

## Original Research Article

# Godfatherism, Political Power, and the Systemic Marginalization of Women in Nigerian Politics

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the intricate relationship between godfatherism, political power, and the systemic marginalization of women in Nigerian politics. The analysis demonstrates how informal patronage networks, characterized by godfatherism, concentrate political power through financial control, candidate imposition, electoral violence, and exclusionary socialization processes. These mechanisms disproportionately disadvantage women, creating structural barriers to their political participation, representation, and substantive influence in governance. The paper synthesizes evidence on how godfathers manipulate party nominations, monopolize campaign financing, deploy violence to intimidate aspirants, and perpetuate male-dominated political networks that systematically exclude women from decision-making positions. Two comparative tables illustrate the barriers to women's participation and the specific mechanisms through which godfatherism produces gendered exclusion. The analysis concludes with targeted policy recommendations, including enforceable gender quotas, campaign finance reform, strengthened internal party democracy, legal protections against electoral violence, and capacity-building initiatives. These interventions are essential for dismantling the interlocking systems of patronage and patriarchy that undermine democratic governance and gender equality in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Godfatherism, Political Power, Women's Marginalization, Nigerian Politics, Gender Inequality, Political Patronage.

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## Introduction

Nigeria's transition to democratic governance in 1999 marked a significant milestone in the country's political history, ushering in an era of competitive electoral politics after decades of military rule. However, this democratic dispensation has been characterized by the emergence and consolidation of informal power structures that operate parallel to formal democratic institutions. Among the most pervasive of these informal structures is the phenomenon of godfatherism—a system of political patronage in which influential individuals, known as godfathers, exercise extra-constitutional control over political processes, particularly party nominations, electoral outcomes, and governance decisions (Badmus, 2006; Okonkwo, 2016). Godfatherism has become deeply embedded in Nigeria's political culture, shaping the character of electoral competition and determining who gains access to political power. These political patrons deploy substantial financial resources, extensive social

networks, and sometimes coercive mechanisms to control party structures, impose candidates, and influence policy decisions (Okonkwo, 2016). The godfather-godson relationship is fundamentally transactional, with patrons providing political capital—including funding, protection, and electoral machinery, in exchange for loyalty, access to state resources, and policy influence once their protégés assume office.

While godfatherism affects all aspirants to political office in Nigeria, its impact on women has been particularly severe and systematic. Nigerian women remain grossly underrepresented in elective and appointive political positions across all levels of government, despite constituting approximately half of the country's population and electorate. Since 1999, women's representation in the National Assembly has rarely exceeded 7%, and their participation in executive positions at federal, state, and local government levels remains dismally low (Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021;

Badmus, 2006). This persistent marginalization occurs despite Nigeria's ratification of international conventions promoting gender equality, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action.

The intersection of godfatherism and gender inequality in Nigerian politics creates a double bind for women aspirants. On one hand, the monetization of politics and the dominance of patronage networks make political participation prohibitively expensive and accessible primarily to those with connections to wealthy patrons. On the other hand, patriarchal norms and gender biases within these patronage networks systematically exclude women from the inner circles where political decisions are made, resources are distributed, and candidacies are determined (Okorie, 2016; Bolaji, 2008). The problem is not merely one of numerical underrepresentation but also of structural exclusion from political power. Women who manage to navigate the barriers to entry often find themselves relegated to tokenistic positions with limited substantive influence, or they become proxies for male godfathers who use them to fulfill nominal gender requirements while maintaining actual control over decision-making (Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021; Okonkwo, 2016). This dynamic perpetuates a political system that is unresponsive to women's interests and concerns, resulting in policy outcomes that fail to address gender-specific needs and rights.

Furthermore, the mechanisms through which godfatherism operates, including violence, intimidation, financial manipulation, and the subversion of democratic party processes, create a hostile environment that actively discourages women's political participation. Electoral violence, in particular, has gendered dimensions that disproportionately affect women candidates and their supporters, creating a chilling effect on women's political ambitions (Inokoba & Zibima, 2014). The lack of internal democracy within political parties allows godfathers to impose candidates and manipulate primaries, effectively closing off legitimate pathways for women to secure party nominations (Badmus, 2006; Okonkwo, 2016).

This paper pursues three interconnected objectives:

1. To analyze the structures and mechanisms of godfatherism in Nigerian politics: This includes examining how godfathers accumulate and exercise political power, the instruments they employ to control electoral processes, and how patronage networks shape party politics and governance.
2. To document and explain the systemic marginalization of women in Nigerian politics: This involves identifying the multiple barriers, economic, social, cultural, institutional, and security-related, that constrain women's political participation and

representation, and analyzing how these barriers intersect and reinforce one another.

3. To examine the intersection between godfatherism and women's political marginalization: This objective focuses on demonstrating how the mechanisms of godfatherism specifically and disproportionately disadvantage women, creating gendered patterns of exclusion that perpetuate male dominance in political institutions.

Understanding the relationship between godfatherism and women's marginalization is crucial for several reasons. First, it moves beyond descriptive accounts of women's underrepresentation to provide a mechanisms-focused analysis that explains how informal power structures produce and reproduce gendered exclusion. This analytical depth is necessary for designing effective interventions that address root causes rather than symptoms. Second, the study contributes to broader debates about democratization, governance, and gender equality in Africa. By examining how informal institutions interact with formal democratic structures to shape political outcomes, the analysis illuminates the challenges of consolidating democracy in contexts where patronage politics remains dominant. The Nigerian case offers insights relevant to other African democracies grappling with similar issues of political patronage and gender inequality. Third, the paper provides an evidence base for policy reforms aimed at enhancing women's political participation and representation. By identifying specific mechanisms of exclusion and their effects, the analysis points to targeted interventions, including legal reforms, party democratization, campaign finance regulation, and capacity-building initiatives, that can dismantle barriers and create more inclusive political systems. Finally, addressing women's marginalization in politics is not merely a matter of fairness or rights; it is essential for improving governance quality and policy responsiveness. Research consistently demonstrates that women's political participation leads to greater attention to social welfare, education, health, and other public goods, as well as reduced corruption and improved accountability (Oke, 2013; Nelson, 2012). Therefore, breaking the cycle of godfatherism and gendered exclusion has implications for Nigeria's broader development trajectory.

