

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF AKWA IBOM WOMEN IN POLITICS: LESSONS FROM DEBORAH

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ABSTRACT

Achieving sustainable development requires gender parity in leadership and decision-making positions. In other words, gender inclusivity in leadership and decision-making positions is crucial for sustainable development because men and women bring different experiences, insights, and ideas to the table, leading to more informed decision-making and balanced judgment. However, in Akwa Ibom State, women face immense marginalization and exclusion from leadership roles in the political landscape due largely to the deeply ingrained culture of patriarchy that view women as subordinate to men and consequently incapable or unsuited for leadership positions. Employing comparative and analytical research methods, this paper explores the barriers to political participation faced by Akwa Ibom women, including patriarchal politics, violence and financial constraints, among others. The findings of the study revealed that Deborah's ascent to power in a male-dominated society offers valuable lessons for contemporary Akwa Ibom women. Drawing on the strategies adopted by Deborah, this paper argues that Akwa Ibom women can enhance their political participation and break down barriers to decision-making by adopting effective communication, collaboration, and boldness. The work submits that Akwa Ibom women should leverage social networks, community connections and professional associations to mobilize support and resources for effective and enhanced political participation.

Keywords: Political Participations, Barriers, Patriarchy, Women, Deborah, Akwa Ibom State.

Introduction

Political participation is a fundamental aspect of democratic governance, encompassing a range of activities beyond mere voting, attending rallies, and campaigning for candidates. It includes candidacy, election, and appointment of people to positions of power at all levels of government and within party structures. However, in Akwa Ibom State, women's political participation is hindered by significant barriers, limiting their ability to compete fairly with men for political positions. Despite the agitation for gender equality globally, women are often relegated to secondary roles, such as dancing at rallies, singing, and campaigning for male candidates, while being denied opportunities to hold political office. This marginalization

stems from deeply ingrained cultural and societal factors, including patriarchy, which perpetuates gender bias and stereotypes, viewing women as weak, fearful, and incompetent.

Structural barriers, such as political violence, inconvenient meeting schedules, and financial challenges, further exacerbate women's exclusion from political decision-making processes. This phenomenon is not unique to Akwa Ibom State, as women have historically faced marginalization in political and social spheres, with roots in ancient cultures and societies. The Old Testament accounts of women's experiences in ancient Israelite society serve as a poignant reminder of this historical marginalization. However, the story of Deborah, a remarkable political leader and judge, stands out as a beacon of hope and inspiration. Deborah's leadership qualities and achievements in a patriarchal society offer valuable lessons for Akwa Ibom women seeking to overcome barriers to political participation. This work aims to draw explicitly from Deborah's experiences, exploring how Akwa Ibom women can derive salient lessons from her political leadership qualities to claim their rightful place in the political sphere of their state.

Defining Politics and Political Participation

Politics is a multifaceted concept that has been the subject of much scholarly debates and discussions. Thus, scholars have differently conceptualized the term “politic.” For Ekandem, Essien and Okon (2022), politics can be seen as the practice and theory of influencing other people. It involves the use of power by one person to affect the behaviour of another person. Similarly, Usoro (2017) defines politics as the process of making collective decisions for a group or society. Usoro’s notion of politics stresses the role of decision-making and highlights the importance of understanding how individuals and groups come together to make choices that affect the common good. While this definition is valuable in highlighting the democratic aspects of politics, it does not take into consideration the role of power dynamics and conflicts in shaping political outcomes. Additionally, this definition seems too vague in its focus on decision-making, as politics also involves the implementation of decisions and the enforcement of rules and laws.

In the view of Ayomide (1988), politics is defined as the acquisition and exercise of power. Citing Samovar, Porter, et al, Owete and Olusakin (2016) define power as the ability to do. It means to be in control of what happens, cause things that one wants to happen. In relation to power, politics is making things to happen, achieving goals and driving change. This can include passing laws, allocating resources, or implementing policies. Etymologically, the term “politics” according to Finance, as cited by Etokakpan (2020) is an annexation of the two Greek words *polis*, literally meaning *city* and *êthica* which means simply “what concerns human conducts.” From this etymological derivation, Etokakpan therefore defines politics as the art of ordering the city and human conducts towards a more stable human society.

