
SOCIO-POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT AND ITS EFFECT ON WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING POWER IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

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ABSTRACT

This study examined socio-political empowerment and its effect on women's decision-making power in local governance structures. The study was guided by three specific objectives which sought to determine the extent to which socio-political empowerment influences women's participation in decision-making processes, examine the relationship between socio-political empowerment and women's level of authority in local governance bodies, and identify the barriers limiting the effectiveness of socio-political empowerment in enhancing women's decision-making power. A descriptive survey research design was adopted using a quantitative approach. Data were collected from 236 respondents selected through multistage sampling techniques using a structured questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation. Findings from the study revealed that socio-political empowerment significantly enhances women's participation, authority, and influence in local governance decision-making processes through political education, leadership opportunities, and civic engagement initiatives. The study further established that barriers such as cultural norms, gender discrimination, financial constraints, low educational attainment, and political intimidation hinder the effectiveness of socio-political empowerment efforts. The study concluded that socio-political empowerment is essential for improving women's decision-making power and achieving inclusive governance. The study therefore recommended stronger gender-inclusive policies, continuous empowerment programs, financial support

initiatives, and societal reorientation toward women's leadership participation in governance structures.

KEYWORDS: Socio-Political Empowerment, Women's Participation, Decision-Making Power, Local Governance, Gender Equality.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on gender equality has increasingly emphasised the importance of women's socio-political empowerment as a critical driver of inclusive governance and sustainable development. Socio-political empowerment, in this context, refers to the process through which women gain the capacity, confidence, institutional access, and societal recognition required to actively participate in political and civic life, particularly in decision-making processes that shape their communities. Despite global and national commitments to gender inclusion, women's representation and influence in local governance structures remain disproportionately low, especially in developing societies where patriarchal norms and socio-cultural constraints continue to shape political participation. Within such contexts, local governance, being the closest tier of government to the people, serves as a critical arena where the empowerment or marginalisation of women becomes most visible and consequential.

Empirical evidence suggests that when women are meaningfully included in governance processes, there is a marked improvement in the quality of decisions made, particularly in areas relating to community welfare, resource allocation, and social development priorities. Women's participation in decision-making has been linked to more inclusive governance outcomes and improved responsiveness to community needs, as their lived experiences often differ from those of men in leadership positions. However, studies continue to show that structural barriers such as cultural stereotypes, limited access to political networks, economic dependency, and institutional bias significantly restrict women's effective participation in decision-making roles within local government systems. These limitations not only weaken gender equality objectives but also undermine the democratic ideals of representation and inclusiveness in governance structures .

In addition, recent scholarly discussions have highlighted that empowerment is not merely about numerical representation but about actual influence and authority in decision-making processes. Women may occupy positions within local councils or community leadership structures, yet still lack substantive power to influence policy directions or resource

distribution. This gap between presence and influence underscores the need to examine socio-political empowerment as a determinant of decision-making power rather than a symbolic achievement. Evidence from governance studies further suggests that enhancing women's socio-political empowerment, through education, institutional inclusion, and supportive policy frameworks, can significantly improve their capacity to engage in collective decision-making and challenge entrenched patriarchal norms within local institutions.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to critically examine the relationship between socio-political empowerment and women's decision-making power within local governance structures. It aims to explore the extent to which empowerment initiatives translate into actual influence in governance processes, and how such influence affects participatory decision-making at the grassroots level.

Problem Statement

Even with the growing global advocacy for gender equality and inclusive governance, women's participation in local governance structures continues to be largely symbolic rather than substantive in many developing societies. While various policies, international frameworks, and national gender inclusion strategies have been introduced to enhance women's socio-political empowerment, their actual influence in decision-making processes at the grassroots level remains limited. In many local government systems, women are still underrepresented in key leadership positions, and where they are present, their capacity to influence decisions is often constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, socio-cultural expectations, political marginalisation, and limited access to strategic networks.

