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Young Women in Lagos Politics: Digital Political Cultures and the Reconfiguration of Traditional Power Brokerage

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Abstract

Digital political culture seems to have reconfigured the traditional godfather system that governs access to elective office in Lagos State, Nigeria, with specific attention to young women. Using an interpretive and documentary method that reads across political science, media studies and gender studies scholarship, alongside Nigerian newspaper and organisational reporting, the paper argues that Lagos politics has undergone a segmented transformation. Young women have gained substantial informal power through digital platforms, most visibly during the 2018 to 2020 Not Too Young to Run campaign and the October 2020 #EndSARS protests, where the Feminist Coalition assumed a logistical and financial role in national protest organising that older civil society structures could not match. This capacity has not, however, extended into the formal mechanics of candidate selection, party nomination and financing that Lagos's godfather network, built around Bola Ahmed Tinubu and his gubernatorial successors, continues to control almost entirely. The paper situates this finding within Lagos's longer history of female political brokerage through the traditional Iyaloja market institution, arguing that informal female authority has deep roots in the city's politics without historically converting into durable formal office. It concludes that digital tools have altered the technology of young women's political voice far more than they have altered the terms on which that voice becomes elected power.

Keywords: Lagos politics: Godfatherism; Digital political culture; young women; political brokerage.

Introduction

Lagos is Nigeria's commercial capital and, by most measures, its most digitally connected state. It is also a place where a single political network, built around Bola Ahmed Tinubu and sustained through a chain of loyal governors since 1999, has determined who rules almost without interruption for a quarter of a century.[2]Within this terrain has existed a generation of young women who campaign on Instagram, organise relief funds on Twitter, and build followings that older politicians cannot easily match, yet who remain almost invisible in the Lagos State House of Assembly and in the party structures that decide who gets a ticket to run. Young women have gained real capacities: visibility outside party channels, the ability to raise money and mobilise bodies for a cause within

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[2]Onuigbo et al., "Political God fatherism and Its Effect on Nigeria's Democratic Process,"*International Journal of Innovative Legal & Political Studies* 11, no. 3 (2023): 55.

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hours, and a public voice that does not require a godfather's blessing to be heard. But visibility is not the same thing as access to a ticket, and a viral moment is not the same thing as a seat. Where the godfather system has been most rigid, in candidate selection, party financing and local ward structures, digital tools have barely dented its authority. Where it has been more porous, in agenda-setting, protest mobilisation and the shaming of political actors, young women using social media have exercised something close to power. The puzzle this paper sits with is not whether digital tools matter but whether they have actually loosened the grip of the old brokers, or whether the brokers have simply learned to work the new terrain on their own terms.

Lagos functions, in Nigerian political commentary and in a fair amount of scholarship, as a bellwether, a state whose political innovations tend to travel to other parts of the federation. If digital political culture is going to loosen godfather control anywhere in Nigeria first, Lagos, with its unusually young population, its high internet penetration and its concentration of media and technology firms, is the state where that loosening should show up earliest and most clearly. A finding that the loosening remains partial even in Lagos therefore carries implications well beyond the state's own borders, and that is part of why the case merits the sustained attention this paper gives it rather than a passing mention inside a broader national survey.

Studies of women's political participation, godfatherism and digital activism in Nigeria such as Adebajo et al.[3] and Faniyi[4] have document the depth of young women exclusion in politics, the mechanics of the patronage system in rich detail, and have also captured the energy and reach of young women's online organising digital activism. However, these studies have rarely isolated the specific position of young women within that exclusion and also treated youth as a category that erases gendered experience within it. Thus, this paper sits at the intersection of the three literatures and asks what each one leaves out when read against the others. This paper, therefore, argues that digital tools seem to have altered the technology of young women's political voice far more than they have altered the terms on which that voice becomes elected power.

