

## Identity Politics and Development in Nigeria: A Feminist Theoretical Analysis

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### Abstract

### Review Article

Nigeria's socio-political environment is significantly influenced by identity politics, especially within the context of development. This article utilizes a feminist theoretical lens to examine how identity politics and development intersect in Nigeria. Nigeria's political dynamics have always been impacted by the country's diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural identities, which frequently intersect. Feminist theory provides a distinctive viewpoint by highlighting how these identities interact with gender, influencing women's roles and contributions to development. The central objective of this research is to analyse how gender stereotypes and patriarchal traditions exacerbate the exclusion of women from key areas such as resource allocation, education, and decision-making processes. Relying on the secondary sources of data, the paper found that diverse identities overlap and suppress women. This marginalization not only hinders women's empowerment but also undermines broader national development goals. By recognizing the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class, feminist theory advocates for more inclusive policies that address these complex challenges. The theoretical framework is rooted in feminist analysis, which underscores the importance of acknowledging and amplifying women's experiences and voices. This approach reveals how entrenched patriarchal norms limit women's agency, yet also uncovers the significant contributions of Nigerian women to grassroots movements advocating for social justice and economic transformation. These movements demonstrate the potential for inclusive identity politics to drive sustainable development. The discoveries in this study reveal that while structural barriers persist, Nigerian women have not relented in fighting for equality and promoting development at the grassroots level. However, their efforts are often overlooked or underutilized in formal policy-making processes. The article recommends that policymakers integrate feminist perspectives into policy plans to more effectively address Nigeria's developmental challenges.

**Keywords:** Identity politics, gender, feminism, intersectionality, development.

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## INTRODUCTION

The socio-political landscape of Nigeria, where various ethnic, religious, and cultural identities coexist within a convoluted and frequently controversial framework, has been significantly shaped by identity politics. These identities have historically influenced political dynamics and frequently resulted in tensions and conflicts that have an impact on national development (Samuel & Deinibiteim, 2023). Nigeria offers special chances and difficulties for development because of its diverse ethnic groupings and cultural differences. Nigeria's colonial past, in which colonial powers established arbitrary borders and divides that resulted in protracted battles for control over resources and power, is fundamental to identity politics in the

nation (Abasili *et al.*, 2023; Ojiego-Okoro & Ezeonwuka, 2024; Onyekwelu *et al.*, 2022). These tussles have been further complicated by religious and cultural differences existing among the people and needs to be interrogated and understood from a gendered perspective. Feminist theory offers a useful framework for examining how these overlapping identities impact development outcomes in this context.

Gender is emphasized by feminist theory as a crucial component in appreciating social dynamics (Few-Demo *et al.*, 2020). Historically, gender stereotypes and patriarchal conventions have disenfranchised women in Nigeria, limiting their involvement in the political and economic arenas. In addition to being a violation of

women's rights, this marginalization poses a serious obstacle to the advancement of the country (Adamu, 2023; Banjo, 2023). Feminist analysis provides important discoveries, such as the idea of intersectionality, which acknowledges that people experience oppression in different ways. For instance, Nigerian women may experience biases not only as a result of their sex but also based on their ethnicity, religion, and class (Abimbola *et al.*, 2023; Obaoye & Wenli, 2022). The ways in which these intersecting identities affect women's access to opportunities, resources, and political power are shown via an intersectional analysis. A woman belonging to a marginalized ethnic group, for example, would experience discrimination not just on the basis of her gender but also on the basis of her ethnicity, which would further impede her access to political participation, work opportunities, and education. Understanding the complex dynamics of identity politics in Nigeria and creating solutions for the particular problems that distinct groups of women experience depend on taking an intersectional perspective.