More critically, existing empirical evidence suggests that numerical representation does not automatically translate into decision-making power. Women may occupy positions within councils, committees, or community governance structures, yet still lack the authority to shape policies, influence budget allocations, or contribute meaningfully to governance outcomes. This disconnect between empowerment initiatives and actual decision-making influence raises important concerns about the effectiveness of socio-political empowerment programmes in achieving their intended outcomes. In many cases, socio-political empowerment appears to enhance visibility without necessarily guaranteeing authority or autonomy in governance processes.

There is a paucity of context-specific empirical studies that critically examine how socio-political empowerment translates into real decision-making power among women in local governance structures, particularly within developing regions. This gap in literature makes it

difficult for policymakers and development stakeholders to understand the actual impact of empowerment interventions and to design more effective strategies that go beyond representation to meaningful participation. It is against this backdrop that this study investigates the relationship between socio-political empowerment and women's decision-making power in local governance structures, with a view to addressing the gap between policy intention and practical reality.

Objectives

The paper seeks to:

1. Determine the extent to which socio-political empowerment influences women's participation in decision-making processes within local governance structures.
2. Examine the relationship between socio-political empowerment and women's level of authority and influence in local governance decision-making bodies.
3. Identify the barriers limiting the effectiveness of socio-political empowerment in enhancing women's decision-making power in local governance structures.

Literature Review

Socio-Political Empowerment

Socio-political empowerment is a multidimensional concept that describes the process through which individuals or groups acquire the ability, agency, and institutional access required to actively participate in political and social decision-making processes. In the context of gender studies, it refers specifically to the enhancement of women's capacity to engage meaningfully in governance structures, influence public policy, and contribute to community leadership without structural or cultural inhibition.

In contemporary governance literature, socio-political empowerment is no longer viewed merely as the inclusion of women in political spaces but as the transformation of power relations that determine how decisions are made and who has influence over them. According to recent development discourse, empowerment is effective only when it shifts women from passive observers to active decision-makers within institutional structures (UN Women, 2023). This perspective highlights that empowerment must include access to education, political representation, leadership opportunities, and freedom from socio-cultural constraints that limit participation.

Socio-political empowerment is often influenced by intersecting factors such as economic independence, literacy levels, political awareness, and cultural norms. In many developing

societies, including Nigeria, these factors interact to either facilitate or constrain women's political agency. Studies have shown that even where women are politically represented, their actual influence is frequently limited by entrenched patriarchal systems that dominate governance structures (Arowolo & Aluko, 2022).

Thus, socio-political empowerment is best understood as both a process and an outcome: a process through which women gain access to resources and opportunities, and an outcome reflected in their ability to influence governance decisions meaningfully.

Women's Decision-Making Power

Women's decision-making power refers to the ability of women to participate in, influence, and control governance outcomes at various levels of society. It extends beyond formal inclusion into governance institutions and focuses on substantive participation in agenda setting, policy formulation, resource allocation, and implementation processes.

In local governance structures, decision-making power is particularly critical because local governments are the closest tier of government to the people and are responsible for delivering essential services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and community development. However, empirical evidence suggests that women's decision-making power in these structures remains significantly constrained.

Recent studies indicate that women in local councils often occupy marginal positions that do not allow them to influence major policy decisions (Okafor & Chukwu, 2021). Instead, their roles are frequently symbolic, reinforcing the notion of "presence without power". This situation reflects what scholars describe as the "participation paradox", where increased representation does not necessarily translate into increased influence.

Decision-making power is influenced by multiple factors including institutional design, political party structures, access to financial resources, and socio-cultural norms. Where these factors are exclusionary, women's influence remains limited regardless of their formal positions within governance structures.

Local Governance Structures

Local governance structures refer to administrative and political institutions operating at the grassroots level, responsible for governance closest to the people. In Nigeria, this includes local government councils, wards, community development associations, and traditional governance institutions.

