

Perception of Political Inclusion of Women in Governance among Residents of Akwa Ibom State

Nsikak Solomon Idiong, PhD & Abigail Anthony Akpan

Department of Journalism

Faculty of Communication and Media Studies

University of Uyo, Nigeria.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19608833>

Citation: Idiong, N. S., & Akpan, A. A. (2026). Perception of Political Inclusion of Women in Governance among Residents of Akwa Ibom State. *Transnational Journal of Arts, Humanities and Sciences*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19608833>

Abstract

Although women's representation in governance is gradually increasing in Akwa Ibom State, limited empirical evidence exists on how residents perceive their inclusion. This study examined residents' perceptions of women's inclusion, focusing on awareness, attitudes toward participation, perceived influence, and the socio-cultural and personal factors shaping these views. Anchored on Social Role Theory and Framing Theory, the study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population comprised adult residents aged 18 years and above (5.1 million), with a sample size of 400 determined using the Taro Yamane formula and selected through a multi-stage sampling technique. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire and analyzed using frequencies, percentages, and weighted mean scores. Findings showed a moderate level of awareness across participation (2.84), access (2.81), policy involvement (2.68), and representation (2.76). Respondents expressed positive attitudes toward women's participation (2.83) and access to leadership positions (3.01), but lower support for policy involvement (2.03) and representation (2.27). Despite this, women's inclusion was generally perceived as beneficial to governance (2.80–2.88). Education (40%) and patriarchal traditions (34%) emerged as key influencing factors. The study concludes that while support for women's visible roles is increasing, skepticism persists regarding their influence in decision-making due to socio-cultural norms.

It recommends intensified public enlightenment, leadership development for women, and policies promoting gender-inclusive governance.

Keywords: Perception, Political Inclusion, Women in Governance, Politics, Akwa Ibom State

1.0 Introduction

Politics in Nigeria is shaped by a mix of intense competition, deep-seated divisions, and longstanding power structures. Within this environment, political parties, rather than operating as ideologically driven institutions, often serve as platforms for personal advancement and elite bargaining, which reinforces practices such as vote-buying, godfatherism, and election-related violence (Iyoho, 2023; WFD Nigeria and NILDS, 2023). The centralization of power at the federal level, combined with weak institutional checks, further limits the prospects for inclusive governance (Iyoho, 2023). As a result, who participates in governance, and how, reflects not just procedural rules but deeply entrenched structures, carrying significant implications for groups that have historically been marginalized, particularly women (Unilag Law Review, 2024).

In this context, the inclusion of women in governance has gained global recognition as a crucial measure of democratic quality and responsiveness (Unilag Law Review, 2024). Scholars distinguish between descriptive representation (ensuring women occupy political offices) and substantive representation, which reflects their ability to influence policy outcomes (K4D Help Desk, 2019; NWTf, 2024). Yet, despite growing international focus on gender equality, women continue to face persistent barriers, including economic constraints, socio-cultural expectations, limited access to political networks, and systemic discrimination (K4D Help Desk, 2019; NWTf, 2024). These realities highlight the need to examine not only formal inclusion mechanisms but also the broader environment that shapes women's political participation (Essien & Edem, 2024).

Women's inclusion in governance can be assessed through several key dimensions: participation in political processes, access to elective and appointive positions, involvement in policy formulation, and representation within formal decision-making structures (Unilag Law Review, 2024). Together, these factors provide a framework for evaluating inclusivity, capturing both the opportunities available to women and their visibility within governance systems. However, the existence of these structures alone does not guarantee meaningful participation, particularly where institutional and cultural barriers remain strong (WFD Nigeria and NILDS, 2023).

Nigeria provides a striking example of this gap between formal provisions and actual practice. Although women make up nearly half of the population, their presence in political leadership remains very limited (Unilag Law Review, 2024; *Guardian*, 2025). The 2023 general elections, for instance, underscored this imbalance, with only a marginal number of women elected into legislative positions (WISCAR, 2023). This underrepresentation stems

from a combination of factors, including high campaign costs, political violence, entrenched gender norms, and weak enforcement of gender-focused policies (Guardian, 2025; Essien & Edem, 2024). While frameworks such as the National Gender Policy promote affirmative action, their impact has often been symbolic, revealing a persistent disconnect between policy intentions and lived realities (WFD Nigeria and NILDS, 2023). These national dynamics are mirrored at the sub-national level, particularly in Akwa Ibom State (Iyoho, 2023; Essien & Edem, 2024). The state's political environment reflects many of the patterns seen across Nigeria, including dominant party structures, patronage-driven politics, and electoral irregularities that shape the nature of political participation (Iyoho, 2023). While a few women have risen to prominent positions such as the deputy governor and the deputy speaker of the state assembly, these examples are exceptions rather than the rule (Iyoho, 2023). At the grassroots level, women's representation remains minimal. Civil society organizations have contributed to raising awareness about gender inclusion, but inconsistent institutional support continues to limit the depth and sustainability of women's political engagement (Iyoho, 2023).

Beyond structural barriers, an equally important factor is how these realities are perceived by the public. Perception shapes how citizens judge governance, legitimacy, and inclusion, because people respond not only to formal rules but also to what they see and experience in practice (Goldstein, 2020; Morgan & King, 2021; Easton, 2019). In the case of women's participation, public perception depends on the visibility, influence, and consistency of women's roles in governance. A high-profile appointment may signal progress to some but appear tokenistic to others, illustrating that perception is as much about interpretation as it is about numbers (NWTF, 2024).