Etokakapan cautions that ordering the city here does not simply connote making straight and beautiful roads and functional drainage system alone. Although the artistic and technical development of the city is important, it is not all that is needed to make a good human society. Thus, the conception of politics as the art of ordering the city encompasses the processes and activities involved in governing a community or society. Etokakpan’s elucidation underscores the role of politics in establishing and maintaining order within a city or state. It also emphasizes the importance of governance and decision-making in shaping the social,

economic, cultural and moral life of a community. It involves the exercise of power and authority to create and enforce laws, policies, and regulations that govern the behaviour and interactions of individuals within a society.

Just like the term “politics,” political participation has been defined variously by many scholars. For instance, Elkert and McConnel (2013) describes political participation as the engagement of citizens in the different political activities of the state, either to seek elected positions or to influence the process that lead to the emergence of those that will represent them. Two things are evident in the definition above. The first is that participation in the political affairs of the community may be through engagement in the political activities that produce those representing the people in the helms of the affairs of the society. Secondly, it might mean vying or seeking for the political position. In other words, political participation may mean standing or vying for an elected position by being a member of a political party or engaging actively in an electoral process that produce political leaders or representatives. Hence, one can say that political involvement or participation includes a wide range of activities such as voting, engaging in campaigns, sensitization of people about government policies and protesting against bad and anti-human policies of the government as well engaging in other forms of activism.

On the other hand, Udom (2017) sees political participation as "the various ways in which individuals attempt to influence the political decisions that affect their lives." This broader definition includes not only traditional forms of political participation, such as voting and running for office, but also non-traditional forms, such as signing petitions, participating in protests, and engaging in online activism. Similarly, Akande (2002) posits that political participation is an aspect of political behaviour and it focuses on the way in which individuals take part in politics. The various ways by which the people can be involved in the political system include selection or election of political leaders, formulation of policies, community activities and other civil engagements. Thus, political participation, in the context of this paper, means women's active involvement in elections, leadership roles and decision-making positions in their communities or state, allowing them to shape policies and outcomes that affect their lives.

Gender Politics in Akwa Ibom State

The culture of Akwa Ibom State, like many African societies, reflects a patriarchal system that relegates women to a subordinate status. This perception is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, with prevailing beliefs that a woman's primary role is confined to domestic responsibilities. In this context, men are viewed as the heads of households and communities, while women are often seen as mere extensions of their husbands. The societal structure in Akwa Ibom is such that women are rarely appointed to leadership roles, with no village in the state having a woman as a head. This exclusion is evident in traditional political organizations where women are systematically barred from holding any significant positions. For instance, Essien^a (2020) has noted that the political matters in the traditional society rested on the *Esop Idung* or *Obio* (village council) and *Esop Isung* or *Esop Ikpaisong* (Clan council). Unfortunately, women were neither heads nor members of these councils.

Also, in the five administrative structures of the traditional political organization of the people (*Idib ete, ufok, ekpuk, idung and ikpaisong*) women were and are still not allowed to occupy any

position. Similarly, Edem and Udom (2024) have observed that in the powerful social institutions of the people such as the *ekpo* society, *ekpri akata*, *ekoong*, etc, women were still not allowed to feature as either leaders or members of these groups. This relegation of women in the traditional political institutions in Akwa Ibom State has extended into contemporary politics, where their representation is alarmingly low. Despite the global push for gender equality in political participation, women in Akwa Ibom State face severe challenges. The political culture in the state has not fostered an environment conducive to true democracy, as noted by Umoh (2000), who emphasizes the lack of opportunities for women to engage meaningfully in the political landscape. Although women play crucial roles in the electoral processes that lead to the election of their leaders, they rarely win or appointed to the positions of influence in the state. This is largely due to the patriarchal framework that views women as subordinates, limiting their autonomy and political aspirations.