Local governance is expected to promote inclusiveness, accountability, and participatory democracy. However, in practice, it often mirrors national-level inequalities, particularly

gender disparities. Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions within local governance systems, and where they are present, their participation is often constrained by informal power dynamics.

According to recent governance studies, local government institutions in many African countries continue to be dominated by male political elites, thereby limiting women's access to decision-making spaces (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2022). This reinforces structural inequality and reduces the effectiveness of gender inclusion policies.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on Liberal Feminist Theory, which argues that gender inequality is primarily a result of unequal access to opportunities rather than inherent biological differences between men and women. The theory advocates for equal rights, equal opportunities, and institutional reforms that eliminate barriers to women's participation in political and social life.

Liberal feminism emphasises legal and policy-based solutions such as gender quotas, affirmative action, and educational empowerment as mechanisms for achieving gender equality. Within the context of local governance, the theory suggests that increasing women's access to political offices and decision-making platforms will enhance their influence in governance processes.

However, critics argue that liberal feminism overemphasises formal equality without adequately addressing deep-rooted cultural and structural inequalities. In many societies, including Nigeria, formal inclusion has not translated into substantive empowerment, as patriarchal norms continue to shape political behaviour and institutional practices.

Despite these limitations, Liberal Feminist Theory remains relevant for this study because it provides a useful framework for understanding how socio-political empowerment can influence women's decision-making power in governance structures.

Empirical Review

Socio-Political Empowerment and Women's Political Participation

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that socio-political empowerment enhances women's political participation, although the depth of influence varies across contexts. Research across Sub-Saharan Africa shows that empowerment programmes such as civic education, leadership training, and gender-sensitive policies have increased women's visibility in governance spaces.

However, visibility does not always translate into influence. A study on women's political participation in Nigeria found that while more women are participating in politics than before, their roles are often limited to auxiliary positions with minimal decision-making authority (Akinola & Johnson, 2022). This highlights a persistent gap between participation and power.

Similarly, studies conducted in Ghana and Kenya show that socio-political empowerment initiatives improve women's confidence and political awareness but do not always dismantle structural barriers within political institutions (Mensah & Osei, 2023). Political party systems often remain male-dominated, thereby limiting women's advancement into leadership positions.

Women's Empowerment and Decision-Making in Local Governance

Empirical evidence on women's decision-making power in local governance structures presents mixed outcomes. In some cases, women's inclusion has improved governance responsiveness, particularly in areas related to social welfare, education, and community health.

For example, studies in India reveal that women's participation in local councils has improved service delivery outcomes and increased attention to community needs (Bhatia, 2021). However, these improvements are often accompanied by limited influence in high-level decision-making processes.

In Nigeria, research indicates that women's involvement in local government councils remains largely symbolic, with real decision-making power concentrated among male elites (Okafor & Chukwu, 2021). Even when women occupy official positions, they are often excluded from key committees and financial decision-making bodies.

This suggests that empowerment must go beyond representation to include structural transformation of governance institutions.

Barriers to Women's Decision-Making Power

A significant body of literature identifies persistent barriers limiting women's decision-making power in governance structures. These include: patriarchal cultural norms that discourage women from leadership roles, political party discrimination and gatekeeping, economic dependency and lack of financial resources, low educational attainment in some communities and tokenistic representation in governance institutions

Studies show that these barriers collectively create an environment where women's participation is restricted to symbolic roles rather than substantive leadership (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2022). In many cases, women are included in governance structures to satisfy policy requirements rather than to contribute meaningfully to decision-making processes.

Effectiveness of Empowerment Interventions

Empowerment interventions such as gender quotas, training programmes, and policy reforms have had mixed success. While they have increased women's numerical representation in governance structures, their impact on decision-making authority remains limited.