This divergence between structural indicators and public perception is significant because it affects how citizens engage with political processes and whether they support broader inclusion efforts (Essien & Edem, 2024). Understanding how ordinary residents perceive women's inclusion is therefore critical for assessing both the present state of governance and the potential for future improvements in gender representation.

Despite extensive research on structural barriers to women's participation in Nigeria, there has been limited focus on public perceptions, particularly at the state level. In Akwa Ibom State, existing studies largely examine participation trends and institutional challenges, with little attention to citizens' attitudes, interpretations, and lived experiences (Iyoho, 2023; Essien & Edem, 2024). Given the central role perception plays in shaping democratic legitimacy and inclusive governance, this study seeks to explore how residents of Akwa Ibom State perceive the inclusion of women in governance.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although women in Akwa Ibom State have gradually gained visibility in governance through roles such as deputy governors, commissioners, and council chairpersons, their overall

representation remains limited and uneven, suggesting that gender balance in leadership is still developing. Public perception of women's inclusion appears mixed, with some residents viewing it as progressive while others regard it as symbolic or misaligned with cultural expectations, yet these perspectives remain largely unexplored. This gap highlights a need for empirical investigation to better understand citizens' interpretations and inform strategies for more inclusive governance.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study was conducted to:

- i. determine the level of residents' awareness of women's inclusion in governance in Akwa Ibom State.
- ii. examine residents' attitudes and acceptance of women's participation in governance roles.
- iii. assess residents' perceptions of the influence of women in governance.
- iv. identify socio-cultural and personal factors shaping residents' perceptions of women's inclusion in governance.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

Perception constitutes an active and interpretive cognitive process through which individuals organize and interpret sensory input to derive meaning from their environment (Goldstein, 2019). From the initial reception of light, sound, or other stimuli by sensory organs, a multilayered process unfolds that involves selection, organization, interpretation, and meaning-making. Sensation alone does not produce perception; rather, stimuli must be cognitively filtered and integrated with internal processes such as attention, memory, and prior experience to gain interpretive value (Bruce et al., 2020). Attention functions as a selective filter that prioritizes salient stimuli based on relevance, salience, and motivational states (Styles, 2016), and without such filtering, the brain's limited processing capacity would be overwhelmed. Contemporary research shows that attention interacts dynamically with perception, modulating perceptual precision and feature binding across cognitive levels, which suggests that perception and attention are intricately linked processes rather than isolated modules.

Interpretation, a central aspect of perception, relies on integrating sensory data with stored mental schemas and experiences (Eysenck & Keane, 2020). Top-down processing frameworks hold that perceptions are shaped by expectations and predictive coding mechanisms, enabling the brain to form hypotheses about incoming stimuli and adjust them through feedback. Context and cultural norms further shape how identical sensory inputs are interpreted differently across individuals (Schacter et al., 2022), reflecting the subjective nature of perception. Emotion also modulates perceptual experience, influencing what is attended to and how stimuli are evaluated, an idea supported by affective neuroscience showing that structures like the amygdala interact with perceptual networks. Thus,

perception is not a passive reflection of reality but an active, selective, and constructive process shaped by cognitive, affective, and contextual factors. It is through this dynamic interplay that individuals make sense of political reality, including the presence and roles of women in governance.

2.1.1 Political Inclusion

Political inclusion refers to the deliberate integration of historically marginalized groups into political processes and decision-making structures, ensuring equitable participation beyond mere access to voting rights (Arowosegbe, 2020). It involves representation, influence in policymaking, and active engagement in governance, reflecting the broader principles of democratic legitimacy and accountability (UNDP, 2021). In developing nations, structural inequalities such as socio-economic disparities, weak institutions, and entrenched elite control, often impede full political inclusion, thereby limiting the voices of women, youth, and minority groups (Ibrahim & Adedoyin, 2023).

Inclusion is multidimensional, encompassing legal frameworks, institutional reforms, party structures, and socio-cultural empowerment. Gender-focused inclusion, for example, requires both affirmative action measures such as quotas and cultural transformations to counter patriarchal norms (Olayemi & Adekeye, 2022). Similarly, youth inclusion is strengthened by legal reforms, mentorship, and the removal of economic and social barriers, as seen in Nigeria's Not Too Young to Run Act (Udeh & Chukwuma, 2021). Ethnic and minority representation benefits from decentralization, power-sharing, and transparent zoning mechanisms, which reduce tensions and improve social cohesion (Adebayo & Abubakar, 2024).

Political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs), and digital platforms serve as critical facilitators of inclusion. Parties determine candidate emergence, yet practices such as godfatherism and high nomination costs often limit participation (Ekanem & Asuquo, 2023). CSOs can empower marginalized citizens and monitor elections, while social media expands outreach and accountability, albeit with challenges of misinformation and digital exclusion (Akinyemi & Obielum, 2023). Legal guarantees, including constitutional rights to equality, association, and anti-discrimination, provide a foundation but must be complemented by civic education and political will (International IDEA, 2021; Nwosu & Bello, 2023).

Political inclusion manifests through electoral participation, access to leadership, policy involvement, representation, institutional voice, civil society engagement, resource access, and political efficacy (Norris, 2002; Verba et al., 1995). In the context of women in Akwa Ibom State, these dimensions help evaluate the depth of inclusion and the public's perception of women's participation. While formal structures exist, persistent socio-cultural barriers limit meaningful engagement (Caul, Kittilson, & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012; Sulaiman, 2025). Understanding these dimensions allows researchers to link perception to observable realities, bridging the gap between policy provisions and citizen experiences.