## **2. Conceptualizing godfatherism and political patronage**

Godfatherism in Nigerian politics refers to the informal, extra-constitutional control exercised by influential individuals, typically wealthy businessmen, retired military officers, or veteran politicians, over political processes, particularly party nominations and electoral outcomes (Okonkwo, 2016). Unlike formal political institutions that operate according to constitutional rules and legal frameworks, godfatherism functions through personal relationships, financial

inducements, coercion, and the strategic deployment of resources to shape political behavior and outcomes. The godfather-godson relationship is fundamentally clientelistic, characterized by reciprocal but asymmetrical exchanges. The godfather provides essential political capital including campaign financing, access to party machinery, protection from rivals, mobilization of voters, and sometimes the deployment of violence to intimidate opponents (Okonkwo, 2016; Badmus, 2006). In return, the godson, the candidate or office-holder, owes loyalty to the godfather, provides access to state resources and contracts, makes appointments favored by the godfather, and implements policies that advance the godfather's interests.

Okonkwo (2016) argues that godfatherism represents a form of political corruption that undermines democratic governance by substituting personal loyalty for public accountability, replacing merit-based selection with patronage-based appointments, and prioritizing private accumulation over public service. The system creates incentives for office-holders to focus on satisfying their godfathers rather than serving their constituents, thereby weakening the accountability mechanisms that are essential for democratic governance.

Godfatherism operates at multiple levels of Nigeria's political system. At the national level, powerful godfathers influence presidential and gubernatorial elections, shape party leadership contests, and determine the allocation of major political appointments. At the state level, godfathers control governorship races, state legislative elections, and local government chairmanship positions. At the local level, they influence councilor elections and the distribution of grassroots patronage (Badmus, 2006). This multi-level operation creates a comprehensive patronage network that permeates Nigeria's entire political system.

### **2.1 Women's Political Participation in Nigeria: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives**

Women's political activism in Nigeria has a long history predating independence. Pioneering figures such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti mobilized women for political action in the colonial and early post-colonial periods, challenging both colonial authorities and traditional patriarchal structures (Badmus, 2006). The Abeokuta Women's Union, led by Ransome-Kuti, successfully campaigned against oppressive taxation and for women's representation in native authority councils, demonstrating women's capacity for effective political organization and advocacy. However, the promise of women's political empowerment in the early independence period was not sustained. Military rule, which dominated Nigeria's political landscape for much of the post-independence era, further marginalized women from political decision-making. The return to civilian rule in 1999 raised expectations for increased women's participation, but these hopes have been largely

disappointed. Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing equal rights and Nigeria's ratification of international gender equality conventions, women's representation in elective offices has remained consistently low (Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021; Oke, 2013).

Empirical data reveal the extent of women's political marginalization. In the 1999 elections that marked Nigeria's return to democracy, women won only 3% of seats in the National Assembly. This figure improved marginally to 6.7% in 2007, declined to 5.6% in 2011, rose slightly to 5.8% in 2015, and reached 6.5% in 2019 (Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021). At the state level, women's representation in state houses of assembly has similarly hovered around 5-7%. In executive positions, only a handful of women have served as ministers, commissioners, or local government chairpersons, and Nigeria has never had a female vice president or elected female governor. These statistics place Nigeria among the countries with the lowest levels of women's political representation globally and in Africa. Countries such as Rwanda, South Africa, Senegal, and Ethiopia have achieved significantly higher levels of women's representation through the implementation of gender quotas and other affirmative action measures (Okorie, 2016). Nigeria's failure to adopt and enforce similar measures reflects the strength of patriarchal resistance and the weakness of political will to address gender inequality.

### **2.2 Barriers to Women's Political Participation**

The literature identifies multiple, intersecting barriers that constrain women's political participation in Nigeria. These barriers operate at different levels, individual, household, community, institutional, and national, and their cumulative effect creates a formidable obstacle course for women aspirants.

**Economic and Financial Barriers:** The monetization of Nigerian politics is widely recognized as one of the most significant barriers to women's participation (Badmus, 2006; Okorie, 2016). Electoral campaigns in Nigeria are extraordinarily expensive, involving costs for nomination forms, delegate mobilization, campaign materials, media advertising, voter mobilization, and sometimes direct vote-buying. Political parties have increasingly adopted "pay-to-play" practices where aspirants must pay substantial fees for nomination forms and make financial contributions to party structures as conditions for securing tickets. Women generally have less access to financial resources than men due to gender gaps in income, wealth, property ownership, and access to credit. Many women cannot afford the high costs of nomination forms, which can run into millions of naira, let alone the full costs of campaign financing (Badmus, 2006). Furthermore, women have more limited access to the patronage networks through which campaign financing typically flows. Godfathers, who control much of the financial capital in Nigerian politics, are more

likely to invest in male candidates whom they perceive as more viable and more controllable (Okonkwo, 2016).

**Party Gatekeeping and Lack of Internal Democracy:** Political parties in Nigeria are characterized by weak internal democracy, opaque decision-making processes, and the dominance of party elites who function as gatekeepers to political opportunities (Badmus, 2006; Okonkwo, 2016). Party nominations are often determined not through transparent, competitive primaries but through backroom negotiations among party leaders and godfathers. This process of candidate imposition systematically disadvantages women, who are typically excluded from the inner circles where these decisions are made. Even when parties conduct primaries, these processes are frequently manipulated through delegate-buying, result falsification, and intimidation. Women candidates, who generally have fewer resources and weaker connections to party power brokers, find it difficult to compete effectively in such environments (Badmus, 2006). Moreover, party leadership positions are overwhelmingly held by men, and these male-dominated structures tend to perpetuate gender biases in candidate selection and resource allocation.