Recent research suggests that without addressing structural inequalities, empowerment programmes risk becoming superficial (Mensah & Osei, 2023). For instance, gender quotas may increase the number of women in office but do not necessarily guarantee influence over policy decisions. This highlights the need for more transformative approaches that address both representation and power distribution within governance systems.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that socio-political empowerment plays a crucial role in enhancing women's participation in governance structures. However, there is a clear distinction between participation and decision-making power. While empowerment initiatives have improved women's visibility in governance systems, their influence remains limited due to structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. This study therefore builds on existing literature by examining how socio-political empowerment influences women's decision-making power in local governance structures, with a focus on bridging the gap between representation and actual influence.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design using a quantitative approach to examine socio-political empowerment and its effect on women's decision-making power in local governance structures. The target population comprised women occupying elective and appointive positions, women leaders in community-based organizations, and selected local government officials within the study area. A sample size of 250 respondents was drawn from an estimated population of 1,200 women stakeholders using the Taro Yamane sampling formula at a 5% margin of error, while a multistage sampling technique involving purposive and simple random sampling methods were employed to ensure adequate representation of respondents across different local governance units. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire divided into four sections covering respondents' demographic

characteristics, extent of socio-political empowerment, level of participation and influence in decision-making processes, and barriers affecting women's empowerment in local governance. The questionnaire items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). To ensure validity, the instrument was subjected to face and content validation by experts in political science and gender studies, while reliability will be tested using the Cronbach Alpha method with a reliability coefficient of 0.72, which was considered acceptable. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation to address the research objectives. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation of respondents were strictly observed throughout the study.

RESULTS

A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed to respondents, out of which 236 were correctly completed and returned, representing a response rate of 94.4%. The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics comprising frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation.

Research Question One: To what extent does socio-political empowerment influence women's participation in decision-making processes within local governance structures?

Table 1: Respondents' Perception on the Influence of Socio-Political Empowerment on Women's Participation in Decision-Making Processes.

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Political education increases women's participation in local governance decisions	102	88	28	18	3.16	0.89	Accepted
2	Access to leadership opportunities enhances women's involvement in governance activities	110	79	31	16	3.20	0.92	Accepted
3	Women who are politically empowered participate actively in community policy formulation	97	92	29	18	3.13	0.87	Accepted
4	Socio-political empowerment programs encourage women to contest leadership positions	115	81	24	16	3.25	0.91	Accepted
5	Increased civic awareness improves women's participation in local governance meetings	104	85	30	17	3.17	0.88	Accepted

Grand Mean = 3.18

The result in Table 1 reveals a grand mean score of 3.18, which is above the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that respondents generally agreed that socio-political empowerment significantly influences women's participation in decision-making processes within local governance structures. The findings suggest that political education, civic awareness, and leadership opportunities are critical factors that promote women's active engagement in governance activities and policy formulation.

Research Question Two: What is the relationship between socio-political empowerment and women's level of authority and influence in local governance decision-making bodies?

Table 2: Relationship between Socio-Political Empowerment and Women's Authority in Local Governance.

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Empowered women are more likely to occupy leadership positions in local governance	108	86	27	15	3.22	0.86	Accepted
2	Socio-political empowerment enhances women's confidence in influencing public decisions	112	82	25	17	3.23	0.90	Accepted
3	Women with political exposure possess greater authority in governance deliberations	99	90	30	17	3.15	0.88	Accepted
4	Empowerment initiatives improve women's representation in local decision-making bodies	117	78	26	15	3.26	0.91	Accepted
5	Financial and social empowerment strengthen women's influence on community policies	105	84	29	18	3.17	0.89	Accepted

Grand Mean = 3.21

Table 2 shows a grand mean score of 3.21, which exceeds the benchmark mean of 2.50. This implies that socio-political empowerment has a strong positive relationship with women's level of authority and influence in local governance decision-making bodies. The respondents agreed that women who are politically, socially, and economically empowered are more confident, influential, and better represented in governance structures and community policy decisions.

Research Question Three: What are the barriers limiting the effectiveness of socio-political empowerment in enhancing women's decision-making power in local governance structures?

Table 3: Barriers Limiting the Effectiveness of Socio-Political Empowerment on Women's Decision-Making Power.