Women have proven to be remarkably resilient and active in leading development activities; despite the systemic barriers they confront. Women's grassroots movements have been essential in promoting political involvement, economic changes, and social fairness (González-Malabet, 2023). Women's fight against marginalization, marked by active movements, has a long history. The 1929 Aba Women's Riot, in which women demonstrated against social inequities and colonial taxation laws, was one of the first significant occurrences (Afolabi & Akeem, 2022). This occasion paved the way for upcoming feminist movements in Nigeria and demonstrated the power of women in collective struggle. Numerous women's organizations have arisen since independence, promoting women's rights and gender equality. The Nigerian Women's Trust Fund and the Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) are two prominent organizations dedicated to advancing women's political involvement and defending their rights (Olsson, 2022). These organizations have been instrumental in pushing feminist causes and challenging patriarchal conventions. Despite these initiatives, society has not made much progress, and patriarchal systems are still ingrained in the fabric of society.

These initiatives demonstrate how inclusive identities and the politics that advance them can support long-term, sustainable development. Nigeria may leverage the transformative power of gender equality to fulfill its development goals by recognizing and promoting women's leadership. It becomes increasingly important to comprehend the role of identity politics as Nigeria navigates the difficulties of development. Thus, this study emphasizes the significance of gender in this discourse by examining the relationship between identity

politics and development in Nigeria through feminist theoretical lens.

### The Concept of Identity Politics

All over the world, identity politics has become a significant aspect of politics and political activity. Identity politics refers to the idea that a person's advantages or privileges is determined by their race, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, or any other identity that they personally believe defines them (Carlos, 2023). These identities however, may be negotiated and accepted by a particular group or imposed by others, in the complex game of interest articulation, aggregation and appropriation (Okene, 2011; Ndu, 2011). Each of the many identities that men and women possess are accompanied by a set of roles, connections, stereotypes, role models, and cultural symbols (Anuradha, 2010). Anuradha asserts that a person's identity can encompass various aspects such as their country, state, community, sex, workplace, educational background, and so on.

The Civil Rights Movement, the feminist movements of the 1970s, the environmentalist movements of the 1980s, and other American movements beginning in the 1940s can all be linked to the conceptual definition of identity politics (Ogali, 2011). Identity politics has grown to represent a broad spectrum of political engagement and theorizing rooted in the common experiences of injustice experienced by members of particular social groups.

Dalgliesh (2013) views identity politics as the type of political activism that aims to abolish domination or change the institutional framework that inhibits individuals from expressing their discontentment in a system. Because speech empowers disadvantaged groups to create a self-designated identity, identity serves as a vehicle in the political system for oppressed and excluded people to have a voice. However, the aim of identity politics is for a particular oppressed minority to strive for recognition, freedom, and equity. Economic undertones are present in most struggles for the shaping and recognition of identities and the privileges that go with it. It is on this note that Ndu (2011) pointed out that identity politics, like all politics, has its roots in economic calculations. This indicates that issues of abundance and scarcity, inclusion and exclusion, dominance and exploitation, etc., serve as the foundation for the development of group identity.

Political movements as modes of expression of identity politics, are usually initiated by people who have experienced injustice and deprivation in a similar way and are intended to maintain equity in a community. Identity politics as a unifying strategy is closely linked to the notion that some social groups are oppressed; for instance, that being a woman exposes oneself to cultural imperialism, which includes violence, exploitation,

marginalization, stereotyping, and the appropriation of one's group identity (Young, 1990). Taking a cue from Young, identity politics as it pertains to this study implies that an individual's identity can intersect with several identities and result in increased discrimination. Put differently, that an individual can have or be marked by several identities which combine to reinforce powerlessness and discrimination. This study focuses on women, who are subjected to prejudice on multiple fronts due to their gender, ethnicity, religion, and geography, which altogether hinder their capacity to make significant contributions to personal and societal development.