2.1.2 Political Inclusion of Women in Governance

Women in governance refers to the active participation, representation, and leadership of women in political, administrative, and decision-making processes at all levels of government (UN Women, 2021). It is a cornerstone of inclusive democracy, reflecting both equality of opportunity and social justice, and it addresses historical marginalization rooted in patriarchy, socio-cultural norms, and institutional barriers (Arowosegbe, 2020). Women's participation is not only a rights issue but also a driver of policy innovation, social equity, and effective governance (Olayemi & Adekeye, 2022).

Despite global and national frameworks advocating gender equality (Beijing Platform, SDG 5), women's political empowerment in Nigeria remains limited due to patriarchal norms, weak enforcement of laws, and institutional barriers (Oloyede & Aborisade, 2020; Agbalajobi & Akintan, 2023). Legal provisions alone are insufficient; societal transformation, community support, and educational empowerment are critical (Ajayi & Olayinka, 2022; Nwankwor, 2021). Women's inclusion enriches policy diversity and democratic legitimacy, highlighting its dual moral and developmental imperatives (Okeke-Ihejirika & Franceschet, 2021; Bauer & Darkwah, 2019).

Contemporary literature emphasizes multiple dimensions: descriptive representation (numerical presence), substantive representation (advancing women's interests), and symbolic representation (visibility of women leaders as role models) (Krook, 2020). In Nigeria, women's participation remains low, with only 7% of National Assembly seats held by women as of 2023, reflecting structural, cultural, and financial obstacles (Nwosu & Bello, 2023). Barriers include gender-biased party structures, limited access to campaign funding, sociocultural expectations, and political violence (Ekanem & Asuquo, 2023).

Strategies to enhance women's governance include affirmative action measures such as gender quotas, capacity-building programs, mentorship initiatives, and reforms targeting political party practices (Adebayo & Abubakar, 2024). Civil society organizations (CSOs) and international agencies also play crucial roles in advocacy, voter education, and monitoring compliance with gender equality commitments (International IDEA, 2021). Moreover, digital platforms offer new opportunities for women to engage politically, though challenges like digital literacy gaps and online harassment must be addressed (Akinyemi & Obielum, 2023). Evidence suggests that greater female participation improves governance outcomes, including social policy responsiveness, transparency, and citizen engagement, reinforcing the imperative for deliberate inclusion strategies (UNDP, 2021; Ibrahim & Adedoyin, 2023). Thus, women in governance are integral to achieving equitable and sustainable political development.

2.2 Thematic Review of Public Perceptions on Women's Inclusion in Governance

2.2.1 People's Attitudes towards the Inclusion of Women in Governance Roles

Public attitudes towards women's inclusion in governance reflect a gradual but uneven shift in perceptions of leadership suitability. Evidence from the Arab Barometer (2023) shows a notable decline in the belief that men are inherently better political leaders, particularly among younger populations. Similarly, the Reykjavik Index (Women Political Leaders and Verian, 2024) indicates growing global acceptance of female leadership, although this progress varies across regions and cultures. These trends suggest that generational change is playing a critical role in reshaping societal views.

Despite this progress, deeply rooted stereotypes persist. Role congruity theory explains that women are often judged against masculine leadership norms, resulting in perceptions of either incompetence or emotional excess (Gervais and Hillard, 2011). Empirical evidence supports this, with studies in Malawi showing that voters still question women's competence for executive roles (Clayton et al., 2020). Media and digital platforms further reinforce such biases. Analyses reveal that female politicians are more likely to be evaluated based on appearance or personal traits rather than policy competence (Brugnoli et al., 2022; Marjanovic et al., 2021), while Nigerian social media spaces often expose them to gendered hostility (Ogunmusire, 2021).

Attitudes are also shaped by context. Cross-national studies highlight how cultural norms influence acceptance levels (IWDA, 2021), while evidence from Ghana reveals contradictory perceptions that portray women as both trustworthy and overly assertive (Kwame, 2023). Although female candidacy can increase voter engagement, women are often judged more harshly in cases of failure or misconduct (Clayton et al., 2020). Overall, public attitudes are improving but remain ambivalent, shaped by generational change, media narratives, and enduring gender expectations.

2.2.2 Perceived Influence of Women's Inclusion in Governance

Public perceptions of women's inclusion in governance are largely shaped by beliefs about the outcomes female leaders bring to political systems. Across several regions, citizens associate women in leadership with greater attention to social welfare. Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America show that women leaders tend to prioritize sectors such as healthcare, education, and childcare, which are widely perceived as directly benefiting communities (Dutta & Maus, 2023; Clayton et al., 2019). This reinforces the view that women contribute to more inclusive and people-centered governance.

Another widely held perception relates to integrity. Women are often seen as more honest and accountable, a belief that strengthens public trust in their leadership (Riman et al., 2023). In countries like Nigeria and India, such perceptions have contributed to relatively higher confidence in female office holders (Dutta & Maus, 2023). However, scholars caution

that these assumptions may oversimplify complex governance realities and risk reinforcing essentialist stereotypes.

Beyond ethics, women's inclusion is also linked to improved governance practices. Evidence from European contexts suggests that higher female representation is associated with increased transparency and citizen participation (Aidt & Shaari, 2024). Citizens further perceive women as drivers of policy innovation, particularly in areas such as social protection and gender-based violence (Clayton et al., 2019; Fokam et al., 2021). At the same time, these positive perceptions are not absolute. When female leaders underperform, public criticism tends to be more severe, reflecting higher expectations (Aidt & Shaari, 2024). In general, while public perceptions are largely favorable, they remain conditional, shaped by performance, visibility, and prevailing societal expectations.