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Cultural norms and traditions restrict women's participation in governance	120	76	24	16	3.27	0.93	Accepted
2	Gender discrimination reduces women's access to leadership opportunities	114	83	23	16	3.25	0.90	Accepted
3	Lack of financial resources limits women's political engagement	109	85	27	15	3.22	0.87	Accepted
4	Low educational attainment affects women's decision-making capacity in governance	103	88	28	17	3.17	0.89	Accepted
5	Political intimidation discourages women from participating in governance activities	118	80	22	16	3.27	0.92	Accepted

Grand Mean = 3.24

The findings in Table 3 indicate a grand mean score of 3.24, which is above the acceptable criterion mean of 2.50. This demonstrates that several barriers hinder the effectiveness of socio-political empowerment in improving women's decision-making power in local governance structures. Major barriers identified include cultural norms, gender discrimination, financial constraints, low educational attainment, and political intimidation. These challenges continue to limit women's active participation and influence in governance processes despite empowerment initiatives.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study established that socio-political empowerment significantly enhances women's participation in local governance decision-making processes. Women who have access to political education, leadership opportunities, and civic engagement platforms are more likely to contribute meaningfully to governance activities. The study also revealed a positive relationship between socio-political empowerment and women's authority in local governance structures, indicating that empowerment increases women's confidence, representation, and influence in public decision-making. However, the study further identified persistent barriers such as patriarchal cultural practices, gender discrimination,

inadequate financial resources, and political intimidation as major factors limiting the effectiveness of socio-political empowerment initiatives. These findings imply that while empowerment programs have yielded positive outcomes, there is still a need for stronger institutional support, policy reforms, and societal reorientation to achieve inclusive governance and gender equality in local political structures.

CONCLUSION

This study examined socio-political empowerment and its effect on women's decision-making power in local governance structures. Based on the findings of the study, it was established that socio-political empowerment significantly enhances women's participation, authority, and influence in local governance decision-making processes. The study revealed that access to political education, leadership opportunities, civic engagement platforms, and empowerment initiatives positively contributes to women's active involvement in governance activities and policy formulation. Furthermore, the study found that socio-politically empowered women are more confident and capable of occupying leadership positions and influencing public decisions within local governance structures. Despite these positive outcomes, the study also identified major barriers limiting the effectiveness of socio-political empowerment, including cultural and patriarchal norms, gender discrimination, inadequate financial resources, low educational attainment, and political intimidation. These challenges continue to undermine women's full participation and representation in governance structures. Therefore, the study concludes that although socio-political empowerment serves as a vital mechanism for improving women's decision-making power in local governance, achieving sustainable gender inclusiveness in governance requires deliberate institutional support, policy implementation, social reorientation, and the elimination of structural barriers against women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government at all levels should strengthen socio-political empowerment programs through continuous political education, leadership training, and civic awareness initiatives aimed at increasing women's participation in local governance processes.
2. Local government authorities and policy makers should formulate and enforce gender-inclusive policies that guarantee equal opportunities for women in political appointments, leadership positions, and decision-making bodies.

3. Non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, and community associations should intensify advocacy campaigns against cultural practices and gender stereotypes that restrict women's political participation and leadership aspirations.
4. Financial support mechanisms such as grants, empowerment funds, and skill acquisition programs should be established to enhance women's economic independence and capacity to participate effectively in governance activities.
5. Educational opportunities for women and girls should be expanded through scholarships, adult education programs, and vocational training to improve their competence, confidence, and decision-making abilities in governance structures.
6. Legal and institutional measures should be strengthened to protect women from political intimidation, discrimination, and violence that discourage their active involvement in governance and public affairs.
7. Community leaders, traditional rulers, and religious institutions should promote positive societal attitudes toward women's leadership and encourage inclusive participation in local governance decision-making processes.
8. Future researchers should conduct comparative studies across different regions and governance systems to further explore the long-term impact of socio-political empowerment on women's political representation and leadership effectiveness.

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