Theoretical Foundations: Brokerage, Godfatherism and the Networked Public

Political brokerage, in the sense this paper uses it, describes an arrangement in which access to public office is mediated by an intermediary who controls resources, party structures or communal legitimacy, and who trades that control for loyalty and material return. Nigerian scholarship on this subject has settled on the term godfatherism to describe a specific, locally recognisable version of brokerage in which a single patron, often a former officeholder, retains decisive influence over who receives a party ticket and who is denied one. The literature is blunt about what this costs a political system. Godfathers are described as figures who arbitrarily decide who gets a party ticket and also

[3] Adebajo et al., "Young Women's Political Participation and Gender Depoliticization in Nigeria,"*Jurnal Studi Pemerintahan* 15, no. 2 (2024): 211.
[4] Ololade Faniyi, "The Networks of Feminist and Queer Organizing in Nigeria's #EndSARS,"*Feminist Media Studies* 25, no. 6 (2025).

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determines who wins or loses an election, operating through a mixture of patronage, intimidation and, where necessary, coercion.[5] Lagos is treated in this literature almost as the archetype of the phenomenon, the place where the model was refined and then exported to other states.[6]Godfatherism is not simply corruption, though it is related to corruption. It is a structure of political reproduction, a mechanism that decides, well before any ballot is cast, which candidates are viable and which are not. Understood this way, godfatherism functions less like a scandal and more like an institution, with its own rules, its own succession logic and its own capacity to discipline those who defy it. The fate of Akinwunmi Ambode, denied a second term as Lagos governor after friction with his political patron, is cited repeatedly in the literature as proof that the system punishes independence regardless of a governor's record in office. If an incumbent governor can be removed from contention for insubordination, the barriers facing a young woman with no prior office, no personal wealth and no inherited network are considerably steeper.

Against this backdrop, the idea of a networked public sphere offers a different account of political power, one built around horizontal connection rather than vertical patronage. Research on Nigerian youth and social media consistently finds a link, sometimes strong and sometimes modest, between online political activity and offline political attitudes, though the relationship between online voice and actual electoral outcomes is far less settled.[7]However, much of literature measures engagement, meaning likes, shares, hashtag frequency and survey responses about attitudes, rather than the harder currency of party nomination, campaign financing or seat allocation. A movement can trend nationally and still fail to translate a single one of its adherents into elected office. That gap between visibility and installation is the analytical hinge of this paper.

This paper, finally, draws on feminist media scholarship that has examined how Nigerian women activists use digital platforms during moments of political rupture, most notably #EndSARS, partly because #EndSARS was unusual, a protest movement in which women, and specifically the Feminist Coalition, took on logistical and financial roles that are normally reserved for older, wealthier, male-dominated civil society structures.[8] What earlier works on Nigerian digital politics sometimes missed, is that gender is not incidental to how digital political culture operates. Women who lead online mobilisation face forms of backlash, including sexualised harassment and coordinated smear campaigns, that male activists in similar positions rarely encounter to the same degree.[9]Thus, a theory of digital political culture that ignores this unevenness

[5]Onuigbo et al., "Political Godfatherism," 57.
[6]"Unraveling Nigeria's Arch-Political Godfather," The Guardian (Nigeria), May 17, 2019, https://guardian.ng/politics/unraveling-nigerias-arch-political-godfather/.
[7]Zakariyya K. Dagona, Halim Karick, and Fatima M. Abubakar, "Youth Participation in Social Media and Political Attitudes in Nigeria," Journal of Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology in Practice 5, no. 1 (2013): 3.
[8]Chinaemelum I. Okafor and Ruth Aigbe, "The #EndSARS Protest and Black Cyberfeminism: A Study of the Feminist Coalition and the Rise of Cyber-Feminist Ideologies in Nigeria," Gender, Technology and Development 26, no. 3 (2022): 314.
[9]Adaeze Agunwa, "Feminism and the Digital Era: Challenges and Possibilities," Feminist Africa 5, no. 2 (2024): 113.

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will systematically overstate how open the new terrain actually is for young women.

