

Yoruba Women and Politics: A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective from Ijebu Women, Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract

The political participation of Ijebu women in Nigeria presents an essential opportunity for exploration, as it is shaped by various systemic challenges rooted in historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. While much has been written about the progress of gender equality globally and women's political participation in Nigeria, particularly among the Yoruba, this paper aims to enhance our understanding by focusing on the Ijebu women. Exploring their unique experiences and contributions highlights how these women navigate and influence the political landscape. This paper recognises the tremendous achievements of Ijebu women in politics, while also addressing the problems they encounter and detailing the reforms required to foster wider inclusion. It examines the impact of traditional norms, patriarchal structures, and modernisation on women's access to political power and decision-making positions. By utilising a postcolonial feminist framework, this study emphasises the importance of understanding the intersections of gender, colonial legacies, and socio-political structures in shaping women's participation in governance. Through this lens, actionable steps to empower Ijebu women and enhance their role in political leadership are identified. The paper offers actionable insights for developing more inclusive and representative governance structures in the region. It concludes with constructive recommendations aimed at increasing Ijebu women's political engagement through initiatives in education, policy reforms, economic empowerment, and enhanced media representation.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Ijebu women, Nigerian politics, Political participation, Yoruba history.

INTRODUCTION

Political participation is crucial for effective democratic governance, including activities like campaigning, voting, and policy formulation (Ugwuegede, 2014). It empowers citizens to

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influence leadership and resource allocation, ensuring that governance reflects the collective interests of the people (Odetola & Ademola, 1985). Women's inclusion in decision-making is a key indicator of a democratic society, as their political rights are closely linked to human rights (Karam, 2000). Promoting women's representation at all levels benefits democracy while also advancing women's rights and gender equality in leadership (Mangyvat, 2009).

Today, gender discrimination, restricted access to resources, and societal expectations continue to impede their participation. Systemic disparities and an unimplemented 35% affirmative action policy worsen women's under-representation in Nigeria's democracy (Shadare, 2020). While there are positive stories regarding Ijebu women, their representation in decision-making positions still has to increase. Addressing this issue necessitates institutional reforms and gender-inclusive policies that can increase their political participation. Fostering educational and economic growth, as well as mentorship programs for aspiring female politicians, is vital to ensuring their involvement. Appreciating and recognising women's contribution to political decision-making create a more inclusive democratic environment (Mabogunje & Kates, 2020).

This paper interrogates the activism of Ijebu women in South West Nigeria, focusing on their historical political involvement, accomplishments, and ongoing concerns. It tracks their political agency from pre-colonial periods to the present, examining the sociopolitical and economic elements that influence their participation. Although women historically played important roles, colonialism upended these structures.

This paper is written in three sections. The first part offers a comprehensive overview of the history of the Ijebu people, emphasising their unique ethnography and political engagement before and after colonisation. The second section thoughtfully examines women's political participation in Ijebu land. The third section examines the challenges that Ijebu women encounter in their pursuit of political participation, highlighting areas for potential improvement and support. The study concludes by discussing Ijebu women's considerable political achievements, highlighting their contributions and encouraging future attempts for increased representation and involvement.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Ijebu are a Yoruba ethnic subgroup located in Ogun State, South-West Nigeria. Their society, founded in the 16th century, is traditionally monarchical and aristocratic, with each town and settlement having its monarch. The Ijebu people, like other Yoruba-speaking groups, have a rich cultural heritage reflected in various aspects of their lives, including their myth of origin, religion, and festivals. Ijebu-Ode is considered the commercial hub and capital of the Ijebu kingdom. It is also home to the reigning overall monarch, the *Awujale* of Ijebu land, Oba Sikiru Adetona. Other major Ijebu towns include Ijebu-Igbo, Ago-Iwoye, Oru, Awa, Imushin, Isiwo, Aiyeye, and Omu, among others. Ijebu civilization became prominent in the 16th century with the rise of their kingdom, which established commercial relations with

European traders and later engaged with the British colonial administration (Oduntan et al., 2023).