**Electoral Violence and Insecurity:** Electoral violence is a pervasive feature of Nigerian politics, and it has gendered dimensions that particularly affect women (Inokoba & Zibima, 2014). Political thuggery, intimidation, and physical violence are commonly deployed during campaigns and elections to suppress opposition, manipulate results, and settle political scores. Women candidates and their supporters are especially vulnerable to such violence and are often targeted with gender-specific threats including sexual violence. The threat of violence creates a chilling effect on women's political participation. Many potential women candidates are discouraged from running for office due to legitimate fears for their safety and that of their families. Women who do run often face harassment and intimidation that limits their ability to campaign effectively (Inokoba & Zibima, 2014). The masculinization of electoral politics through violence reinforces the perception that politics is a male domain and that women who enter this arena do so at their peril.

**Socio-Cultural and Religious Barriers:** Patriarchal norms and gender ideologies that assign women to domestic and care-giving roles while reserving public leadership for men remain powerful in Nigerian society (Bolaji, 2008; Okorie, 2016). These norms are reinforced by religious interpretations that emphasize male authority and female subordination, particularly in northern Nigeria, where Islamic traditions are often invoked to justify women's exclusion from political leadership. Women who aspire to political office often face social stigma, family opposition, and community disapproval. They may be accused of neglecting their domestic responsibilities, being overly ambitious, or

violating cultural norms of female modesty and deference (Bolaji, 2008). Such social pressures can deter women from pursuing political careers or force them to withdraw from races. Even when women succeed in winning office, they may face continued prejudice and marginalization from male colleagues who question their legitimacy and competence.

**Lack of Mentorship and Political Networks:** Political success in Nigeria depends heavily on access to networks of support, mentorship, and patronage. These networks are typically male-dominated and function through informal relationships built in spaces—such as clubs, religious organizations, and business associations, where women have limited presence (Abokede, 2008). Women aspirants often lack mentors who can guide them through the complexities of political competition, introduce them to key stakeholders, and advocate for their candidacies. The godfather system itself is a masculinized network that tends to reproduce male dominance. Godfathers typically groom male protégés whom they perceive as sharing their interests and worldview. Women are rarely incorporated into these mentorship relationships on equal terms, and when they are, it is often in subordinate or tokenistic capacities (Okonkwo, 2016; Abokede, 2008).

## 2.4 Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical perspectives inform the analysis of godfatherism and women's political marginalization in Nigeria.

**Institutionalist Approaches:** Institutional theory emphasizes how formal and informal rules, norms, and structures shape political behavior and outcomes. From this perspective, women's marginalization can be understood as a product of institutional arrangements that create systematic biases against women's participation. These include electoral systems that do not incorporate gender quotas, party structures that lack internal democracy, and patronage networks that function as informal institutions governing access to political opportunities (Badmus, 2006; Okonkwo, 2016). Feminist institutionalism extends this analysis by highlighting how institutions are gendered, that is, they embody and reproduce gender hierarchies and power relations. Even institutions that appear neutral on their face may operate in ways that advantage men and disadvantage women. For example, the godfather system, while not explicitly excluding women, functions through masculine networks and norms that effectively marginalize women (Okonkwo, 2016).

**Clientelism and Patronage Theory:** Theories of clientelism and patronage politics provide insights into how personalistic exchange networks shape political competition and governance. In clientelistic systems, political support is exchanged for material benefits rather than programmatic commitments or ideological alignment. This creates incentives for politicians to prioritize the distribution of private goods to supporters

over the provision of public goods to citizens (Okonkwo, 2016). Godfatherism represents an extreme form of clientelism in which a small number of patrons exercise disproportionate control over political resources and opportunities. This concentration of power in the hands of godfathers undermines democratic accountability and creates barriers to entry for candidates who lack connections to patrons—a category that disproportionately includes women (Badmus, 2006; Okonkwo, 2016).

**Feminist Political Economy:** Feminist political economy approaches analyze how gender intersects with economic structures and power relations to produce systematic inequalities. From this perspective, women's political marginalization is linked to their economic disadvantage, their disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work, and their exclusion from networks of economic and political power (Bolaji, 2008; Okorie, 2016). The monetization of Nigerian politics can be understood as a mechanism through which economic inequality is translated into political inequality. Because women generally have less access to economic resources, the high costs of political participation effectively exclude them from electoral competition. Similarly, godfatherism can be analyzed as a system through which economic elites convert their wealth into political power, and the gendered nature of economic inequality means that this system disproportionately benefits men (Okonkwo, 2016).

### 3. Godfatherism and Political Power in Nigeria: Structures and Mechanisms

#### 3.1 The Architecture of Godfather Control

Godfatherism in Nigeria operates through a sophisticated architecture of control that spans financial, organizational, coercive, and social dimensions. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for grasping how godfathers exercise power and how their dominance produces gendered exclusion.