### The concept of development

Development is a multifaceted process that involves significant changes in social structures, population attitudes, and national institutions, in addition to accelerating economic growth, reducing inequality, and eliminating poverty. Development is centered on the core values of sustenance, self-esteem, and freedom (Todaro and Smith, 2020; Veres *et al.*, 2022). The capacity of policymakers to bring about desired changes in any country's economic structure is a prerequisite for such change that can promote development. These policies must bring about a wide range of changes throughout the social structure, according to the various basic requirements and preferences of people and social groupings. Additionally, it should shift from a rural lifestyle that is often viewed as deficient to one that is considered to be better both materially and spiritually (Akpomuvie, 2010).

According to Walter Rodney (1976), development occurs both at the individual and societal levels. On a personal level, it implies possessing greater potential and capability, as well as greater autonomy, creativity, self-control, responsibility, and financial security. Development at the societal level denotes a growing ability to control interactions both inside and outside the group. In a similar vein, Gboyega (2003) defines development as efforts to enhance the circumstances around human existence. This suggests that all people's material well-being will increase in ways that will safeguard their future, if development is taking place. It also entails eliminating or significantly reducing poverty and disparities in access to basic necessities. The United Nations Development Programme (2010) places a strong emphasis on "human development," which is defined as the process of achieving all three levels of schooling, adult literacy, life expectancy, and average income, all of which are indicators of a person's ability to make their own decisions. Human development, in its broadest sense, refers to every facet of a person's well-being, from their state of health to their degree of economic and political freedom and security.

This paper's definition of development includes enhancement of everyone's material and mental well-

being, with a focus on lowering poverty, inequality, and barriers to education, as well as promoting economic independence, political freedom, and general infrastructure advancement. The connection between identity politics and development is here under better appreciated within the context of gender.

### Gender and Ethnic Identity: An Intersection

Women's experiences are significantly shaped by the intersection of gender and ethnic identity. In Nigeria, where there are over 250 ethnic groups, each with distinct cultural practices and customs, the relationships existing between gender and ethnicity have a significant impact on women's social, economic, and political lives (Och, 2023). The roles, actions, attributes, and behaviors that a certain society deems proper for men and women are referred to as gender identity (Rakesh, 2023). Conversely, the shared history, language, customs, and cultural legacy by a group of people is referred to as ethnic identity (Yurii, M., 2022). These identities do not necessarily conflict with one another in Nigeria; rather, they interact in complex ways to affect both opportunities and constraints faced by women. Nigerian ethnic groups vary widely and differ in their cultural expectations about gender roles. For instance, traditional interpretations of religious and cultural customs may place limitations on women's mobility and public involvement in particular ethnic groups in the north. On the other hand, some ethnic groups in the South could present more favorable conditions for women to engage in social and economic activities.

In a similar vein, women's rights and access to resources are frequently restricted by patriarchy, which has been described as a pervasive force among Nigerian ethnic groups (Omorogiuwa, 2022). But patriarchy can take many different forms and degrees, which means that it will impact women's agency differently depending on the situation. For example, Igbo women are well-known for their leadership and community organizing skills, while Yoruba women have traditionally played important roles in trade and commerce.

Nigerian women due to their gender and ethnic identity frequently encounter obstacles to political engagement (Adamu, 2023; Banjo, 2023). While ethnic allegiances can further marginalize women inside political parties led by men, traditional gender stereotypes may deter women from entering the political sphere. These variables' interactions may lead to underrepresentation and minimal influence on decisions by women. In a similar way, different ethnic groups have different access to education; for example, girls in the North and other parts of the country have lower enrollment and retention rates because of cultural and religious customs. In Ungogo Local Government Area, Kano state, religious convictions, poverty, a lack of effective government educational strategies, and family

preference for male children all prevent girls from accessing western education, as shown in a study by Nasidi and Wali (2023). Considering that education is an important indicator that determines career possibilities and income levels, this inequality has an impact on women's economic potential. In addition, because of insecurity and displacement, women may encounter additional difficulties in gaining access to opportunities and resources in areas where ethnic conflicts are common. According to an empirical study by Simon (2021), there is a livelihood crisis as a result of conflict-related displacement, and the majority of the study's female participants stressed the need for economic prospects.