Historically, there is evidence that Ijebu women took critical and active roles in some of the strategic and economic decisions that have given them the impetus to actively involve themselves in developmental and political issues, and they have been taking leadership roles in different areas of life. (Oyedele, 2021, Nkwede et al. 2022). According to Olusola (1968), pre-colonial Ìjẹ̀bùlánd was notable for its unique leadership structure, which included only three female kings before 1760. These remarkable princesses, Ore-Yeye (the twenty-third), Ore-Geje (the thirty-first), and Rubakoye (the thirty-seventh); played significant roles as the Awujale of Ijebu-Ode. Moreover, the Iyalode in Ijebu-Ode was an influential figure who belonged to the Osugbo society and actively participated in the Ogboni council, highlighting the important contributions of women in the governance and social structures of their time (Denza, 1994). Recently, although there have been no female regents, it is important to note that there are no laws—either written or unwritten—that prevent women from occupying such positions. Within the intricate palace administrations, the Oba works alongside several women referred to as the “women of the palace”, who hold various ranks and play vital roles in governance. Women can join the Òsùgbó cult once they have attained menopause. This cult of chiefs and elders serves as the town’s executive authority and has a strong religious importance. Its insignia, two brass figurines known as “edan,” indicates its respected status in the community. Furthermore, the Pampa class of chiefs includes at least four women: Ìyálóde, Òtún Ìyálóde, Ìyálájé, and Òtún Ìyálájé. Erelú, a female member of the Ògbóni cult, oversees issues affecting women in the region. Consequently, Mba (1997), notes women have access to all levels of policy-making, including the influential Òsùgbó secret cult and the Ògbóni council of Ìwàrèfà Chiefs. Women occupy a significant political role in Ìjẹ̀bùlánd, as seen by their active participation. The “Ìyálójà” institution promotes women’s participation in communal governance. Women in Ìjẹ̀bùlánd, like their counterparts in other towns around Yorùbáland, contribute actively to the political processes that define their communities. They successfully handle both their affairs and certain aspects of men’s issues. (George, 2022)

Ijebu women effectively harnessed the power of marketplaces to exhibit their political influence and shape crucial decisions within their communities (Akoleowo 2022; Shadare 2020). A remarkable example is Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti, often celebrated as the “Mother of African Nationalism.” She transcended her role as a political activist to become a visionary leader whose impact extended well beyond her hometown of Abeokuta. As the head of the Abeokuta Women’s Union, Kuti organized impactful protests that convinced colonial authorities to eliminate the women’s levy. Efunsetan Aniwura was a notable figure in Ibadan’s political and economic landscape who demonstrated exceptional strategic and leadership abilities. She was famous for her steadfast opposition to policies she viewed as unjust, particularly those that negatively affected her community (Okome 2001). Efunroye Osuntinubu made

substantial and long-lasting contributions to Lagos under the reigns of Adele, Dosunmu, Oluwole, and Akitoye.

As a prominent trader and politician in the mid-19th century, Madam Efunroye played a vital role in supporting these leaders, exemplifying the powerful influence women can have in both commerce and politics. Her efforts not only set a strong foundation for future generations but also underscored the essential role women play in shaping society. Through her wealth and influence, she actively fought against the slave trade and made substantial strides in Lagos's political arena (Okome 2001). Another prominent women activist, Elizabeth Adekogbe, emerged as a key figure in the 1953 protests against unfair taxes, leading women from various ethnic groups to unite against colonial rule. Her activism not only organized these protests but also helped women across Nigeria understand the importance of solidarity and collective action for meaningful change. Similarly, Alimotu Pelewura served as a pivotal leader within the Lagos Market Women's Association and was a staunch advocate for the economic independence of Nigerian women. Under her guidance, the association flourished, amplifying the voices of market women and challenging unfair colonial practices (Akoleowo 2022). Her remarkable ability to mobilize and unite these women reflects her exceptional leadership and profound understanding of their struggles. Additionally, she fought for the rights of market women to trade freely and participate in market governance, fostering an environment where women could thrive economically and politically (Okome 2001).

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN IJEBULAND

Ijebu women have historically contributed to social and economic development through trade, cultural leadership, and collective mobilisation. According to Williams and Ogunkoya (2021), Ijebu women have supported political processes by backing male candidates and running for office themselves, as seen with Jagun (Princess) Titi Adesanya's 2007 bid for the Ogun State House of Assembly. This trend reflects a shift towards more gender-inclusive politics in South-west Nigeria, but further progress requires a broader historical and cultural context. Scholarly discussions have evolved to emphasise African women's agency, moving past narratives of victimhood. The political participation of Yoruba women, particularly in Ijebu, illustrates the intersection of tradition, modernity, and gender power relations.

Precolonial Yoruba communities had prominent female leaders, including Iyalode, market queens, and priestesses (Mba, 1982; Amadiume, 2015). This was undercut by colonial rule, which imposed Western gender roles and concentrated male authority. Nonetheless, Yoruba women have maintained their influence through informal networks such as women's clubs (Aina, 1998). The unique achievements of Ijebu women, particularly their resistance during the 1918 Ijebu Women's Tax Revolt, are mostly overlooked. African feminist study promotes culturally relevant understandings of justice and gender equality, valuing social responsibility and relational ethics over individual rights (Mama, 2001). This stance is crucial in the Ijebu context, where women's political duties have typically emerged through communal activity rather than official positions.

