-Hassan (2021) found that women in Kuwait and Jordan avoided political expressions on social media due to high levels of state surveillance, legal restrictions, and fear of severe consequences.

Finally, in line with the research propositions, the study found a gap between online participation and offline engagement. While social media offers a convenient and accessible platform for expressing political opinions, it may also create a sense of satisfaction or perceived involvement that reduces the urgency for physical participation. In this way, online engagement can function as a substitute rather than a catalyst for offline action. This finding further supports the central argument of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which posits that media use is purpose-driven and need-based.

Women's online political engagement appears to satisfy certain psychological and social needs, yet these gratifications do not necessarily translate into offline participation. Consequently, social media engagement may remain confined to digital spaces, reinforcing the observed disconnect between online and offline political involvement.

The second proposition suggests that although social media has the potential to enhance women's political participation, patriarchal norms and structures significantly limit these positive effects. This finding strongly aligns with the core assumptions of Feminist Theory, particularly its emphasis

on power relations, the structural reproduction of inequality within digital spaces, and gendered constraints. It implies that while women may be willing to engage politically, and are increasingly enabled by social media to do so, they often face barriers such as online harassment, trolling, intimidation, and the fear of stigma, backlash, or cultural sanctions. Therefore, the impact of social media is not uniform but conditional, depending on the extent to which existing gender inequalities are challenged or reinforced.

The implications of this study are profound. Thus, it resists the traditional pattern where Africa is studied by outsiders. Instead, it centres the experiences of African women and contributes to the advancement of democratic inclusion and local transformation. Also, it contributes to decolonising knowledge, ensuring that African realities are defined by Africans, grounded in context and relevant to everyday life. Furthermore, it promotes a context-specific model of democratic development not a borrowed one. Ultimately, this research reinforces the need for research that is accountable, underscores the need for inclusive,

gender-responsive digital citizenship strategies in Africa and similar contexts.

Conclusion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of women's digital political participation in a semi-urban Nigerian context. The study reveals that while social media holds significant potential to strengthen women's political participation, its impact is deeply influenced by local cultural norms, digital inequalities and persistent gendered constraints. The key findings demonstrate that African women are increasingly using social media to access political information, mobilise political support, and express opinions more freely than in traditional public spaces. However, these opportunities are unevenly distributed. Cultural expectations around femininity, socio-economic limitations, misinformation and online harassment remain strong barriers that reduce the full actualisation of social media's democratic potential for women. Therefore, the study concludes that until there is substantial improvement in the restructuring of African political system at all levels, patriarchal norms and practices will continue to constrain women's political representation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance women's utilisation of social media for political participation in an African setting. These recommendations include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Address patriarchal norms through awareness programmes: It is crucial to implement targeted awareness initiatives that challenge beliefs limiting African women's political participation. Community education can play a key role in reshaping such perceptions, while actively engaging men, traditional leaders, and youth can foster more supportive attitudes toward women's involvement in politics.
- Women's digital empowerment/enhancing Digital Literacy and Capacity Building: Training programs should be organised to improve women's skills in navigating social media platforms safely and effectively. These programs should focus on teaching women how to identify credible political information, avoid misinformation, engage constructively in online

discussions, and use social media tools for mobilization and advocacy.

- Implementation of Cybercrimes Act: Strong efforts should be made to implement the Cybercrimes Act in order to address online harassment,

cyberbullying, intimidation, and other forms of digital abuse that disproportionately affect women. This would encourage more women to actively express their political views, share experiences, and strategise on collective political engagement.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors do not have any conflicting interests.

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