Women's ethnic identities can both empower and limit them. Traditional associations and structures offer social mobility and empowerment opportunities for certain ethnic groups. These options, meanwhile, are not available to everyone, and women commonly encounter social constraints in their pursuit of leadership roles or financial independence. Development results for individuals and groups in Nigeria are profoundly impacted by the intersection of gender and ethnic identity. Therefore, policies and initiatives that overlook these connections run the risk of unintentionally widening the development gap and fostering current inequality, especially as it concerns women.

#### **Identity Politics and Women's Economic Empowerment:**

Women's economic empowerment in Nigeria is greatly impacted by identity politics, which is characterized by the convergence of gender, ethnicity, religion, and regional ties. Women's access to private enterprise, job placement, and education is impacted by these overlapping identities, which frequently exacerbate already-existing disparities. Gender and ethnic identities have a significant impact on access to formal education in Nigeria, leading to differences in educational achievement (Nasidi & Wali, 2023; Obaoye & Wenli, 2022). This is apparent regardless of the fact that education plays a crucial role in empowering women through providing them the knowledge and skills required for both work and entrepreneurship. In certain Nigerian communities, cultural norms and behaviors place a higher value on male education than on female education, which restricts females' access to education, and even when educated, to equal opportunities as men. Moreover, early marriage and household responsibilities limit girls' access to higher education, especially in rural areas.

Ethnic and geographical differences exist in access to educational. The reduced female literacy rates in Northern Nigeria, which is home to multiple ethnic groups, can be attributed in part to cultural and religious customs that limit females' access to education as compared to the South. A 2005 survey that was published

in Olaleye & Adeyemo (2012) provided evidence for this assertion by displaying the prevalence of illiterate women in different northern states. The study found that in the North Eastern States of Nigeria (Borno, Yola, Adamawa, and Bauchi), 33.3% of females had never attended formal schooling. In the states of the North West (Kano, , Kebbi, Sokoto and Jigawa) 87.8% of females had no formal education. Only 36.2% of females in the South-South and South-Eastern States of (Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Rivers, Imo, Cross-River, Anambra) lacked a formal education, compared to at least 26.1% in the South West (Ogun, Lagos, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti). In agreement with the above research, a different study conducted in 2012 by the British Council revealed that 70.8% of young women in the North West between the ages of 20 and 29 couldn't read or write. Contrarily, ethnic groups in the South like the Yoruba and Igbo frequently place a higher importance on female education, which helps women in such areas achieve better educational performance. According to Onyekwelu (2019), female enrolment in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines at universities in Nigeria is much higher than male enrollment, with female enrollment generally being higher in the southern geopolitical zones, as opposed to the north. Yet, this is hardly reflected in post-graduation employment and appointment based on the competencies acquired.

Gender and ethnic identities have an impact on women's access to employment opportunities asserts Zhai (2023). Women's access to well-paying jobs and their capacity to participate in the labor market may be restricted by gender-based discrimination. Women's economic empowerment in Nigeria is restricted by the prevalence of gender-based discrimination in employment, advancement, and compensation. Stereotypes that limit women to lower-paying and less secure occupations can hinder them from certain jobs associated with men. The ethnic identification of a woman may make it more difficult for her to secure job. Employers can show preference for candidates who belong to their own ethnic group while marginalizing women from other ethnic backgrounds. While these discriminations apply to men, cursory observations show that they are more pronounced in the case of women.