The United Nations Assembly, at its conference in Beijing in 1985, urged member states (including Nigeria) to grant 30% to female representation in governance. In other words for every constituted democratic governance thirty percent of the total number of elective office-holders should be females. Despite this provision by the Apex body, Akwa Ibom State, being a signatory to the United Nation's convention still lags behind in the implementation of the 30% female representation in the State politics. It is important to state categorically that women in the state are characterized by a subordinate, low status, subservient and generally miserable in sociopolitical cum economic sphere of the state.

However, the under-representation of Akwa Ibom women in politics is both descriptive and substantive. Akwa Ibom women's under-representation in the public and social domain, against their male counterparts and the inability to properly fit into political arena, has affected their empowerment and social status. Since the emergence of democracy in the state, no woman has successfully won the position of the state governor. Again, no woman has been appointed as the speaker of the State Assembly. Furthermore, since the creation of the State, no woman has been appointed as chairman of any political party. This is really sad, since it is at the party level that crucial political decisions are made. It is indeed glaring that the political activities of the state is gender-biased.

Gendered politics in the state is equally demonstrated in the number of women that have won elective positions at the federal level and State levels in each political year. For instance, Udom (2009) observes that in 2007 election in the state, there was only one woman who won Local Government Councillorship, with no woman in the State's House of Assembly. Similarly, in 2011, only one woman represented the State in the Federal level in the Senate, with no woman in the House of Representatives and the State's House of Assembly. In the present state executive council, only three female commissioners have been appointed into the state cabinet. This constant relegation of women to the backdrop of the political domain shows that the politics of the state is characterized by patriarchal proclivities and high level of gender imbalance. Therefore, for development of the state to be guaranteed, inclusion of the women in the politics of the state should be seen as matter of importance.

Barriers to Effective Participation of Akwa Ibom Women in Politics

Despite some recent advancements such as a woman serving as the Deputy Governor and a few women in local government leadership roles, the overall participation of women in Akwa

Ibom politics remains dismal. The challenges faced by women in Akwa Ibom State are multifaceted, with several key factors contributing to their limited involvement in politics. The patriarchal culture prevalent in Akwa Ibom is a significant barrier to women's political participation. This societal structure perpetuates the notion that women are primarily caretakers and not suited for leadership roles. The family unit is often the first institution where patriarchal values are instilled, leading to the perception that women are incapable of making sound decisions. Such beliefs have been reinforced over generations, resulting in women being viewed as inferior and unworthy of political engagement. Consequently, women face societal backlash for pursuing political ambitions, often being criticized for neglecting their domestic duties.

Financial challenges also play a critical role in hindering women's political participation. Engaging in politics in Nigeria, particularly in Akwa Ibom State, requires substantial financial resources. The high costs associated with political campaigns, party nominations, and other electoral expenses create a significant barrier for women, who often have limited access to financial resources compared to their male counterparts. The monetization of politics in Akwa Ibom State means that without adequate funding, women struggle to compete effectively in the political arena. Even with some political parties offering waivers for women candidates, the financial burden remains a significant deterrent.

Cultural and religious barriers further complicate women's involvement in politics. Traditional gender roles dictate that women are responsible for household chores and childcare, leaving them little time or energy to engage in political activities. This division of labor reinforces the belief that women should not seek leadership roles, as they are expected to prioritize their domestic responsibilities. Additionally, societal norms discourage women from being visible in public spaces, further limiting their political engagement. In many communities, women are expected to adhere to religious and cultural ideologies that reinforce male dominance, thereby discouraging their participation in political processes. Also, religious teachings and practices both in the traditional and contemporary society have often been used to reinforce patriarchy and marginalization of women in the leadership positions. The practice by some religious organizations do not challenge the status quo but somewhat sustain it (Essien & Edem, 2024). As a matter of fact, Olusakin (2014) has rightly noted that the practice in some denominations such as the Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, and many conservative protestant denominations believe that it is only men that should be ordained as clergy. This is evident in the interpretations of some religious texts to show that leadership position is the exclusive reserve of the men.