**Financial Control and Campaign Financing:** The most fundamental instrument of godfather power is financial control. Nigerian elections are among the most expensive in Africa, with costs escalating at each electoral cycle. Nomination forms for major offices can cost millions of naira, and the total cost of running a viable campaign for a governorship or senatorial seat can reach hundreds of millions or even billions of naira (Badmus, 2006; Okonkwo, 2016). Given these astronomical costs, most aspirants cannot finance their campaigns independently and must seek external support. Godfathers position themselves as the primary sources of campaign financing, providing funds for nomination fees, campaign materials, media advertising, voter mobilization, and direct vote-buying. This financial gatekeeping gives godfathers tremendous leverage over candidates. Aspirants who refuse to submit to godfather control find themselves unable to compete effectively, while those who accept godfather support become

beholden to their patrons (Okonkwo, 2016). The financial dependence of candidates on godfathers has several consequences for women's participation. First, women generally have less independent wealth and fewer connections to wealthy patrons, making them more dependent on external financing and less able to compete in the monetized electoral environment (Badmus, 2006). Second, godfathers are less likely to invest in women candidates, whom they may perceive as riskier investments or less controllable than male candidates. Third, even when godfathers do support women candidates, they typically do so in races where they have strategic reasons, such as fulfilling nominal gender requirements or fielding candidates in unwinnable seats, rather than in competitive races for powerful positions (Okonkwo, 2016).

**Nomination Manipulation and Candidate Imposition:** Godfathers exercise control over party nominations through a variety of mechanisms. In many cases, they simply impose their preferred candidates on party structures, overriding any pretense of democratic selection (Badmus, 2006; Okonkwo, 2016). This imposition is facilitated by the weakness of internal party democracy in Nigeria. Party constitutions often vest enormous discretion in party leaders, and decision-making processes are opaque and unaccountable. Godfathers exploit these institutional weaknesses to dictate nominations. Even when parties conduct primaries, these processes are frequently manipulated. Godfathers buy the loyalty of delegates through cash payments, promises of appointments, or threats of exclusion. They influence the composition of electoral committees and returning officers to ensure favorable outcomes. They manipulate voter registers and result sheets to alter outcomes. In extreme cases, they deploy violence to disrupt primaries and impose their candidates through consensus arrangements (Okonkwo, 2016). This manipulation of nominations has particularly severe effects on women aspirants. Women typically lack the resources to buy delegate loyalty or the connections to influence party officials. When godfathers impose candidates, they almost always choose men who fit their preferred profile of loyalty and controllability. Even when women manage to win primaries fairly, godfathers may overturn results or force them to step aside in favor of male candidates (Badmus, 2006).

**Coercion, Violence, and Intimidation:** Godfathers often maintain private militias or have connections to criminal networks that they deploy for political purposes. These groups engage in electoral violence including intimidation of opponents, disruption of campaign events, ballot box snatching, and post-election violence (Inokoba & Zibima, 2014). The threat and use of violence serve multiple functions for godfathers: they deter potential challengers, suppress opposition voting, manipulate electoral outcomes, and enforce discipline among political clients.

The use of violence in Nigerian politics has pronounced gendered dimensions. Women candidates and their supporters are particularly vulnerable to intimidation and violence. The threat of violence discourages many women from running for office, and those who do run often face harassment that limits their campaign effectiveness. Sexual violence and gender-based threats are sometimes used specifically to intimidate women candidates (Inokoba & Zibima, 2014). Moreover, the overall climate of electoral violence reinforces the masculinization of political space. Politics comes to be perceived as a violent, dangerous arena unsuited to women, reinforcing stereotypes about women's proper roles and deterring their participation. The association of political success with the ability to mobilize force advantages men, who are more likely to have connections to security actors and militant groups (Inokoba & Zibima, 2014).

### **Political Socialization and Network**

**Control:** Godfathers exercise power not only through material resources and coercion but also through their control of political socialization and networks. They function as mentors and gatekeepers, grooming protégés whom they introduce to political life, guide through electoral processes, and incorporate into networks of power (Abokede, 2008). This mentorship function is highly gendered. Godfathers typically identify and groom young men whom they perceive as having political potential and who demonstrate loyalty to patron interests. These relationships are often built through informal social interactions in spaces, such as business clubs, religious organizations, and social gatherings, where women have limited presence. Women are rarely incorporated into these mentorship networks on equal terms, and when they are included, it is often in subordinate capacities or as tokens (Abokede, 2008; Okonkwo, 2016). The exclusion of women from godfather mentorship networks has long-term consequences. Women lack access to the political knowledge, connections, and resources that mentorship provides. They are not introduced to key stakeholders, do not learn the informal rules of political competition, and are not incorporated into the networks of reciprocity and support that facilitate political success. This creates a cumulative disadvantage that compounds over time, as men build political careers through godfather networks while women remain on the margins (Abokede, 2008).

### **3.2 Empirical Illustrations from Nigerian Politics**

The mechanisms of godfather control described above are not merely theoretical constructs; they are documented in numerous case studies and empirical analyses of Nigerian politics. The political history of states such as Anambra, Oyo, and Kwara provides vivid illustrations of godfather dominance. In Anambra State, the notorious conflict between Governor Chris Ngige and his godfather, Chris Uba, in the early 2000s revealed the extent of godfather control. Uba claimed to have financed Ngige's election and demanded control over

government appointments and contracts. When Ngige resisted, Uba orchestrated his removal, allegedly arranging for Ngige to be kidnapped and forced to resign (Okonkwo, 2016). This episode demonstrated the extra-constitutional power that godfathers wield and the consequences for office-holders who challenge patron authority.

In Oyo State, the political dominance of Lamidi Adedibu, known as the "strongman of Ibadan politics," exemplified godfather control over multiple electoral cycles. Adedibu controlled party nominations, financed campaigns, mobilized voters, and deployed political thugs to intimidate opponents. His compound served as the de facto headquarters of political decision-making in Oyo State, superseding formal party structures (Okonkwo, 2016). Adedibu's power rested on his wealth, his extensive patronage network, and his willingness to use violence, all masculine resources that reinforced male dominance in Oyo politics. In Kwara State, the political dynasty of the Saraki family illustrated how godfather power can be inherited and institutionalized across generations. Olusola Saraki controlled Kwara politics for decades, determining who held elective and appointive positions at all levels of government. After his death, his son Bukola Saraki inherited the godfather mantle, continuing to exercise similar control until he was eventually challenged by a rival faction (Okonkwo, 2016). The Saraki dynasty's dominance effectively closed off political opportunities for aspirants outside their network, including women.