This study uses postcolonial and indigenous feminist frameworks to rethink Yoruba women's knowledge and widen their political participation beyond Eurocentric expectations. It questions universalist feminist assumptions by emphasising local experiences and indigenous power.

This is consistent with the call for intersectional, decolonial approaches to African women's political reality (Lewis, 2004; Mohanty, 2003). Women in Nigeria have suffered considerable limits on political involvement due to ingrained cultural norms, patriarchal systems, and systemic discrimination (Oduntan et al., 2023). However, recently, there has been a progressive transition, driven by increased access to education and lobbying for gender equity. Persistent challenges remain, such as patriarchal expectations, political violence, and male-dominated party politics, all of which marginalise women. Despite this, Ijebu women have demonstrated resiliency by taking up leadership positions and expanding their candidature in recent elections. Since independence, Nigerian women have opposed structural exclusion and highlighted gender concerns in national discourse (Oyinade & Daramola, 2013), even though gender discrimination remains prevalent in Nigerian politics and elsewhere. Colonial practices worsened gender inequality by strengthening male domination (Ogunmusire, 2021), and patriarchy is prevalent in most of Nigeria's political culture (Heywood, 2007). Cultural events such as the Ojude-Oba festival have allowed Ijebu women to assert their authority and play an active role in creating the political landscape (Kukoyi et al., 2018). Genuine democracy must recognise these historical exclusions and embrace culturally particular forms of political engagement, emphasising that African women are not only observers but active participants (Adefarasin, 2018).

CHALLENGES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION FOR IJEBU WOMEN

In the post-colonial era, Ijebu women's political participation has the potential to grow, despite facing several challenges. Among these challenges are:

Male Dominance: In Nigeria, the prevalence of men in positions of power has contributed to an unequal social structure, where women's participation is often limited. The patriarchal nature of society has historically placed men in leadership roles while women experience lesser representation. However, this situation presents an opportunity for advocacy and change. Empowering women to seek senior political roles is essential for achieving a more equitable political landscape and fostering a more inclusive society (Odebiyi & Iwuagwu 2018).

Cultural Expectations and Barriers: Cultural biases frequently confine women to duties as spouses and mothers, limiting their political participation. Women in Ijebu and other southwestern Nigerian states are traditionally expected to be homemakers, caring for children, giving birth, and running the household. As a result, the thought of a woman running for a political office appears strange. The situation is aggravated by outrageous nomination fees, which only a few women can afford, making it impossible for them to run for elected positions.

Political Procedures: The nomination process within Nigerian political parties is not standardised, making it difficult for women to negotiate. Nkechi (1996), argues that society

has conditioned women to believe that they belong in domestic settings like the kitchen and the market rather than the political arena.

Patriarchy: Patriarchy remains a fundamental barrier to women's political engagement in Yoruba culture, as men have traditional power in the household and society (Aina, 1998). While acknowledged in trade and communal life, women's contributions are frequently subordinate to men's decision-making responsibilities. The patriarchal system shapes inheritance laws, leadership roles, and religious responsibilities, favouring men while restricting women's access to power and resources (Ukpokolo, 2020). As a result, Akintan (2013) points out that Yoruba culture encompasses social stratification that can hinder women's political ambitions. In communities that prioritise men, it is common to see women undervalued, which reinforces patriarchal systems.

Religious and Cultural Constraints: While the constitution does not impose any restrictions on women's increased participation in Nigerian politics, various societal, religious, and cultural barriers continue to hinder their engagement (Aina 2012, Pogoso 2012).

Societal Expectations: It is argued that women are often relegated to the role of political wives, expected to attend events rather than contest for public office themselves (Babatola, 2020). A noteworthy trend, as Falola (2021) argues, is that women are often encouraged to marry political leaders rather than actively seeking leadership positions. However, Oduntan (2023) offers a more empowering perspective by suggesting that marriage does not inherently limit the political participation of Ijebu women. Instead, it is the societal expectations that need to be challenged and reshaped to foster greater involvement of women in politics.