2.2.3 Socio-cultural and Personal Factors Influencing Perceptions

Perceptions of women's inclusion in governance are deeply rooted in socio-cultural and personal contexts that shape how leadership is understood and evaluated. Long-standing norms and historical patterns of exclusion continue to influence attitudes, often positioning women as less suitable for public authority (Inglehart & Norris, 2021). In many developing societies, factors such as religion, low levels of education, and traditional gender roles reinforce resistance to female leadership (Kassa & Haile, 2022). By contrast, societies with stronger gender equality movements tend to exhibit greater acceptance.

A persistent challenge lies in the "double-bind" faced by women in leadership. As Ridgeway (2011) explains, women who display assertiveness may be judged as overly aggressive, while those who appear collaborative risk being seen as weak. These conflicting expectations shape both public perception and women's own political engagement. Media representation further reinforces these biases, often focusing on personal attributes rather than competence (Trimble et al., 2022).

However, attitudes are not static. Exposure to effective female leaders can reshape perceptions through what is described as the role model effect (Beaman et al., 2012). Generational differences also matter, with younger populations showing more inclusive attitudes (UN Women, 2023). In addition, factors such as ethnicity, religion, and class intersect to influence acceptance levels, as seen in Nigeria's diverse socio-political landscape (Adelekan & Omotoso, 2021).

2.2.4 Perceived Barriers and Enablers to Women's Inclusion

Women's inclusion in governance is influenced by a combination of structural barriers and enabling mechanisms. Although formal legal frameworks exist, they often fail to translate into meaningful participation due to entrenched institutional practices (UN Women, 2024; International IDEA, 2024). In Nigeria, political party structures remain male-dominated, limiting women's access to nominations and campaign resources. Electoral systems further

disadvantage women, particularly where financial capacity and incumbency play decisive roles.

Cultural norms also present significant obstacles. Deeply rooted beliefs that associate leadership with masculinity continue to discourage women from pursuing political roles (Stand to End Rape, 2024; UN Women, 2024). These norms are reinforced by family expectations, religious interpretations, and media narratives. Economic constraints compound the problem, as high campaign costs and limited access to funding restrict women's participation (World Economic Forum, 2025).

In addition, political violence and harassment, both physical and digital, create hostile environments that deter female candidates (Enock et al., 2024; UN Women, 2024). Even where support exists, pragmatic bias often leads voters to doubt women's electability, reducing actual electoral support (Panorama Global, 2024; The Guardian, 2024).

At the same time, several enablers are emerging. Mentorship programs, financial support initiatives, and digital platforms are expanding opportunities for women's political engagement (Nigerian Women's Trust Fund, 2025; Gomes & Meyimdju, 2023). Quotas and legal reforms also show promise, particularly when backed by strong political will (International IDEA, 2024). Together, these interventions highlight that while barriers remain substantial, targeted efforts can significantly improve women's inclusion in governance.

2.3 Empirical Review

Empirical evidence on perceptions of women's political inclusion reveals consistent patterns across different contexts. Melanie M. Hughes et al. (2019) examined how gender quotas shape public attitudes using longitudinal data from the World Values Survey across 87 countries (1994–2014). Through fixed-effects regression analysis, the study found that quota adoption significantly improves acceptance of women's political leadership and weakens traditional gender norms, particularly in less egalitarian societies. It concluded that quotas not only enhance representation but also shift societal attitudes, recommending their wider adoption. However, the study's macro focus leaves a gap in understanding how such institutional mechanisms influence perceptions at subnational levels like Akwa Ibom.

In a related context, Sarah Brierley and Pereira (2023) explored gendered perceptions of corruption in Ghana using a survey experiment with 200 respondents. Their regression analysis showed that female bureaucrats were judged more harshly for corrupt behavior and were more likely to be reported, despite no actual gender difference in corruption tendencies. The study concluded that public expectations, rather than behavior, drive these perceptions and recommended gender-sensitive anti-corruption strategies. A key gap remains in examining whether similar moral double standards shape perceptions of women in elective governance.

Focusing on media influence, Elisa Brugnoli et al. (2022) conducted a large-scale content analysis of 100,000 Italian news articles using NLP techniques. The findings

revealed that female politicians are more frequently portrayed through personalized and emotional frames, while men are associated with competence and policy issues. The study concluded that media narratives reinforce gender stereotypes and recommended editorial reforms. However, it does not account for how such portrayals translate into audience perceptions in different cultural settings, creating a gap this study addresses.

Extending this to digital spaces, Lena Koch et al. (2024) analyzed over 500,000 tweets from the 2022 Brazilian elections using machine learning models. The study found that female candidates face significantly higher levels of misogynistic abuse, especially those from marginalized groups, with hostility intensifying near elections. It concluded that online misogyny constitutes a structural barrier to political participation and recommended regulatory and platform-level interventions. Nonetheless, there is limited insight into how such digital hostility shapes offline public perception, particularly in emerging democracies like Nigeria.

Finally, Hilde Coffé and Reiser (2023) investigated how perceptions and information influence support for gender equality policies in Germany using a survey experiment with 2,500 respondents. Their analysis showed that awareness of women's underrepresentation increases support for quotas and that factual information can significantly shift attitudes, especially among educated and politically engaged individuals. The study concluded that information plays a critical role in shaping perceptions and recommended civic education initiatives. However, the applicability of these findings to contexts with different socio-cultural dynamics remains uncertain.