Identity politics can be a major obstacle to women's success in private enterprise or entrepreneurship. Identity politics have the ability to impede the chances for entrepreneurship that are essential for women's economic empowerment. These opportunities present the possibility of financial independence and leadership. According to a British Council survey from 2012, women only manage 20% of formal sector enterprises, and 23% of these enterprises are in the retail industry. Furthermore, 37% of all workers in the apparel business are women. Due to lack of collateral and discriminatory practices at financial

institutions, women entrepreneurs frequently have trouble obtaining funding (Bari *et al.*, 2023; Sari & Karabulut, 2023). Ethnic prejudices have the potential to make these difficulties worse, with women from marginalized or minority ethnic groups having more difficulty obtaining financing. Additionally, social networks are essential to entrepreneurship because they give access to knowledge, resources, and markets. Due to prejudices based on gender and ethnicity, women's access to these networks are restricted, which limits their chances of success and expansion in business. These restrictions also obviously manifest in women's access to political leadership, which is essential for social advancement.

### Identity Politics and Women's Leadership Representation

Women's involvement in politics and leadership roles is greatly impacted by identity politics in Nigeria, and these are shaped by the intricate relationships between gender, ethnicity, religion, and regional affiliations. Achieving gender equity in leadership posts is frequently hampered by the interaction of different identities, in a patriarchal system. Nigeria, the most populous nation on the continent, falls short of many other nations in terms of the proportion of women in positions of leadership. Only a small proportion of political and decision-making positions in the public and corporate sectors are held by women. In the Nigerian National Assembly, women make up a small portion of the seats. According to Onyeji (2019), women's representation in the national parliament decreased from 6.5% in 2015 to 4.1% in 2019 and continued to diminish following the 2023 elections for the Senate and House of Representatives. This is a reflection of long-standing gender differences in political engagement and is far lower than the global average. In a similar vein, women are underrepresented in state and federal executive roles. In Nigeria's history, there have been relatively few female local government council executives and governors.

In addition, women are underrepresented in positions of leadership in the public and private sectors. Although there are fields where women have achieved great advancements, like healthcare and education, leadership roles in government, business, industry, and academia are still predominantly held by men (Counter *et al.*, 2023; Ajemba, 2023). There are several reasons for this restriction, many of which are closely related to patriarchal inclinations of identity politics. Cultural conventions and traditional gender roles frequently dictate that women should prioritize taking care of their homes over pursuing leadership roles (Adamu, 2023; Banjo, 2023). These social norms deter women from pursuing leadership positions and being involved in politics. Thus, patriarchal institutions that favour male leadership obstruct women's access to political and leadership chances in many Nigerian communities.

Political representation in Nigeria is influenced, among other things, by ethnic and regional identities. Ethnic groups frequently hold control over political arenas due to the distribution of political power along these lines. Women from minority ethnic groups may be marginalized as a result, and their access to leadership roles may be restricted. More specifically, geographical differences have a detrimental effect on women's representation, particularly in areas with rigid cultural norms. For example, cultural and religious customs in some northern areas further limit women's involvement in public life.

### Taking a Feminist Theoretical Approach to Identity Politics

Feminist thought has placed identity politics at its centre. The ability of women to actively contribute to the development of their country has been weakened by patriarchal behaviors and societal systems, as feminist researchers have shown. In addition to acknowledging the importance of an intersectional approach to development, which recognizes that individuals experience social, economic, and political life in multifaceted ways due to the interconnectedness of various social categories such as ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and more as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. This research draws on the viewpoint of radical feminist researchers as a means to tackle the root cause of the problem. Radical feminists argue that patriarchy is the primary source of discrimination against women in society. In spite of the different social identities which overlap and intersect to create unique experiences of oppression against women, patriarchy remains the fundamental foundation to women's marginalization in the society. It is in this regard that Eisentein argues that the political framework of patriarchy aims to dominate and enslave women, so that their ability to make choices regarding their sexuality, childbearing, mothering, loving, and career remains minimal. Eisentein went further to say that patriarchy is an oppressive system that acknowledges both the actual and prospective power of men and women. Its major goals are to restrict women's options and maintain their status as mothers (Eisentein 1981).