Representation and Legislative Inequality: Since 1999, just two women have represented Ogun State in the Senate- Mrs. Iyabo Anisulowo and Mrs. Iyabo Obasanjo-Bello, with very little female participation in the House of Representatives. From 2003 to 2019, Ogun East had only one female lawmaker in the National Assembly (Oduntan, 2023). This under-representation underscores the importance of improving gender equality, as emphasised by the National Gender Policy (NGP) and the Beijing Platform for Action. Despite representing more than half of the worldwide population, women's political participation in Nigeria is low (Agbalajobi, 2010). Eliminating cultural barriers and illiteracy among women may increase female political participation, benefiting democracy by ensuring that diverse opinions are heard (Banjo, 2023).

Gender Disparities in Education and Political Participation

Education is essential for women's political engagement, yet some Ijebu women struggle to obtain it due to poor facilities in rural areas. Nigeria's female illiteracy rate was 51% in 2021 (World Bank, 2021), emphasising the importance of enhanced educational resources. Domestic duties frequently impede Ijebu girls' academic progress, and budgetary constraints limit access to learning materials (Idoko, 2021). Despite recent advances in female education and activity, the lack of female role models in education and politics inhibits young women from pursuing positions of leadership. Systemic impediments remain significant.

Discrimination in Political Candidacy and Citizenship Rights

Ijebu women encounter discrimination when running for elections in their spouses' home states. Obi (2023) points out that female candidates are frequently denied the opportunity to run for office in their husbands' states, which violates constitutional prohibitions. This prejudice extends to citizenship rules; a foreign woman married to a Nigerian man immediately acquires Nigerian citizenship, while a Nigerian woman cannot confer her nationality on her foreign husband (Eyongndi & Okongwu, 2021). This disparity highlights the gender-based disparities embedded in Nigeria's legal and political systems.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF IJEBU WOMEN IN POLITICS

Ijebu women's political participation in Nigeria has yielded significant outcomes, demonstrating resilience and influence in a historically male-dominated society. Despite long-standing societal constraints, they have established a prominent presence in political, social, and economic spheres. As noted by a former Ijebu local government caretaker and leader of the African Women National Congress (Ijebu branch), "Ijebu women have made a name for themselves in Ogun State politics... their political accomplishments are astonishing" (Odunayo, 2023). These women have consistently overcome structural barriers to ascend to leadership positions and influence policy. Their efforts have laid a solid foundation for future generations of female leaders (Quadri, 2020). Notable Ijebu women such as Bisi Onasanya, Bola Kuforiji-Olubi, Bola Ajibola, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Hannah Dideolu Awolowo, Kemi Adeosun (former Minister of Finance), and Funke Akindele have significantly impacted diverse sectors, underscoring the transformative potential of women's leadership in governance.

Beyond individual accomplishments, Ijebu women's collective action has driven community development and national progress. Female political leaders have championed critical social interventions in education, healthcare, and economic empowerment. Their advocacy for gender-responsive legislation has led to the establishment of skill acquisition programs, microcredit schemes, and improved access to education and health services. For example, under the leadership of Chief (Mrs.) Igbo Martha, the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS) successfully implemented community healthcare projects that expanded access and reduced mortality rates in underserved areas.

Crucially, Ijebu women have developed strategic approaches to navigating political exclusion. These include the formation of intra- and inter-party networks, enabling collaborative candidate selection and policy alignment. In many cases, they form subgroups or independent alliances to amplify their political influence, build capacity, and offer peer support. While these efforts have yet to translate into immediate proportional representation, they reflect a growing demand for constitutional reforms particularly the push for a minimum 30% female representation in governance.

Their engagement also extends to legislative advocacy and legal reform. Ijebu women have been vocal at both federal and local levels, challenging discriminatory laws and customs.

A landmark example is the *Fawehinmi v. State* case, where the Supreme Court struck down a Yoruba law denying inheritance rights to women. Their activism also contributed to the adoption of the “Deceased Wife’s Property Law,” now implemented in many southern states, which grants women legal access to their late husbands’ property (Oyekanmi & Moliki, 2021). Nevertheless, male dominance in political spaces remains a significant obstacle. Even well-meaning male allies often maintain control over the terms of women’s participation (Olojede et al., 2020). Scholars argue that enhancing women’s political influence requires deliberate strategies to challenge entrenched patriarchal structures. For instance, the “future vote” strategy should be approached not as a symbolic gesture, but as a substantive act of gender equity (Ake et al., 2023).

Moreover, the rise of women-focused organisations and advocacy coalitions has strengthened Ijebu women’s political engagement. Groups like the Association for Reproductive and Family Health (ARFH), in collaboration with the Centre for Communication and Social Impact, offer training, mentorship, and financial resources to women aspiring to political offices. These initiatives have bolstered women’s confidence, skillsets, and access to leadership roles.