These cases reveal common patterns: godfathers accumulate power through wealth and networks, they control party structures and nominations, they deploy violence to enforce their will, and they demand loyalty and material benefits from office-holders. Women are largely absent from these accounts, not by accident but because the mechanisms of godfather power systematically exclude them.

#### **4. The Systemic Marginalization of Women in Nigerian Politics**

##### **4.1 Patterns of Exclusion Across the Political Lifecycle**

Women's marginalization in Nigerian politics is not confined to a single stage of the political process but operates systematically across the entire political lifecycle, from initial political socialization through aspirancy, candidacy, electoral competition, and office-holding. Each stage presents distinct barriers that cumulatively produce the severe underrepresentation observed in Nigerian political institutions.

**Political Socialization and Aspirancy:** Political socialization, the process through which individuals develop political awareness, skills, and ambitions, is highly gendered in Nigeria. From childhood, boys and girls receive different messages about their appropriate roles in public life. Boys are encouraged to be assertive, competitive, and ambitious, while girls are socialized to be nurturing, deferential, and focused on domestic responsibilities (Bolaji, 2008). These gendered socialization patterns affect political ambition. Studies of political aspirancy demonstrate that women are less likely than men to consider running for office, and when they do consider it, they are more likely to doubt their qualifications and underestimate their chances of success. This "political ambition gap" is not innate but is produced by socialization processes that discourage women from seeing themselves as potential political leaders (Abokede, 2008). Furthermore, the spaces in which political socialization occurs, including schools, universities, youth organizations, and community groups, often reproduce gender hierarchies. Leadership positions in these organizations are disproportionately held by males, giving boys more opportunities to develop political skills and confidence. Women who do develop political ambitions often lack role models and mentors who can guide and encourage them (Abokede, 2008).

**Candidacy and Nomination:** For women who overcome socialization barriers and decide to seek political office, the next hurdle is securing party nomination. As discussed earlier, this process is dominated by godfathers and party elites who function as gatekeepers. Women face multiple disadvantages in navigating this process. First, they typically lack the financial resources to purchase nomination forms, which can cost million of naira for major offices. Even when women can afford nomination fees, they face additional financial demands including delegate mobilization, campaign materials, and informal payments to party officials (Badmus, 2006). Second, women are often excluded from the informal networks and backroom negotiations where nomination decisions are actually made. Party conventions and primaries may be held in locations or at times that are inaccessible to women due to family responsibilities or security concerns. Third, even when women compete in primaries, they face

manipulation and fraud that disadvantage them. Delegate-buying, result falsification, and outright imposition are common, and women generally lack the resources and connections to counter these practices (Okonkwo, 2016). The result is that women secure party nominations at far lower rates than men. When they do receive nominations, it is often for unwinnable seats or in races where the party has little chance of success. This pattern of relegating women to marginal constituencies is a form of tokenism that allows parties to claim they support women's participation while actually denying them real opportunities for success (Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021).

**Electoral Competition and Campaigning:** Women who secure nominations face additional barriers during the campaign period. Electoral campaigns in Nigeria are resource-intensive, requiring substantial funds for advertising, mobilization, and voter outreach. Women candidates typically have smaller campaign budgets than their male counterparts and less access to the patronage networks that provide campaign resources (Badmus, 2006).

Moreover, women candidates face gendered campaign dynamics. They are subject to sexist attacks that question their competence, morality, and commitment to family. They face double standards in which behaviors that are acceptable for male candidates, such as aggressive campaigning or making bold promises, are criticized when exhibited by women. Media coverage of women candidates often focuses on their appearance, family status, and personality rather than their policy positions and qualifications (Bolaji, 2008). Electoral violence poses particular challenges for women candidates. Campaign rallies and door-to-door canvassing expose candidates to risks of violence and intimidation. Women candidates and their supporters are sometimes targeted with gender-specific threats including sexual violence. The prevalence of electoral thuggery creates a hostile environment that many women find difficult to navigate (Inokoba & Zibima, 2014).

**Office-Holding and Governance:** Even when women successfully win elections, their marginalization often continues in office. Women office-holders frequently find themselves isolated in male-dominated institutions where they face prejudice and exclusion from decision-making processes. They may be assigned to "soft" portfolios such as women's affairs, education, or social welfare, while men control the "hard" portfolios of finance, security, and infrastructure (Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021). Furthermore, women office-holders who were sponsored by godfathers face the same constraints as their male counterparts in terms of patron demands and loss of autonomy. However, they may face additional pressures due to gender stereotypes that portray women as more easily controlled or as tokens who lack independent political bases. This limits their ability to exercise substantive representation, that is, to

advocate effectively for women's interests and gender-sensitive policies (Oke, 2013; Nelson, 2012).

#### **4.2 Intersectionality and Multiple Marginalization**

Women's political marginalization in Nigeria is not uniform; it is shaped by intersecting identities including class, ethnicity, religion, region, and age. Women from elite families or with substantial personal wealth face fewer financial barriers than poor women, though they still confront gender biases in party structures and electoral processes. Women from dominant ethnic groups may have advantages over women from minority groups in terms of access to patronage networks and electoral support (Bolaji, 2008). Religious and regional factors also shape women's political opportunities. In northern Nigeria, where Islamic law and traditions have greater influence, women face more restrictive norms regarding public roles and political participation. Conservative interpretations of Islam are sometimes used to justify excluding women from political leadership, and women who challenge these norms may face severe social sanctions (Bolaji, 2008; Okorie, 2016). In contrast, women in southern Nigeria, particularly in the southwest, have somewhat greater cultural acceptance of women's political participation, though they still face substantial barriers. Age intersects with gender to create additional challenges. Young women face double marginalization as both women and youth in political systems dominated by older men. The "Not Too Young To Run" movement, which successfully advocated for reducing age requirements for political office, has opened some opportunities for young people, but young women still face gendered barriers that their male counterparts do not (Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021).