These studies demonstrate that perceptions of women's political inclusion are shaped by institutional frameworks, media representation, cultural expectations, and information exposure. Yet, there remains a clear gap in context-specific, grassroots-level analyses, particularly within Nigerian settings such as Akwa Ibom State, where local socio-cultural realities may significantly mediate these influences.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored in framing theory and social role theory, both of which provide complementary explanations for how perceptions of women's political inclusion are formed. Framing Theory, developed by Erving Goffman (1974) and later expanded by Robert Entman (1993), explains how the presentation of information shapes audience interpretation. It posits that media and communicators selectively emphasize certain aspects of reality, thereby influencing how issues are understood. In the context of women in governance, the way political actors, media platforms, and public discourse frame female leadership, either as competent and necessary or as controversial and secondary, can significantly shape public attitudes.

Complementing this is Social Role Theory, advanced by Alice Eagly and Wendy Wood (1987), which attributes gendered perceptions to socially constructed roles. The theory

argues that long-standing divisions of labor create expectations that women are nurturing and men are authoritative, leading to biases in evaluating leadership suitability. In political contexts, these expectations often make female leadership appear inconsistent with societal norms, thereby influencing acceptance levels.

In all, both theories offer a holistic understanding of perception. While framing theory explains how external narratives shape opinions, social role theory accounts for the internalized cultural beliefs that guide interpretation. Their relevance to this study lies in their ability to explain how residents of Akwa Ibom State form attitudes toward women's inclusion in governance through both mediated messages and deeply rooted socio-cultural norms. Collectively, they provide a strong analytical lens for examining the interaction between communication, culture, and public perception.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey design to systematically collect and analyze data on residents' perceptions of women's inclusion in governance in Akwa Ibom State. The population comprised all adult residents aged 18 years and above, estimated at 5.1 million. A sample size of 400 was determined using Taro Yamane's formula at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. A multi-stage sampling technique ensured representativeness across the three senatorial districts, six selected LGAs, and urban public locations, with purposive and availability sampling used to select eligible respondents. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising 14 items across five sections, covering awareness, attitudes, perceived influence, socio-cultural factors, and barriers to women's political inclusion. Validity was ensured through expert review and minor revisions, while reliability was confirmed via a pilot study with 40 respondents, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84. Trained assistants administered questionnaires face-to-face over three weeks, ensuring comprehension and accurate responses. Data were coded, tabulated, and analyzed using frequencies, percentages, and weighted means.

4.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Understanding of Women's Inclusion by Dimension

Dimension	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Participation	Women participating as voters/candidates	140	38
Access	Women appointed or gaining access to political offices	150	41
Policy Involvement	Women contributing to policy formulation	50	14
Representation	Women represented in councils/boards/committees	27	7

Dimension	Response	Frequency	Percentage
N/A	Not sure	0	0
Total		367	100

Table 1 shows that respondents most frequently associate women's inclusion with access to political offices (41%) and participation in elections (38%), which indicates that awareness is stronger for visible positions and electoral participation than for policy or structural representation.

Table 2: Understanding of the Goal of Women's Inclusion

Dimension	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Participation	Ensure equal participation in elections	145	39
Access	Guarantee access to leadership roles	155	42
Policy Involvement	Enable influence on policy decisions	45	12
Representation	Ensure proper representation	22	6
N/A	Don't understand the purpose	0	0
Total		367	100

Table 2 shows that respondents' awareness of women's inclusion in governance is concentrated on visible aspects or political roles, particularly access to leadership positions (42%) and participation in elections (39%), while awareness of policy involvement (12%) and representation (6%) remains comparatively low.

Table 3: Awareness of Inclusion Policies/Initiatives

Dimension	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Participation	Programs encouraging women to vote/run	160	44
Access	Initiatives supporting appointments	155	42
Policy Involvement	Programs involving women in policy	35	10
Representation	Efforts to enhance women's representation	17	5
N/A	Not aware	0	0
Total		367	100

In Table 3, most respondents are aware of initiatives promoting participation (44%) and access (42%), but policy involvement (10%) and representation (5%) receive less attention, showing that awareness is skewed toward electoral and appointment opportunities.

Table 4: Awareness of Women's Inclusion by Dimension

Dimension	Item	VA (4)	MA (3)	SA (2)	NA (1)	Total	Weighted Sum	WMS	Decision
Participation	Women participating as voters/candidates	102 (408)	148 (444)	72 (144)	45 (45)	367	1,041	2.84	Moderately aware
Access	Women gaining access to political offices	88 (352)	160 (480)	81 (162)	38 (38)	367	1,032	2.81	Moderately aware
Policy Involvement	Women contributing to policy formulation	74 (296)	150 (450)	93 (186)	50 (50)	367	982	2.68	Moderately aware
Representation	Women represented in councils/boards/committees	81 (324)	158 (474)	85 (170)	43 (43)	367	1,011	2.76	Moderately aware

Table 4 indicates that respondents generally have a moderate level of awareness of women's inclusion in governance, with greater recognition of visible roles such as participation and access and less awareness of structural and policy-related dimensions.

Table 5: Attitudes of Women's Inclusion in Governance

Dimension	Item	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Weighted Sum	WMS	Decision
Participation	Confidence in women participating in elections/governance	91 (364)	169 (507)	61 (122)	46 (46)	367	1,039	2.83	Agree
Access	Confidence in women accessing/holding political positions	108 (432)	180 (540)	54 (108)	25 (25)	367	1,105	3.01	Agree
Policy Involvement	Belief in women contributing to policy/decision-making	41 (164)	67 (201)	123 (246)	136 (136)	367	747	2.03	Disagree

Dimension	Item	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Weighted Sum	WMS	Decision
Representation	Support for women in councils/boards/committees	62 (248)	79 (237)	121 (242)	105 (105)	367	832	2.27	Disagree

Table 5 shows that while respondents generally express positive attitudes toward women's participation and access to political positions, they remain less supportive of women's involvement in policy-making and formal representation, reflecting selective endorsement across different governance dimensions.

