



SPECIAL REPORT:

THE 2015 NIGERIA ELECTIONS & VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

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This special report, which commemorates the April 2014 kidnapping of hundreds of schoolgirls in Chibok by Boko Haram, focuses on women, politics and violence. The girls' kidnapping, and the continued threat posed by Boko Haram to internal security and regional stability played a significant role in the March 2015 Nigerian elections.

Violence against women in politics is a global scourge that marginalizes women in political and public life. This report examines the troubling, multidimensional phenomenon of violence against women in politics and elections with specific focus on Nigeria, where historic presidential elections were held on March 28, 2015, followed by local elections on April 12.

In the lead up to the elections, which were postponed for six weeks due to the tenuous security situation, there was widespread fear of electoral violence. However, monitors and the international community deemed Nigeria's elections free and fair, an unprecedented peaceful and democratic transition of power.

Despite this commendable achievement, electoral politics in Nigeria is not free from violence, and women face significant gender-based vulnerabilities. In the year prior to the elections, Nigeria experienced more political violence than it had during its previous election cycle in 2011, when over 1000 fatalities were reported. During the presidential election, an attack by the Islamic militant group Boko Haram killed 41 people, including a legislator and two voters, and scared hundreds away from the polls.¹ Additionally, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has reported 66 incidents of violence during the more recent local elections.²

¹ Associated Press, "Boko Haram Kills Dozens During Nigeria Election," *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 28 Mar. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2015.

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/28/boko-haram-attack-nigeria-election_n_6962354.html>

² "Nigeria President-elect's Party Dominates Regional Vote," *Al Jazeera English*, Al Jazeera, 13 Apr. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/nigeria-regional-vote-150413104804393.html>>.

These numbers only reflect the violence that is either reported or visible to the election monitors. Unfortunately, violence against women in politics and in elections often goes unreported and unmonitored, but remains a troubling issue with far-reaching implications for democracy, human rights, gender equality and security. The analysis uses the backdrop of the Nigerian elections to explore the impact of violence against women in politics and elections and next steps to further address this important subject.

Women's Political Participation in Nigeria

Women's political participation in Nigeria is greatly affected by patriarchal values and the pervasive violence rampant in politics. In 2006, Nigeria put forward a National Gender Policy, a framework intended to promote gender equality in order to encourage development and economic growth. The Policy sets a 35% target for women in elected positions by 2015³, but in reality, women's political participation remains alarmingly low.

Leading up to the 2015 elections, Nigeria ranked 133rd in the world for women's political participation. Women currently occupy only nine out of 109 Senate seats and 24 out of 352 seats in the House of Representatives.⁴ Across Nigeria's 36 states, there are no female governors. Although votes are still being tallied for the local elections, it is unlikely that these numbers will change significantly. There was only one (unsuccessful) female candidate for President, and in the 2015 sub-national elections, women comprised:

- 87 out of 380 candidates for governor and deputy governor (22.9 percent)
- 122 out of 747 candidates for Senate (16 percent)
- 267 out of 1774 candidates for the House of Representatives (15 percent)⁵

It is unlikely that Nigeria will reach its 35% goal, given that so few women are running for elected office but this is not surprising considering the political climate. Unlike many other African states, Nigeria lacks a formal quota system, which in certain contexts can serve as a mechanism through which to increase women's political participation. This lack of a quota combined with cultural and structural factors pose often-insurmountable barriers to women's political participation. An elite, wealthy, and powerful group of men have historically run the political system in Nigeria – many of whom have ties to the military – and women often have little or no access to their levels of influence, money, power, or resources. Given the prevalence of violence in Nigerian politics, the high costs of running a campaign, and a climate of sociocultural and religious conservatism, women are dissuaded or prevented from entering formal politics.⁶

³ National Gender Policy, § 2.5.5 (2006). Web. 16 April 2015 <http://www.aacoalition.org/national_policy_women.htm>

⁴ "Women in National Parliaments: World Classification," *Women in Parliaments: World Classification*, Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1 Dec. 2014. Web. 13 April 2015. <<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>>

⁵ Halima Sogbesan, "ANALYSIS: 2015 Elections Hold No Promise for Improved Women Representation in Nigerian Politics," *Premium Times Nigeria*, 26 Mar. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.premiumtimesng.com/features-and-interviews/179136-analysis-2015-elections-hold-no-promise-for-improved-women-representation-in-nigerian-politics.html>>.