Ijebu women also engage in external mobilisation, advocating for gender-sensitive policies with the support of international and non-governmental organisations. These partnerships provide essential resources and credibility to their lobbying efforts. However, persistent challenges including electoral discrimination, financial exclusion, cultural norms, political violence, and systemic suppression continue to restrict broader female representation. Resolving these barriers demands a multi-pronged approach that includes civil society, supportive male allies, policy reform, and community participation.

This paper critically examines these challenges and evaluates the effectiveness of various strategies for enhancing the political agency of Ijebu women, thereby contributing to broader goals of inclusion and gender equity in Nigerian politics. Interrogating the political marginalisation of Ijebu women offers an opportunity to investigate broader postcolonial feminist debates regarding power systems that have historically silenced indigenous voices. The effects of colonialism and patriarchal governance created Western political frameworks that frequently prevented women from leadership posts, despite their essential contributions to governance before colonisation. Reclaiming political space enables Ijebu women to reject marginalisation while regaining meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Using Spivak’s concept of the “subaltern,” Ijebu women’s active political participation resists institutional erasure while emphasising their agency.

A genuinely democratic society is built on the principle of epistemic fairness, which requires acknowledging and honouring Indigenous women’s political viewpoints. This recognition is crucial for establishing ethical governance and dismantling the patriarchal systems that continue to perpetuate gendered oppression in postcolonial Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This article proposes launching community-based workshops, seminars, and outreach programs to empower Ijebu women by educating them on their political rights and leadership potential. These activities will increase engagement and boost confidence in their abilities to lead. The Nigerian government should implement policies to enhance women's political participation. Furthermore, the policies should be domesticated to assist women from both rural and urban areas. In addition, the bill for affirmative action policies, such as a 35% quota for women in political offices, should be passed by the National Assembly. To increase female representation, nomination fees should be minimised and equitable nomination procedures implemented.

Further, this paper recommends leadership development and mentorship programs that connect aspiring female politicians with established female leaders. It is strongly encouraged to organise leadership training seminars to equip women with the abilities necessary to navigate political environments. Women should be economically empowered by having easy access to microcredit facilities, vocational training, and entrepreneurship programs that would enable them to achieve financial independence. For example, encouraging political parties to establish finance structures that assist female candidates while preserving political independence.

To intensify advocacy efforts, Ijebu women must strengthen their ties with larger women's movements through advocacy and coalition building. Collaborate with civil society organisations and government agencies to promote gender-sensitive policies. The media can also have a positive impact on female political engagement.

They should promote positive representations of female politicians in the media and popular culture. Encourage investigative journalism that challenges gender bias in politics and exposes political malpractices that hurt women. Legislative and policy changes are required to ensure that laws protecting women from political violence and discrimination are upheld.

Establish gender quotas for state and federal elections and appointments. Despite institutional challenges, Ijebu women have made major contributions to Nigeria's political landscape. However, meaningful transformation requires specialised strategies to address social, cultural, and institutional barriers. Educational initiatives, policy reforms, financial support systems, and strategic advocacy can all help to foster a more inclusive political environment. Acceptance of postcolonial Feminist perspectives ensures that these solutions are contextually relevant and reflect the historical and cultural reality of Ijebu women's political experiences. Through coordinated efforts, stakeholders may establish a governance structure in which Ijebu women are not just participants but also influential decision-makers in determining Nigeria's future.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined Ijebu women's political participation through a postcolonial feminist lens, revealing the complex interplay of indigenous agency, historical disruptions, and contemporary gender politics in Nigeria. While Ijebu women have historically contributed to society's progress through informal leadership roles, trade, and collective mobilisation, their

participation in formal political venues is limited by patriarchal norms, colonial legacies, and institutional exclusion.

Nevertheless, recent shifts fuelled by improved access to education, altering cultural attitudes, and female advocacy imply a gradual reconfiguration of these processes. Ijebu women are not only supporting political players, but also disputing political stances, exhibiting resilience, strategic adaptability, and a desire to shape governance from within.

Furthermore, it emphasises the need to go beyond universalist paradigms of political involvement that ignore culturally unique forms of agency. It advocates for a greater understanding of traditional political systems and relational ethics, which have historically empowered women in Yoruba society. By stressing Ijebu women's lived experiences and epistemologies, this work contributes to larger efforts to decolonise feminist theory and concentrate on African women's voices in political discourse. Further studies may probe into how Nigeria's political institutions respond to culturally established forms of leadership and participation, as well as methods for converting women's informal influence into formal political capital while maintaining its communal foundation.

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