Table 6: Perceived Influence of Women's Inclusion in Governance by Dimension

Dimension	Item	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total Weighted Score	WMS	Decision
Participation	Women's participation in elections and political processes positively influences governance outcomes	98 (392)	142 (426)	84 (168)	43 (43)	1,029	2.80	Agree
Access	Women gaining access to political positions positively influences governance effectiveness and decision-making	105 (420)	137 (411)	80 (160)	45 (45)	1,036	2.82	Agree
Policy Involvement	Women's involvement in policy formulation positively impacts the quality and inclusiveness of government policies	118 (472)	134 (402)	70 (140)	45 (45)	1,059	2.88	Agree
Representation	Women's representation in councils and decision-making bodies improves fairness,	102 (408)	142 (426)	76 (152)	47 (47)	1,033	2.82	Agree

Dimension	Item	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total Weighted WMS Decision Score
	accountability, and responsiveness					

Table 6 indicates that respondents generally perceive women's inclusion across all dimensions, participation, access, policy involvement, and representation, as positively influencing governance, which suggests a broad recognition of the constructive impact of women in political processes and decision-making.

Table 7: Personal and Sociocultural Factors Influencing Perceptions

Factor Type	Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Personal	Level of education	187	40
Personal	Religious beliefs	101	22
Personal	Political interest	99	21
Personal	Experiences with female leaders	82	17
Sociocultural	Patriarchal traditions	171	34
Sociocultural	Cultural expectations of women	140	28
Sociocultural	Community norms	112	22
Sociocultural	Influence of local media	78	16
Total		970	100

Table 7 shows that residents' perceptions of women's inclusion in governance are shaped by both personal factors, especially education, and sociocultural influences, with patriarchal traditions and cultural expectations playing a prominent role in guiding public attitudes.

4.1 Discussion of Findings

4.1.1 What is the level of residents' awareness of women's inclusion in governance in Akwa Ibom State?

The findings presented in Tables 1–4 provided the empirical insights to address the research question. The data reveal that residents of Akwa Ibom State demonstrate a moderate level of awareness regarding women's inclusion in governance, though this awareness is unevenly distributed across different dimensions. Respondents most readily associate inclusion with women gaining access to political offices and participating in elections, while recognition of

policy involvement and representation in councils or governance structures is comparatively limited. Similarly, awareness of initiatives and programs aimed at promoting women's participation mirrors this pattern, with programs targeting electoral engagement and political appointments receiving more public attention than those focusing on policy development or structural representation. These patterns suggest that visibility within the political arena plays a significant role in shaping public awareness. Weighted mean analyses further reinforce these findings. Across all dimensions such as participation, access, policy involvement, and representation, respondents exhibit moderate awareness, with WMS values ranging from 2.68 to 2.84. This indicates that while citizens recognize the broader concept of women's inclusion, their understanding tends to emphasize high-profile, tangible aspects such as electoral participation and leadership appointments, rather than the more technical or institutional dimensions of governance.

These findings align with prior research on gender inclusion in Nigerian politics. Olojede (2014) observed that public exposure to civic education and political communication significantly shapes awareness of women's political roles, while Okeke-Ihejirika et al. (2020) noted that media emphasis on women in visible positions enhances recognition but leaves technical and institutional contributions underappreciated. The observed patterns can be interpreted through Social Role Theory, which posits those societal expectations about gender roles influence perceptions of capability and appropriate functions within social domains (Eagly, 1987). The moderate awareness of women's participation in visible political roles suggests that traditional gender norms are gradually evolving, allowing for greater recognition of women in leadership. However, lower awareness of policy and structural representation indicates that ingrained assumptions about women's involvement in decision-making processes remain influential.

Framing Theory also provides a useful lens, as the public's understanding appears shaped by the salience of certain issues in political discourse and media narratives. Electoral campaigns and high-profile appointments are highly visible and widely reported, reinforcing awareness in these areas. Conversely, policy processes and committee-based representation receive limited media attention, which may account for the relatively lower awareness observed among respondents (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

4.1.2 What are residents' attitudes and acceptance of women's participation in governance roles?

The findings indicate that residents of Akwa Ibom State generally demonstrate a supportive attitude toward women's participation in elections and access to political leadership, reflecting a growing recognition of women's competence in visible political roles. Citizens appear willing to accept women as electoral participants and officeholders, suggesting that symbolic acceptance of female leadership is increasingly normalized. This positive disposition is consistent with empirical studies showing that exposure to women in public

office can gradually shift societal perceptions, as highlighted in Melanie M. Hughes et al. (2019), who observed that gender quotas enhance public acceptance of women's political authority.

In contrast, attitudes toward women's involvement in policy formulation and institutional representation remain less favorable. Residents exhibit skepticism regarding women's capacity to influence decision-making or hold positions in councils, boards, and committees, indicating a gap between symbolic inclusion and substantive support. This selective endorsement suggests that entrenched socio-cultural norms, gendered role expectations, and perceptions of technical competence continue to influence public evaluation of women's authority in governance. Similar patterns are evident in contexts where media framing and cultural expectations shape perceptions, as shown by Brugnoli et al. (2022) and Brierley & Pereira (2023), who note that women are often associated with emotional or symbolic roles rather than policy or leadership competence.

