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## Women in State-Level Politics

### Winihin Jemide Series Policy Brief

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The Winihin Jemide Series (WJS) acknowledged women's increasing involvement in government and commercial leadership, both within Africa and across the globe, in its 2014 conference titled Women in Government and Politics. Yet despite notable landmarks such as Rwanda's majority female parliament and a clause mandating gender parity in elective office in Kenya's new constitution, political leadership in Africa — reflecting the global trend — remains largely male dominated. As a foundation established by one of Africa's leading female philanthropists, WJS has undertaken to sponsor key initiatives, including academic research, that will help shed light on factors that hinder African women from participating more actively in politics and government. In line with this goal, WJS offered fieldwork grants this year to master's and doctoral students collecting data relevant to questions about women's political participation in African countries. I was fortunate to be awarded one of such grants to support my thesis which took a recent gubernatorial election as a case study through which to explore political participation among informal laborers in a growing urban area in southwest Nigeria.

This demographic was an interesting one to consider because, as is increasingly noted, the priorities of the often young informally employed urban poor are likely to significantly shape politics across Africa in coming years. As the political space allows for democratic choice in more and more African countries and populations continue to swell in urban areas across the continent, its growing electoral share will likely to translate into increased political influence for this demographic. Exploring trends in the motivations and modes of political participation among the urban poor in a growing city in Nigeria thus provided an important window into some of the key factors that may shape electoral politics in coming years.<sup>1</sup> Taking cues from recent studies on this demographic (e.g. Resnick 2014), I visited the main open-air markets within the urban area in which I worked and spoke to traders and day-laborers selected at random to get a range of individual-level perspectives on the 'whys' and 'hows' of political participation among the informally employed.

Within this demographic, exploring the factors that influenced both women's and men's participation served to shed light on both shared trends which appeared to be independent of gender, and on the unique factors which impacted upon women particularly. Key patterns likely illustrative of broader trends among this group emerged through nearly a month of semi-structured and in-depth interviews, and shed light on factors which had an influence across three important domains of political participation: namely, voting, party activism, and party leadership positions. The reoccurrence of these modes of participation in most interviews highlighted their importance to the individuals with whom I spoke but also provided a useful window into the very often *practical* factors which influenced women's participation in particularly modes which were considered important.

#### **Voting:**

For virtually all the women interviewed (24/25), much like the men (23/25), voting was the key form of political action undertaken in the concluded gubernatorial election which was in focus. This observation agreed with studies of the urban poor in other sites in Africa which often find voting rates within this

demographic to be among the highest (Resnick 2014). Likewise, there hardly seemed to be a difference between women and men with regards to their interest in voting, how suitable they found the voting materials and procedures, and even their preferred candidate—the main opposition challenger (who ultimately won the race) received near unanimous support (47/50) among the individuals interviewed.

Similarly, both men's and women's motivations for supporting their preferred candidate often had to do with the extent to which a candidate's appeals reflected the main priorities expressed by members of this demographic. Perceptions of candidates' relative interest in paying full salaries and allowances to civil servants was a key issue of this sort which a majority of interviewees offered as an explanation for their decision to support the opposition candidate. Because the civil service is widely understood to be the main employer of labor in the state and since, as a result, informal workers considered civil servants to be their main customer base, the willingness of the competing candidates to fully remunerate civil servants—assessed based on past performance and proxies such as personality and campaign style—was considered make or break.

The opposition candidate who exhibited a style often referred to by interviewees as 'generous' or 'car[ing] for ordinary people' was therefore expected, as one vegetable seller observed, to 'make civil servants happy so that they can equally make us [market vendors] happy.' This mode of determining preferred candidates on the basis of assessments of personality and campaign style is often understood to be less optimal than more policy based assessments. Yet the divide between personality and policy proved to be permeable in this case, as the candidates' personalities and styles of appeals were understood as important indicators of whether or not they would pursue favorable policy. This linking of electoral change and economic issues of vital importance to both female and male informal workers may prove to be an interesting trend to continue to observe as this demographic gains more weight electorally.

### **Party Activism:**

Although a slightly more mixed picture emerged, the greater trend appeared to be convergence when male and female interviewees were asked about their respective levels of participation in various forms of party activism in advance of the gubernatorial election. Most interviewees irrespective of gender tended not to have worked for a political party, attended a meeting with a political party or candidate, or even been present at any of the many large open-air campaign rallies which had taken place before the election.