It is this gender disparity in Christianity that has prompted Essien and Ukpong (2012) to postulate that the “disadvantaged position” of women in their society indicates that religious and traditional institutions are the real factors empowering patriarchy and gender inequality, leading to the marginalization of women from political leadership. Political violence is another critical factor that dissuades women from entering the political sphere. The history of electoral violence in Akwa Ibom State has created an environment where female aspirants feel unsafe and vulnerable. The aggressive tactics employed by political actors during elections often target women, making it difficult for them to participate actively in the political landscape. The fear of violence and intimidation can deter women from pursuing political aspirations, leading to a further decline in their representation.

Deborah's Early Life and Political Leadership

Deborah's family background is briefly mentioned in the biblical text, specifically in Judges 4:4, where she is identified as the wife of Lapidoth. While the details of her family life remain sparse, scholars suggest that her marriage to Lapidoth may have provided her with a supportive partnership that allowed her to pursue her leadership role. The name "Deborah" itself means "bee" in Hebrew, symbolizing industriousness and productivity. This etymology may reflect her character and the vital role she played in the community. Deborah's position as a prophetess and judge indicates that she was not only respected but also held significant authority in a society that typically marginalized women.

The cultural context of Deborah's time was predominantly male-dominated and patriarchal. The ancient Near Eastern societies, including Israel, were characterized by a social structure that prioritized male leadership and authority. Women were often relegated to domestic roles, and their contributions to society were frequently overlooked. The biblical narrative reflects a patriarchal worldview that shaped the roles and expectations of women. This, according to Essien^b (2020) is not unconnected from the notion that God, the creator and controller of the universe is a man. In this environment, Deborah's rise to power as a judge was both remarkable and revolutionary.

Deborah's emergence as a judge in Israel is a significant aspect of her story. Judges in ancient Israel were not only legal authorities but also military leaders who guided the people during times of crisis. This is well captured in Judges 4:4-5. This passage highlights her dual role as a spiritual and political leader, indicating that her influence extended beyond mere legal matters. Deborah's position was not just a title; it was a political role that required her to navigate the complexities of leadership in a time of oppression. During this period, Israel was battling with various peculiar problems (Nyoyoko & Essien, 2022), particularly from the Canaanite king Jabin and his commander Sisera. The oppression of the Israelites by Jabin's forces created a dire situation that necessitated strong leadership. Deborah's call to action is documented in Judges 4:6-7, where she summons Barak, a military leader, and instructs him to gather an army to confront Sisera. This moment is pivotal, as it showcases Deborah's courage and decisiveness in the face of adversity.

The Challenges of Deborah's Political Leadership

Deborah's leadership was fraught with challenges that tested her resolve and leadership abilities. One of the primary challenges Deborah faced was the historical context of her political leadership within a patriarchal culture. The societal norms of the time often undermined women's authority, and Deborah had to navigate a landscape that was not only hostile to female leadership but also skeptical of her capabilities. Pressler (2002) emphasize that Deborah's role as a judge was groundbreaking, as it challenged the prevailing notions of gender roles in ancient Israel. Her very presence as a leader in a male-dominated society was a radical departure from the norm. Another significant challenge was the initial refusal of Barak to follow her directives. In Judges 4:8, Barak responds to Deborah's call by stating, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you do not go with me, I will not go." This response reflects Barak's hesitation and the prevailing belief that a woman could not lead a military campaign.

Deborah's ability to inspire confidence in Barak was crucial, as his leadership was essential for mobilizing the Israelite forces. This dynamic illustrates the complexities of leadership and

the need for collaboration, even in the face of societal constraints. Additionally, Deborah faced the challenge of lacking military experience. While she was a prophetess and a judge, her role did not inherently include military training or expertise. This gap in experience could have undermined her authority, especially in a culture that valued martial prowess. However, Deborah's leadership was characterized by wisdom and strategic thinking, allowing her to compensate for her lack of military background. Thus, Deborah's strength lay in her ability to leverage her prophetic insight and wisdom to guide her people effectively.