From a theoretical standpoint, Social Role Theory helps explain these attitudes: while residents increasingly accept women in visible political roles, traditional expectations regarding male-dominated decision-making persist in shaping perceptions of policy influence and institutional authority. Framing theory further suggests that public attitudes may be reinforced by media and political narratives that emphasize symbolic participation over substantive governance roles. Overall, the findings reveal a complex interplay between evolving support for female political participation and persistent cultural constraints that limit full endorsement of women's authority in governance.

4.1.3 What is the residents' perception of the influence of women in governance?

The findings indicate that residents of Akwa Ibom State perceive women's inclusion in governance as broadly beneficial across all examined dimensions. Respondents agree that women's participation in elections and political processes positively influences governance outcomes. This suggests that citizens recognize the practical value of women's engagement in electoral and political activities, seeing it as contributing to greater diversity of perspectives, responsiveness to societal needs, and overall governance effectiveness.

Similarly, residents perceive women's access to political positions as enhancing decision-making and institutional performance. The acknowledgement that female leaders contribute meaningfully to governance structures reflects an evolving attitude in which competence and leadership potential are increasingly recognized irrespective of gender. This finding aligns with studies by Aina (2018) and Oluwatobi et al. (2020), which associate female leadership with improved social welfare, policy responsiveness, and grassroots-oriented governance initiatives.

Importantly, respondents also view women's involvement in policy formulation and representation in councils, boards, and decision-making bodies as positively impacting governance quality, fairness, accountability, and inclusiveness. These perceptions suggest that residents do not limit women's influence to symbolic participation but recognize their

substantive contributions to governance processes. This pattern contrasts with prior research highlighting selective acceptance, indicating a growing public appreciation for women's broader governance roles.

Social Role Theory helps interpret these perceptions by illustrating how traditionally "feminine" qualities such as empathy and social attentiveness are seen as enhancing policy inclusiveness and institutional responsiveness. Framing Theory further explains that consistent media and public narratives emphasizing women's competence and leadership contributions may reinforce these positive perceptions. Collectively, the findings indicate that residents broadly perceive women as capable, valuable, and influential actors within governance, reflecting both progressive acceptance and a recognition of the practical benefits of gender-inclusive leadership.

4.1.4 What are socio-cultural and personal factors shaping residents' perceptions of women's inclusion in governance?

The findings in Table 7 indicate that residents' perceptions of women's inclusion in governance are influenced by a combination of personal and socio-cultural factors. Among personal factors, level of education emerged as the most prominent determinant, highlighting the transformative role of intellectual exposure in shaping attitudes toward gender-inclusive governance. Education broadens awareness of democratic principles and challenges entrenched stereotypes, aligning with the findings of Hilde Coffé and Reiser (2023), who demonstrated that factual information and civic education significantly shift support for gender equality policies. Religious beliefs, political interest, and direct experiences with female leaders further shape perceptions by either reinforcing traditional expectations or providing evidence of women's leadership competence.

Sociocultural influences, however, remain highly significant. Patriarchal traditions and cultural expectations of women were identified as leading factors, collectively shaping normative frameworks that guide public attitudes. These structures historically associate leadership and decision-making with men, thereby creating implicit barriers to women's political participation. Community norms and local media also play critical roles: communal reinforcement of male-dominated politics can limit acceptance of female leaders, while media framing either challenges or perpetuates existing stereotypes, as noted by Brugnoli et al. (2022) in their study of gendered media portrayals.

The interaction between personal enlightenment and socio-cultural constraints highlights the dynamic tension shaping perceptions. While education and political engagement encourage more progressive views, deeply rooted traditions and collective norms continue to mediate the extent of acceptance. This dual influence reflects broader trends identified by Hughes et al. (2019) and Brierley and Pereira (2023), where institutional, cultural, and informational contexts collectively shape public attitudes toward women in governance. In Akwa Ibom, these findings suggest that advancing gender inclusion requires

simultaneous attention to personal empowerment and the transformation of socio-cultural norms.

The findings reflect Social Role Theory, which posits that societal expectations about gender roles shape evaluations of leadership, explaining why patriarchal traditions and cultural norms strongly influence residents' perceptions of women's political inclusion. Women's perceived caregiving and social-orientation qualities may enhance acceptance when aligned with governance participation, yet traditional role expectations constrain views on leadership authority. Framing theory further clarifies how media, education, and community narratives shape these perceptions by highlighting or downplaying women's contributions, demonstrating that both societal roles and communication processes jointly mediate attitudes toward gender-inclusive governance.

5. Conclusion

The findings suggest that while residents increasingly recognize women's competence in political participation and leadership, their influence in policy-making and institutional decision-making is less valued, reflecting selective support shaped by socio-cultural norms. Educational exposure and personal experiences with female leaders enhance acceptance, whereas patriarchal traditions and cultural expectations constrain full endorsement. The implication is that women's meaningful inclusion in governance depends not only on access to political positions but also on transforming societal attitudes and cultural frameworks. Sustainable gender-inclusive leadership requires targeted civic education, advocacy, and interventions addressing entrenched socio-cultural barriers.

5.1 Recommendations

- i. Since residents demonstrate only a moderate level of awareness of women's inclusion in governance, government agencies, civil society organizations, and media institutions should intensify public enlightenment campaigns on the meaning and importance of women's political inclusion. Such campaigns should highlight not only electoral participation and access to offices but also women's roles in policy formulation and decision-making, which currently receive less public recognition.
- ii. Given the mixed attitudes toward women's inclusion, particularly doubts about women's ability to contribute effectively to policy formulation, political parties, leadership training institutions, and advocacy groups should organize capacity-building programs, leadership workshops, and public dialogues that showcase competent female leaders and demonstrate women's effectiveness in governance and policy processes.
- iii. Since residents generally perceive women's inclusion as beneficial to governance outcomes, policymakers should leverage this positive perception by formulating

policies and institutional frameworks that promote gender-balanced political representation, such as gender quotas, inclusive recruitment practices in public offices, and targeted support for female candidates in elections.