⁶ Nwokedi Uche, "Women's Participation in Politics and Gender Equality in Electoral Processes," *Nigeria Women's Trust Fund*, 10 Sept. 2015, Web. 13 April 2015. <<http://nigerianwomentrustfund.org/women-participation-in-politics-and-gender-equality-in-electoral-processes/>>

Violence against Women in Politics and Elections

In the year leading up to the 2015 Nigerian elections, “female politicians and the wives and family members of male political candidates have not only experienced heightened levels of gender-based hate speech, but have in some cases, been directly targeted by thugs and criminals for physical violence, including sexual abuse.”⁷ All of these actions are direct examples of violence against women in politics, a tactic used to reinforce entrenched patriarchal values and undermine the integration and representation of women’s experiences and perspectives into governance processes and institutions. This violence can take many forms including psychological threats, sexual harassment and abuse, and physical abuse and these harms hamper women’s ability to exercise political voice through voting, activism, public dialogue, campaigning and running for or holding office. Within the spectrum of violence against women in politics, gender-based electoral violence can take place before, during or after elections and serves “to delay, impede, intimidate, prevent or eliminate political opponents and/or electoral processes.”⁸

Women can be directly subjected to political violence when they engage in civic discourse, support or join a political party, or vote as a public citizen. For example, when women are seeking public office or as candidates, they face many challenges by the political party systems, including harassment, intimidation, and even assault.⁹ Political parties make it difficult for women to fundraise and get their names on the ballot, often using this type of harassment to bar women from entering politics.

There are many cases of women being harassed and assaulted as they head to the polls and of female poll workers being targeted. Women also often face violence and interference against their political voice in the home, where they may be intimidated, harassed or even abused by their husbands in order to keep them from voting or to force them to vote for a specific candidate. This type of gender-based violence stems from women’s historic social exclusion from positions of decision-making within and beyond the household and, in turn, reinforces patriarchal norms that deny women their rights in the democratic process.¹⁰

More commonly, women are the secondary victims of election-related violence as a result of their family relationships and social affiliations. In other words, women are often targeted not through their actions but because of their associations, such as being the wife, mother or daughter of a political candidate. However, this type of violence is understudied and more difficult to measure. Often they are victims of reprisal attacks, unable to flee their homes due to dependents in their care and other societal obligations. Even when women do participate in protests or demonstrations, they often have babies or small children with them, which makes it more difficult to run away if there is an outbreak of violence.¹¹

⁷ Hannah Blythe, "Gender Violence Spikes in Nigerian Election Run-Up," Web log post, *World Square Blog*, Fund for Peace, 25 Mar. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2015. <<http://library.fundforpeace.org/blog-20150325-nigeriaelection>>.

⁸ Gabrielle Bardall, *Breaking the Mold: Understanding Gender and Electoral Violence*, White Paper, International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 13 Dec. 2011. Web. 13 Apr. 2015, 11.

⁹ Bardall, 11

¹⁰ Bardall, 12

¹¹ Bardall, 11

Violence against women in politics and elections is a complex issue that does not always fall into a clear categorization. For example, during the presidential election, two thousand women from the APC party gathered to peacefully protest misconduct in Rivers State and were forcibly dispersed by the police using teargas.¹² Eno Ben-Udensi, a representative of Pan African Women Projects, a South African NGO observing the election in Rivers state, stated: “We saw the women being [sic] teargassed and we don’t think it was a right thing to do because under the 1995 Beijing conference, women have the right to peaceful protests without any form of molestation or violence.”¹³ It is unclear whether these women were targeted as protesters because they were women, or if the police would have responded to the protest with teargas regardless of gender, but it should be noted that some did interpret this as an attack on women, and we must also examine how the use of teargas may have impacted women differently than it would have impacted men.

Actions Taken to Prevent Violence and to Protect Women

In anticipation of widespread electoral violence, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the All People’s Congress (APC) signed the “Abuja Accord,” which called for peaceful elections and effective management of the outcome in hopes of curbing election-related violence. Just days before the presidential election, Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari met again to urge the public for peace on election day. Keeping the promise of the “Abuja Accord,” President Jonathan promptly conceded the presidential election, which likely staved off post-election violence.