#### **4.3 Consequences of Women's Political Marginalization**

The underrepresentation of women in Nigerian politics has significant consequences for governance, policy, and development. Research demonstrates that women's political participation is associated with greater attention to social welfare, education, health, and other issues that particularly affect women and children (Oke, 2013; Nelson, 2012). When women are excluded from decision-making, these issues receive less priority in policy and budget allocation.

Women's marginalization also perpetuates gender inequalities in other spheres. Political representation is both a symbol and an instrument of women's status in society. When women are absent from political leadership, it reinforces stereotypes about women's capabilities and proper roles. Conversely, women's political participation can have demonstration effects that inspire other women and challenge gender norms (Nelson, 2012). Furthermore, the exclusion of women from politics represents a massive waste of human capital and talent. Women constitute half of Nigeria's population and bring diverse perspectives,

skills, and experiences that are essential for effective governance. Excluding them from political decision-making impoverishes democratic deliberation and reduces the quality of policy outcomes (Oke, 2013).

### **5. The Intersection of Godfatherism and Women's Marginalization**

#### **5.1 How Godfatherism Produces Gendered Exclusion**

The relationship between godfatherism and women's marginalization is not merely coincidental or additive; rather, the mechanisms through which godfatherism operates are inherently gendered in ways that systematically disadvantage women. This section analyzes four key mechanisms through which godfatherism produces gendered exclusion: financial gatekeeping, nomination manipulation, violence and intimidation, and network exclusion.

**Financial Gatekeeping Mechanism:** As established earlier, godfathers control access to campaign financing, which is essential for electoral competitiveness in Nigeria's monetized political system. This financial gatekeeping operates as a gendered exclusion mechanism through several pathways. First, godfathers make strategic calculations about which candidates to support based on perceived viability and controllability. Gender stereotypes influence these calculations, leading godfathers to view women as riskier investments. They may doubt women's ability to win elections, particularly in contexts where electoral success depends on mobilizing violence or navigating masculine political networks. They may also perceive women as less controllable or less willing to engage in the corrupt practices through which godfathers extract rents from office-holders (Okonkwo, 2016). Second, even when godfathers do support women candidates, they typically do so strategically rather than substantively. Women may be supported in races where the party has little chance of winning, allowing the party and godfather to claim they support women's participation without actually investing in their success. Alternatively, women may be supported as proxies for male godfathers who use them to circumvent term limits or to maintain control while appearing to promote gender equality (Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021). Third, the financial dependence created by godfather financing undermines women's autonomy and substantive representation. Women office-holders who owe their positions to godfather support find themselves constrained in their ability to advocate for women's interests or challenge patriarchal practices. They must prioritize satisfying their godfathers over representing their constituents, limiting their effectiveness as representatives of women's concerns (Oke, 2013).

**Nomination Manipulation Mechanism:** The manipulation of party nominations by godfathers operates as a gendered exclusion mechanism by systematically favoring male candidates in the distribution of party tickets. Several dynamics contribute to this gendered pattern. Party nominations are often

determined through backroom negotiations among godfathers and party elites. These negotiations occur in informal settings, such as private homes, clubs, or hotels, where women have limited presence. The exclusion of women from these spaces means they cannot advocate for themselves, build coalitions, or influence outcomes (Badmus, 2006; Okonkwo, 2016).

When primaries are held, godfathers manipulate outcomes through delegate-buying and result falsification. Women candidates, who typically have fewer resources and weaker connections to party structures, are disadvantaged in this environment. Even when women win primaries fairly, godfathers may overturn results or pressure them to step aside in favor of male candidates, sometimes offering them consolation appointments or promises of future support (Okonkwo, 2016). The gendered nature of nomination manipulation is also evident in the distribution of winnable versus unwinnable seats. Analysis of party nominations reveals that women are disproportionately nominated for seats that the party is unlikely to win, while men receive nominations for safe or competitive seats. This pattern allows parties to appear to support women's participation while actually denying them real opportunities for success (Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021).

**Violence and Intimidation Mechanism:** Electoral violence, which is often orchestrated or condoned by godfathers, operates as a gendered exclusion mechanism through its differential impact on women and men. While electoral violence affects all participants, it has specific effects on women that create additional barriers to their participation. First, the threat of violence has a chilling effect on women's political ambitions. Women are more likely than men to cite security concerns as a reason for not running for office. This is not because women are inherently more risk-averse but because they face gender-specific risks including sexual violence and because they bear greater responsibility for the safety of children and other family members (Inokoba & Zibima, 2014). Second, women candidates who do run face harassment and intimidation that limits their campaign effectiveness. Campaign rallies may be disrupted by thugs, women candidates may receive threats, and their supporters may be intimidated. These tactics are

### 5.3 The Reproduction of Patriarchal Power

The intersection of godfatherism and women's marginalization can be understood as a system for reproducing patriarchal power in Nigerian politics. Godfatherism does not merely coexist with gender inequality; it actively produces and reproduces male dominance through the mechanisms described above.

This reproduction occurs through several processes. First, godfatherism concentrates political power in the hands of a small group of wealthy, well-connected men who use their power to favor male candidates and exclude women. Second, the

sometimes specifically designed to exploit gender vulnerabilities and to send the message that politics is a male domain where women do not belong (Inokoba & Zibima, 2014). Third, the overall climate of electoral violence reinforces the masculinization of political space. Politics comes to be associated with toughness, aggression, and the ability to mobilize force, qualities that are stereotypically coded as masculine. This association disadvantages women by reinforcing perceptions that they are unsuited for political competition and by privileging masculine forms of political engagement over other modes of political participation (Inokoba & Zibima, 2014).