- iv. Because education level and patriarchal traditions strongly influence residents' perceptions, educational institutions, community leaders, and religious organizations should collaborate to promote gender equality values through civic education, community engagement programs, and culturally sensitive advocacy that challenges stereotypes and reshapes socio-cultural norms about women's leadership roles.

References

- Adebayo, R., & Abubakar, S. (2024). Ethnic politics and power rotation in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects. *African Journal of Political Science*, 18(1), 66–81.
- Adelekan, T. A., & Omotoso, F. (2021). Gender representation and public perception in Nigeria's politics. *Journal of African Elections*, 20(1), 101–120.
- Arowosegbe, J. O. (2020). The state and political inclusion in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 38(4), 518–534.
- Beaman, L., Duflo, E., Pande, R., & Topalova, P. (2012). Female leadership raises aspirations and educational attainment for girls. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 4(4), 1–14.
- Brugnoli, E., et al. (2022). Gendered media representation of political actors: A large-scale content analysis. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 2054–2076.
- Clayton, A., Josefsson, C., Wang, V., & Zetterberg, P. (2019). Quota shocks: Electoral gender quotas and government spending priorities worldwide. *The Journal of Politics*, 81(3), 916–932.
- Coffé, H., & Reiser, M. (2023). How perceptions and information influence support for gender equality policies. *Political Behavior*.
- Dutta, N., & Maus, L. (2023). Women's political empowerment and education outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 5, Article 1120287.
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.

- Essien, I. B., & Edem, A. E. (2024). Women's participation in Nigerian politics: A case study of Akwa Ibom State. *Nigerian Journal of Gender and Development Studies*, 8(1), 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.4314/njgds.v8i1.4>
- Goldstein, E. B. (2019). *Sensation and perception* (10th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Goldstein, E. B. (2020). *Cognitive psychology: Connecting mind, research, and everyday experience* (5th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Guardian. (2025, March 10). Nigeria's 2023 elections: Women still sidelined in politics. *The Guardian Nigeria*. <https://guardian.ng/news/nigerias-2023-elections-women-still-sidelined/>
- Ibrahim, M. A., & Adedoyin, S. A. (2023). Political marginalisation and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. *Journal of African Governance*, 15(2), 134–150.
- Inglehart, R., & Norris, P. (2021). Cultural barriers to women's leadership. *Perspectives on Politics*, 19(1), 75–89.
- International IDEA. (2021). *Global state of democracy report: Building resilience in a pandemic era*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
- Iyoho, E. (2023). Political participation and electoral violence in Southern Nigeria: A study of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. *Journal of African Political Studies*, 15(2), 112–131.
- Kassa, S., & Haile, A. (2022). Public attitudes and gender equality in African politics. *African Journal of Political Science*, 16(2), 34–49.
- Morgan, C. T., & King, R. A. (2021). *Introduction to psychology* (12th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Norris, P. (2002). *Democratic phoenix: Reinventing political activism*. Cambridge University Press.
- NWTF (Nigerian Women Trust Fund). (2024). *2023 elections gender audit report*. <https://nigerianwomentrustfund.org/publications>
- Okeke-Ihejirika, P., & Franceschet, S. (2021). Gender, politics, and power in Nigeria: Pathways to inclusion. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 55(2), 197–214.
- Okeke-Ihejirika, P., Spitzer, D., & Chioma, U. (2020). Gender equity in governance: The unfinished struggle of Nigerian women. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 54(2), 243–263.
- Olayemi, A., & Adekeye, M. (2022). Gender quotas and political inclusion in Nigeria: From policy to practice. *African Gender Studies Review*, 10(2), 78–95.

- Olojede, I. (2014). Women's participation and representation in Nigeria's politics: From the 1920s to 2011. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(20), 117–128.
- Ridgeway, C. L. (2011). *Framed by gender: How gender inequality persists in the modern world*. Oxford University Press.
- Riman, H. B., Lebo, M., Ude, O., & Akpan, E. S. (2023). Does women participation in governance reduce corruption and income inequality? *Global Journal of Social Sciences*, 22(1), 1–16.
- Schacter, D. L., Gilbert, D. T., Wegner, D. M., & Nock, M. K. (2022). *Psychology* (5th ed.). Worth Publishers.
- Stand to End Rape (STER). (2024). Barriers to women's political entry in Nigeria. <https://standtoendrape.org/barriers-to-entry/>
- Trimble, L., Wagner, A., Sampert, S., Raphael, D., & Gerrits, B. (2022). Gender, media, and politics: The influence of news coverage on perceptions of female leaders. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 2054–2076.
- UNDP. (2021). *African governance report: Progress and challenges*. United Nations Development Programme.
- Unilag Law Review. (2024). Women and political representation in Nigeria: Reassessing the effectiveness of legal reforms. *University of Lagos Law Review*, 5(1), 22–41.
- WFD Nigeria & National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (NILDS). (2023). *Gender audit of Nigeria's 2023 general elections*. <https://www.wfd.org/publications/gender-audit-nigeria-2023>
- WISCAR (Women in Successful Careers). (2023). *Policy brief on women's political representation in Nigeria*. <https://wiscar.ng/publications>
- Women Political Leaders & Verian. (2024). *The Reykjavik Index for Leadership 2024/25 report*.
- World Economic Forum. (2025). *Global gender gap report 2025*. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2025>