There was also great expectation that Professor Attahiru Jega, the Chairman of INEC, would lead free and fair elections, and INEC took several precautions to quell election-day violence. One major initiative was changing the accreditation and voting process. Voting in Nigeria is a two-step process: first, the voter must be accredited, and then he or she returns to the polls to actually vote later in the day. In 2011, after voters were accredited, they had to physically wait at the polling station until the afternoon in order to place their vote. Huge crowds lingering at the polling stations led to increased violence. In 2015, INEC allowed voters to leave after accreditation and then return to vote in the afternoon. This measure helped to curb potential violence. It also had an unexpected impact on women voters.

Prior to the election, there was a fear by election observers that this measure would decrease female turnout because women would go home after being accredited and due to their household responsibilities, not return to vote. Despite this expectation, according to the expert on women’s political participation, female voter turnout was not adversely affected by the two-step process and may have made it easier for women to vote. Women were able to take care of their responsibilities during the day without having to physically remain at the polling place for extended periods of time.

INEC also indicated its commitment to protecting women throughout the electoral process. Professor Jega stated: “In INEC we believe very strongly that whatever we do,

¹² Associated Foreign Press, "Nigerian Election Protestors Teargassed in Port Harcourt," *Yahoo! News*, Yahoo!, 29 Mar. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2015. <<http://news.yahoo.com/nigerian-election-protesters-teargassed-port-harcourt-001227130.html>>.

¹³ Associated Foreign Press

we have to factor the protection and the defence of women.”¹⁴ Additionally, Nigerian civil society organizations, in coordination with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducted capacity-building trainings on election observation, attempting to introduce gender-sensitive approaches into the public’s consciousness.¹⁵ Furthermore, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) supported independent election monitors Transition Monitor Group (TMG) to do pre-election warning monitoring and election day observation, including a significant component on gender-based electoral violence. TMG was very receptive and as part of this training identified root causes, triggers and specific examples of violence against women around the electoral cycle in Nigeria, an important step in preventing election-related violence.¹⁶

The “Nigerian Women’s Platform for Peaceful Elections” in partnership with UN Women also hosted a Women’s Situation Room to ensure that elections were peaceful and that women and youth played a substantive role in sustaining peace. The situation room features a toll-free number that citizens can call to reach 40 trained operators in order to report any hindrance to women’s participation in the elections. Representatives from INEC and the Nigerian Police Force were also available to help mitigate reported cases. Additionally, 300 female monitors were sent to various states to observe the elections.¹⁷

Future Recommendations

Despite the efforts taken by various groups in Nigeria to mitigate violence against women in elections, more must be done to protect women at all stages of the electoral process. First, according to Caroline Hubbard, Senior Program Manager for Gender, Women and Democracy at NDI, it is critical to identify indicators for and monitor early warning signs that could forecast the potential for conflict that would have a distinct impact on women or that are rooted in gender norms. These indicators relate to both the underlying causes as well as triggers of electoral violence and if caught and reported in early stages, can be used to anticipate and prevent violence at all phases of the electoral process. Second, observers must be trained adequately in order to incorporate gender-sensitive approaches to monitoring elections. Third, police and security forces must receive adequate training on gender-based violence and be well-equipped to ensure women’s safety and security.

If women cannot fully participate in the political future of their country, democracy is at risk. While there is much to praise about Nigeria’s free, fair and peaceful elections, women’s ability to exercise political voice beyond this milestone as citizens, activists, leaders and public servants will be the ultimate test of whether real progress has been made.

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¹⁴ “INEC Will Not Condone Women Marginalization in Electoral Process,” INEC Nigeria, 17 Nov. 2014. Web. 16 April 2015. <<https://www.facebook.com/inecnigeria/posts/902705946415462>>

¹⁵ “Observing Elections from a Gender Perspective; UNDP Builds Capacity of Women CSOs,” *UNDP in Nigeria*, United Nations Development Programme, 3 Feb. 2015. Web. 16 April 2015 <<http://www.ng.undp.org/content/nigeria/en/home/presscenter/articles/2015/02/03/observing-elections-from-a-gender-perspective-undp-builds-capacity-of-women-csos-.htm>>

¹⁶ “Nigeria,” National Democratic Institute, Web. 20 April 2015, <<https://www.ndi.org/nigeria>>

¹⁷ “Elections Day at the Women’s Situation Room,” *UN Women West and Central Africa*. UN Women. 31 March 2015. Web. 13 April 2015. <<http://www.unwomenwestandcentralafrica.com/news1/elections-day-at-the-womens-situation-room>>