**Network Exclusion Mechanism:** Godfatherism operates through networks of personal relationships, reciprocity, and patronage. These networks are highly gendered, with women largely excluded from the inner circles where political capital is accumulated and distributed. This network exclusion operates as a mechanism of gendered marginalization through several processes. First, godfathers typically groom male protégés whom they mentor and incorporate into political networks. This mentorship occurs through informal interactions in spaces where women have limited presence. Young men are invited to social gatherings, introduced to political stakeholders, and given opportunities to learn political skills and build relationships. Women are rarely incorporated into these mentorship relationships on equal terms (Abokede, 2008). Second, political networks are built through reciprocal exchanges of favors, support, and resources. These exchanges create bonds of obligation and loyalty that facilitate political cooperation. Women's exclusion from these networks means they cannot participate in these exchanges, limiting their ability to build the political capital necessary for successful candidacies (Abokede, 2008; Okonkwo, 2016). Third, network exclusion has cumulative effects over time. Men who are incorporated into godfather networks early in their careers build political capital that compounds over time, as they accumulate experience, relationships, and resources. Women who are excluded from these networks face cumulative disadvantage, falling further behind with each electoral cycle (Abokede, 2008).

masculinization of political competition through violence and aggressive tactics reinforces gender stereotypes and discourages women's participation. Third, the network-based nature of godfatherism perpetuates male dominance by channeling political capital primarily to men. Fourth, the corruption and rent-seeking associated with godfatherism create incentives for office-holders to prioritize patron interests over public service, including the advancement of gender equality (Okonkwo, 2016). The result is a self-reinforcing system in which male dominance in politics perpetuates male control of godfatherism, which in turn perpetuates male dominance in politics. Breaking this

cycle requires interventions that address both godfatherism and gender inequality simultaneously.

## 6. Discussion and policy recommendations

### 6.1 Synthesis of Findings

This analysis has demonstrated that godfatherism and women's political marginalization in Nigeria are intimately connected through mechanisms of financial control, nomination manipulation, violence and intimidation, and network exclusion. These mechanisms operate systematically across the political lifecycle to produce the severe underrepresentation of women observed in Nigerian political institutions. The evidence reviewed reveals several key findings. First, godfatherism concentrates political power in the hands of wealthy, well-connected patrons who exercise extra-constitutional control over party nominations, electoral outcomes, and governance decisions. Second, the mechanisms through which godfathers exercise power, including financial gatekeeping, candidate imposition, electoral violence, and network control, are inherently gendered in ways that systematically disadvantage women. Third, women face multiple, intersecting barriers to political participation including economic constraints, party gatekeeping, electoral violence, socio-cultural norms, and network exclusion. Fourth, these barriers operate cumulatively across the political lifecycle to produce persistent underrepresentation and limited substantive influence for women in politics.

### 6.2 Critical Reflections and Limitations

While the literature converges on the centrality of godfatherism and monetized politics to women's marginalization, several areas require further research and critical reflection. First, there is heterogeneity in the relative importance of different barriers across contexts. In some regions, socio-cultural and religious constraints may be more significant, while in others, economic and institutional barriers may be more salient. Interventions must be tailored to specific contexts (Bolaji, 2008; Okorie, 2016). Second, the literature on women's political participation in Nigeria has focused primarily on formal political institutions and electoral politics. Less attention has been paid to women's political participation in informal institutions, social movements, and civil society organizations. A more comprehensive understanding of women's political agency would examine these diverse sites of political participation (Nelson, 2012). Third, while the analysis has focused on barriers to women's participation, it is also important to document and analyze cases of successful women politicians who have overcome these barriers. Understanding the strategies, resources, and circumstances that enable some women to succeed can provide insights for supporting other women aspirants (Oke, 2013).

### 6.3 Policy Recommendations

Addressing the systemic marginalization of women in Nigerian politics requires comprehensive

reforms that target both godfatherism and gender inequality. The following recommendations are organized around five key areas: internal party democracy, gender quotas, campaign finance reform, electoral security, and capacity-building.

#### Strengthening Internal Party Democracy:

Political parties must be required to adopt and implement transparent, democratic procedures for candidate selection. This includes:

- Mandating open, competitive primaries with clear rules and independent oversight to prevent manipulation and imposition by godfathers (Badmus, 2006; Okonkwo, 2016).
- Prohibiting delegate-buying and other forms of vote-purchasing in primaries, with sanctions for violations including disqualification of candidates and deregistration of parties.
- Requiring parties to publish detailed rules for candidate selection and to make nomination processes transparent and accountable.
- Establishing independent party ombudspersons or electoral tribunals to adjudicate disputes over nominations and to enforce party rules.
- Sanctioning parties that fail to comply with internal democracy requirements through fines, loss of public funding, or deregistration.

#### Adopting Enforceable Gender Quotas:

Nigeria should adopt legally enforceable gender quotas that require parties to nominate women for a specified proportion of elective positions. Effective quota systems must include:

- Legislated quotas requiring parties to nominate women for at least 35% of candidacies, with this proportion increasing to 50% over time (Okorie, 2016; Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021).
- Placement mandates ensuring women are nominated for winnable seats rather than being relegated to marginal constituencies.
- Sanctions for non-compliance including rejection of party lists, fines, and loss of public funding.
- Constitutional amendments to enshrine gender quotas and prevent their circumvention through legal challenges.
- Monitoring and enforcement mechanisms including independent electoral commissions and civil society oversight.

#### Reforming Campaign Finance:

The monetization of Nigerian politics is a fundamental barrier to women's participation. Campaign finance reform should include:

- Public funding for political parties and candidates, with additional allocations for women candidates to offset their resource disadvantages (Badmus, 2006; Okorie, 2016).