Surmounting Challenges through Strategic Leadership Initiatives

To overcome these challenges, Deborah employed several strategies that showcased her leadership acumen. One of the most significant strategies was building alliances and collaboration with Barak. Through acknowledging Barak's military expertise and involving him in the decision-making process, Deborah was able to create a partnership that strengthened their collective efforts. This collaboration is evident in Judges 4:9, where Deborah agrees to accompany Barak into battle, demonstrating her willingness to support him while also asserting her authority. Deborah's boldness and willingness to challenge the patriarchal norms of her time were also powerful strategies. Through stepping into a traditionally male role, she not only defied societal expectations but also set a precedent for future generations of women. Her leadership was not merely a personal achievement; it represented a broader movement toward gender equality and empowerment.

As noted by Fiorenza (1983), Deborah's story serves as a reminder that women can and should occupy positions of authority, even in the face of systemic barriers. In addition to collaboration and boldness, Deborah employed strategic communication to rally the Israelite forces. Her ability to inspire and motivate others was crucial in overcoming the initial resistance from Barak. Deborah was able to instill a sense of purpose and urgency among the Israelites by framing the battle against Sisera as a divinely ordained mission. Judges 4:14 captures this moment: "Then Deborah said to Barak, 'Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?'" This declaration not only affirmed her leadership but also reinforced the belief that their cause was just and supported by divine will.

The impact of Deborah's political leadership is profound and far-reaching. Her successful campaign against Sisera, as described in Judges 4:15-16, resulted in a decisive victory for the Israelites. The narrative highlights how Deborah's leadership transformed the course of Israelite history, providing a model of effective governance and military strategy. The song of Deborah, found in Judges 5, serves as a testament to her accomplishments and the collective triumph of the Israelites. This poetic celebration not only commemorates the victory but also elevates Deborah's status as a revered leader.

Lessons from Deborah's Leadership for Akwa Ibom Women Today

Deborah's story offers valuable lessons for contemporary women, particularly in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, where patriarchal structures and cultural barriers continue to hinder women's political participation. The challenges faced by women in Akwa Ibom, such as relegation to domestic roles, financial constraints, and political violence, mirror the obstacles Deborah encountered in her time. One of the key lessons from Deborah's leadership is the importance of building alliances. In a political landscape often dominated by men, women can benefit from forming coalitions and partnerships with like-minded individuals who share their vision

for change. By actively collaborating with others, Akwa Ibom women can amplify their voices and increase their influence in decision-making processes. Deborah's partnership with Barak exemplifies the power of collaboration in overcoming societal barriers.

Furthermore, Deborah's boldness in challenging patriarchal norms serves as a powerful example for women today. Akwa Ibom women can challenge the status quo and pave the way for future generations by asserting their right to lead and participate in political discourse. Also, Deborah's willingness to step into a traditionally male role demonstrates that leadership is not confined to gender; rather, it is defined by one's capabilities, vision, and determination. Additionally, effective communication and strategic messaging are essential tools for women seeking political participation. Deborah's ability to inspire and motivate others through her words highlights the importance of articulating a clear vision and rallying support around a common cause. Women in Akwa Ibom can draw from Deborah's example by crafting compelling narratives that resonate with their communities and advocate for their rights and aspirations.

The life and leadership of Deborah provide a rich brocade into female empowerment in a patriarchal society. Her family background, cultural context, emergence as a judge, and the challenges she faced all contribute to a nuanced understanding of her impact on Israelite history. Deborah's strategies for overcoming obstacles, including collaboration, boldness and effective communication, serve as valuable lessons for contemporary women in Akwa Ibom. Akwa Ibom women can navigate the complexities of political participation and work toward a more equitable and inclusive society these embracing these principles.

Conclusion

The life and leadership of Deborah provide some detailed insights into female empowerment in a patriarchal society. Her family background, cultural context, emergence as a judge, and the challenges she faced all contribute to a textured understanding of her impact on Israelite history. the barriers and challenges encumbering Akwa Ibom women in the political sphere is reminiscent of the obstacles faced by Deborah in a male-dominated society. Deborah's strategies for overcoming obstacles, including collaboration, boldness and effective communication, serve as valuable lessons for contemporary women in Akwa Ibom State. Women in Akwa Ibom State can navigate the complexities of political participation and work toward a more equitable and inclusive society by emulating the examples set by Deborah and employing her strategies.

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