Yet one area of slight divergence on gender lines seemed to emerge when interviewees explained why they had avoided such events. Both men and women often offered that political events would only take time away from more essential activities of the business day—'we are traders not politicians' was a recurrent remark. But several women further explained that male family members (often husbands or brothers) were not politically active themselves and/or did not approve of their attendance at such events. 'Me? Nooo - I don't like *wahala* [trouble]! Moreover, my husband will say political rall[ies are] not good for married women,' one caterer joked.<sup>ii</sup>

Many female interviewees, much like this caterer, seemed to agree with the disinclinations of family members and often justified this with reference to the association between politics and *wahala* in general, or the risk of violence more particularly. An implication seemed to be that women felt and were considered by family members to be more vulnerable at unpredictable and potentially violent political

gatherings. Correspondingly, the few women who did attend these events often added that they did so in the company of male family members who often occupied party positions.

### **Party Positions:**

Of the three areas in focus, holding party positions was the mode of participation in which the most divergence between women and men was evident. As part of the broader group, the individuals who attested to holding positions in political parties were clearly in the minority (9/50) and only two of such party executives were women; one of whom held the position of Women's Leader in her ward, while the other was an Organizing Secretary at the Local Government level. The total size of the group of position holders (like the larger group interviewed) was of course hardly sufficient to provide a representative picture of how party positions break down or of proportions within the overall demographic. In-depth interviews with the women who did hold party positions did however prove illustrative of factors that may have a broader influence on women's leadership in party positions.

The Party Organizing Secretary with whom I spoke who wished to be identified as Lady B, had interesting insights to share in this regard. She affirmed that women who attended party events played a very active role in shaping meeting agendas. Yet she also observed that outside of specific women's positions (such as Women Leader) she was the only woman holding a general executive council position beyond the Ward-level in the state, and that she had just recently acquired this office after 10 years of active membership in the party. Responding to questions about why there were not more women in such positions and why she was in the Local Government rather than state executive, she explained:

"it is hard to have a position in politics as a woman. Especially if you don't have money... my tailoring business, at least it is doing ok. I even give employment to some youths from our party... As for me, I like politics but I did not finish secondary school. If you want to do politics and you did not go to school, you are just disturbing yourself... The issue is they [men in the party] will say, 'no, the women should not travel for rallies or go for the important meetings at night.' They will say, 'no, [people] can fight there and it can be dangerous. That's why they say sometimes women should not participate.'

Lady B's comments and story seemed to point to a number of key factors that may prevent women's advancement in party positions. The length of time she has served before attaining a position; her allusion to the financial requirements needed to raise support along with her ability to provide employment for party members; and her reflections about education all seemed to be factors that might work against the modal woman in informal employment with whom I spoke. These women were often young, had attained limited education, and managed trades that clearly did not generate enough of an income or employment surplus for use in raising political support.

Yet there also seemed to be another key impediment intersecting with the above factors. As Lady B highlighted in comments about 'important meetings at night' and traveling for rallies, the threat of insecurity in politics and more so the view that women were somehow less suited for such potentially turbulent contexts seemed an additional hindrance to their active participation and elevation into important leadership roles. It therefore appeared that such norms regarding 'appropriate' activities for women (or the instrumental use of such norms by men also pursuing the same positions) intersected with practical factors of security, youth, income, and education to prohibit women's attainment of political positions.

**Conclusions:**

Exploring important forms of political participation pursued by both women and men within this key demographic of the urban poor served to shed light on a number of often practical factors that will likely continue to influence modes and levels of women's participation in local politics. The vibrant participation of women in this demographic in voting—as well as the increasing link between their economic concerns and the possibility of electoral change— may represent opportunities for increased empowerment as this demographic gains more political influence. Other forms of participation including party activism and holding party position may also present opportunities for more equitable representation, particularly if recurrent practical hindrances are addressed. From a policy angle, the association of local politics with insecurity and violence and the implication of this for women's participation is a clear area that may benefit from comprehensive and thoughtful intervention. In this regard, policy geared at safeguarding political events and expression and holding (particularly political elite) offenders accountable for violence can contribute to redressing gender imbalances in local politics. Likewise, working against equally broad challenges of women's economic marginalization and gender gaps in education can mitigate practical limitations financial and educational gaps may represent for women seeking to pursue political positions. Such comprehensive interventions have the potential to both allow for the reassessment of prohibitive norms regarding women's participation in local politics, and open spaces even beyond the local context for more inclusive politics.

**Sources:**

Resnick, D. (2013). *Urban Poverty and Party Populism in African Democracies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

United Nations. 2014. World Urbanization Prospects. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Retrieved from: <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Highlights/WUP2014-Highlights.pdf>

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<sup>i</sup> The UN World Urbanization Prospects report 2014 revealed that smaller cities of the 300-500 thousand range, similar to the one in which fieldwork was conducted, comprise the majority of Africa's fastest growing urban areas

<sup>ii</sup> Biographical details and the location are anonymized on request of the interviewees.