- Caps on campaign spending and contributions to reduce the advantages of wealthy candidates and godfathers.
- Transparency requirements mandating disclosure of campaign contributions and expenditures.
- Restrictions on vote-buying and other forms of electoral corruption, with effective enforcement and sanctions.
- Provision of in-kind support for women candidates including media access, campaign materials, and training.

#### **Enhancing Electoral Security:**

Electoral violence disproportionately affects women and creates a hostile environment that discourages their participation. Security reforms should include:

- Strengthened enforcement against electoral violence including rapid-response protection for candidates and voters (Inokoba & Zibima, 2014).
- Gender-sensitive security protocols that address the specific risks faced by women candidates including threats of sexual violence.
- Legal prosecution of perpetrators of electoral violence with special provisions for gender-based violence.
- Disqualification of candidates and parties that deploy violence or intimidation.
- Community-based security initiatives that engage traditional and religious leaders in promoting peaceful elections.

#### **Investing in Capacity-Building and Empowerment:**

Long-term change requires building women's capacity for political participation and leadership. Capacity-building initiatives should include:

- Systematic mentorship programs pairing aspiring women politicians with experienced mentors who can provide guidance, connections, and support (Abokede, 2008).
- Campaign training programs that equip women with skills in fundraising, media relations, voter mobilization, and policy development.
- Leadership development programs targeting young women to build a pipeline of future political leaders.
- Civic education programs that challenge gender stereotypes and promote women's political participation.
- Support for women's political networks and caucuses that can advocate for institutional reforms and provide mutual support (Oke, 2013; Nelson, 2012).
- Coalition-building between women politicians, civil society organizations, and international development partners to coordinate advocacy and resource mobilization.

#### **6.4 Implementation Considerations**

Implementing these recommendations will require political will, institutional capacity, and sustained advocacy. Several considerations are important for effective implementation. First, reforms must be comprehensive and coordinated. Addressing one barrier in isolation, such as adopting quotas without reforming campaign finance, is unlikely to produce significant change. The interlocking nature of barriers to women's participation requires multi-faceted interventions that address economic, institutional, cultural, and security dimensions simultaneously. Second, reforms must be enforceable. Nigeria has adopted various policies and commitments to promote gender equality, but weak enforcement has limited their impact. Effective implementation requires clear legal mandates, independent monitoring mechanisms, meaningful sanctions for non-compliance, and sustained pressure from civil society and international partners (Okorie, 2016). Third, reforms must engage men as allies. While women's organizations and movements are essential drivers of change, achieving gender equality in politics requires transforming the attitudes and behaviors of male politicians, party leaders, and voters. Men must be engaged as partners in challenging patriarchal norms and supporting women's political participation (Bolaji, 2008). Fourth, reforms must be context-specific. Nigeria's diversity, including regional, ethnic, religious, and class differences, means that interventions must be tailored to specific contexts. What works in Lagos may not work in Kano, and strategies effective for elite women may not address the needs of poor or rural women (Bolaji, 2008; Okorie, 2016).

#### **7. Conclusion**

This paper has examined the relationship between godfatherism, political power, and the systemic marginalization of women in Nigerian politics. Drawing on empirical and theoretical studies, the analysis has demonstrated how informal patronage networks dominated by godfathers concentrate political power through financial control, nomination manipulation, electoral violence, and network exclusion. These mechanisms operate systematically to disadvantage women, creating structural barriers to their political participation, representation, and substantive influence. The intersection of godfatherism and gender inequality produces a self-reinforcing system of male dominance in Nigerian politics. Godfathers, who are overwhelmingly male, use their control over financial resources to determine who can compete for office. They manipulate party nominations to favor male candidates who fit their preferred profile of loyalty and controllability. They deploy violence and intimidation that disproportionately deter women from political participation. And they build networks of mentorship and reciprocity that largely exclude women, perpetuating male dominance across generations of political leadership. The consequences of women's political marginalization extend beyond issues

of fairness and rights to affect the quality of governance and the responsiveness of policy to citizens' needs. When women are excluded from political decision-making, issues that particularly affect women and children, including maternal health, education, gender-based violence, and economic empowerment, receive inadequate attention in policy and budget allocation. Moreover, the exclusion of half the population from political leadership represents a massive waste of human capital and talent that impoverishes democratic deliberation and reduces the effectiveness of governance.

Breaking the cycle of godfatherism and gendered exclusion requires comprehensive reforms that address both the mechanisms of patronage politics and the structures of gender inequality. These reforms must strengthen internal party democracy to prevent candidate imposition, adopt enforceable gender quotas to ensure women's nomination, reform campaign finance to reduce the power of money in politics, enhance electoral security to protect women candidates, and invest in capacity-building to empower women for political leadership. Implementing these reforms will require sustained political will, institutional capacity, and coordinated advocacy by women's organizations, civil society, political parties, and international partners. The task is challenging but essential. Only by dismantling the interlocking systems of patronage and patriarchy can Nigeria achieve the inclusive, accountable, and responsive democratic governance to which its citizens aspire. The struggle for women's political empowerment in Nigeria is ultimately a struggle for democracy itself. A political system that systematically excludes half its population from decision-making cannot claim to be truly democratic. Conversely, advancing women's political participation is not only a matter of gender justice but also a pathway to strengthening democratic institutions, improving governance quality, and achieving more equitable and sustainable development. The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that the barriers to women's political participation are neither natural nor insurmountable; they are products of political choices and institutional arrangements that can be changed through concerted action and reform.

As Nigeria continues its democratic journey, the inclusion of women in political leadership must be recognized not as a favor or concession but as a fundamental requirement of democratic governance and a prerequisite for national development. The

recommendations offered in this paper provide a roadmap for achieving this goal, but their realization will depend on the commitment and courage of all stakeholders, politicians, civil society activists, traditional and religious leaders, international partners, and ordinary citizens, to challenge entrenched power structures and build a more inclusive political system.

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