The need to conquer patriarchy becomes essential in order to address the issues raised by identity politics as embedded in the social structure of the society. Eller (2000) express the belief that revolution is the most effective means of addressing the root causes of oppression, including patriarchy. By rejecting traditional gender norms and the oppression of women in society, radical feminism seeks to confront and overturn patriarchy and advocates for a radical reconstruction of society.

The current research applies the radical feminist idea to address the challenges of identity politics and

development in Nigeria. This is because it provides greater clarity of the fundamental root of discrimination against women. This method provides a thorough explanation of the central cause of the ongoing subjugation of Nigerian women and their rights in all facets of life in the society. In order to achieve women's rights and equality, patriarchy—which includes gender inequality, religious restrictions, traditional and cultural norms, regional and ethnic inclinations, and hierarchical structures that restrict women's access to decision making organs in society—must be destroyed. Women can accomplish this by continuing struggle; reorientation of women, including stakeholders; and total revolution against patriarchy. The desired development may never be achieved until these elements that applaud patriarchy are eliminated in the system.

### Recommendations

In a bid to overcome the challenges of identity politics imbedded in patriarchy especially as it limits women's vigorous ability to contribute to development, the following recommendations are put forward;

1. When creating and executing policies, policymakers need to take the intersectionality of gender and ethnic cleavages into account. In order to prevent current power dynamics, affirmative action policies, such as gender quotas in political representation, must take ethnic diversity into consideration and political parties should adopt gender quota at all levels of political selections, appointments and internal party elections. Through this method, more women would attain leadership posts which would facilitate the overthrow of patriarchy in the system.
2. Development agendas could be greatly strengthened by development programs that acknowledge and tackle the particular difficulties experienced by women from diverse ethnic backgrounds. For instance, initiatives to improve girls' education should take into account how cultural and religious norms affect their ability to access school and adjust their intervention designs accordingly. Scholarships, conditioned financial aid, and community awareness initiatives are a few examples of policies that can support girls' education and assist in raising educational achievement for women and girls, especially in areas where there are large gender gaps.
3. In order to advance economic empowerment, gender-responsive policies that cater to the unique requirements and difficulties faced by women must be put into place. These laws should prioritize the eradication of gender-based discrimination in the workplace and in Private enterprise, while also offering financial support to women for starting and growing their own businesses. Giving women entrepreneurs

access to business development resources and financial literacy training can enable them to handle their money wisely and expand their companies and their influence.

4. More inclusive and sustainable development would result from acknowledging the diversity of women's experiences and empowering them at the local level. Training, mentorship, and support for women aspiring to leadership positions can be offered as part of such empowerment programs. These initiatives can be carried out with funding from governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as from networks and women's organizations across different ethnic groups, promoting collaboration, and intensifying women's voices in policy dialogues.
5. Women's access to resources, knowledge, and markets can be improved by establishing and strengthening their support networks. These networks can also offer peer support and mentoring, both of which are essential for the development of businesses. Creating forums for female entrepreneurs to interact and exchange experiences can stimulate creativity while simultaneously opening doors for collaboration and collaborative ventures.

### CONCLUSION

Understanding the intersection between gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and regional identities are crucial in determining women experiences in Nigeria. Feminists have included the notion of intersectionality, which acknowledges that people encounter oppression in diverse ways, into their examination of identity politics and its connection to gender and development. Women have historically been sidelined by patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, which have restricted their involvement in the political and economic sectors. Not only does this marginalization violate women's rights, but it also poses a serious obstacle to the advancement of the country, seeing that women represent a healthy percentage of the total population. In order to address these issues, society must be drastically reorganized by collapsing the patriarchal mindset, which is the primary cause of women's subjugation. Furthermore, it is necessary to execute strategies that tackle and moderate the intersecting identities and promote inclusive development. By promoting gender-responsive policies that can enhance equality in all aspects including political, economic and social, women can vigorously contribute to sustainable growth and development.

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