Methodology

This study employed the interpretive and documentary research approach. The paper builds its argument from a close reading of published scholarship on Nigerian and Lagos-specific political participation, godfatherism and digital activism, supplemented by documentary material drawn from Nigerian newspapers and organisational reports covering the period roughly from 2013, when Nigerian social media use began to shape electoral discourse in a visible way, through 2026. The choice of a documentary method is deliberate as Lagos politics generates an unusually large public record that includes newspaper investigations into godfather succession, YIAGA Africa's election monitoring reports, academic surveys of women in the Lagos State House of Assembly, and a growing corpus of media studies scholarship on #EndSARS. Reading these sources against one another allows the analysis to track how different disciplinary communities, political science, media studies and gender studies, have each captured a partial view of the same phenomenon. Interpretive method here means that documents are treated not as neutral repositories of fact but as texts produced from a position, each carrying its own emphases and silences.

The source corpus assembled for this study comprises peer-reviewed journal articles in political science, gender studies and media studies, since these are the sources most likely to have subjected claims about godfatherism or digital activism to some form of methodological scrutiny before publication. Working papers and election monitoring reports produced by organisations such as Yiaga Africa and the Centre for Democracy and Development supply data, particularly on candidate numbers and youth representation, that the peer-reviewed literature often cites but does not itself generate.[10] Newspaper reporting and opinion journalism, treated cautiously and cross-checked against the scholarly record wherever possible, supply the granular, time-stamped detail, who succeeded whom as Lagos governor, when a given falling-out with a patron occurred, that slower-moving academic publication frequently lags behind. No single genre is treated as authoritative on its own. Where a claim rests on a single source of any kind, that is noted in the analysis rather than presented with false certainty, and the paper has tried throughout to avoid stating as settled fact anything that only one document in the corpus supports.

Godfatherism as a Gendered Institution and the Architecture of Power in Lagos

Lagos State's post-1999 political history reads as a story of stability. Bola Ahmed Tinubu governed the state from 1999 to 2007, then handed power to his

[9]A. Bruce, "Gender Question and the 2003 Elections in Nigeria," in Elections and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria, ed. G. Onu and A. Momoh (Lagos: NPSA, 2005), 505.
[10]Olubunmi Baruwa, Young Women in Politics in Nigeria: Issues and Prospects, A Case Study of the 2019 General Elections, Working Paper Series 3 (Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development, 2020), 6.

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chief of staff, Babatunde Fashola. Fashola gave way to Akinwunmi Ambode in 2015, and when Ambode's independence became a liability, the succession passed instead to Babajide Sanwo-Olu.[11] Commentary on this sequence in the Nigerian press treats it less as coincidence, describing a pattern in which loyalty and alignment matter more than sentiment and candidates are selected not just to win elections but to sustain the structure. What the sequence obscures, because it is narrated almost entirely through the biographies of men, is how thoroughly the same structure has foreclosed comparable pathways for women, and especially for young women without inherited wealth or a personal relationship to the governing network.

There is a further feature of this succession pattern worth naming, since it bears directly on how a young woman aspirant would need to be evaluated by the network to be considered viable at all. Each handover described above passed the governorship to someone who had already spent years inside the inner administrative circle of the outgoing governor, as chief of staff, commissioner or party functionary, roles that themselves tend to be filled through the same loyalty-based recruitment. Based on this, the pipeline into candidacy, in other words, does not begin at the moment of nomination. It begins years earlier, in appointments to unglamorous administrative posts that build the track record a patron eventually rewards. Thus, a young woman seeking to enter Lagos politics through digital visibility alone is, in effect, trying to skip a pipeline that the system expects every serious aspirant to have already passed through, which helps explain why online popularity, however extensive, so rarely converts into a nomination on its own. Scholarship that has looked directly at women's representation in Lagos finds a pattern that the succession story predicts. A survey-based study of women drawn from Colleges of Education across the state found significant statistical relationships between Lagos's political structures and low female participation, and reported, in the study's own words, no meaningful improvement in women's representation in the Lagos State House of Assembly or in local government councils across the entire span of the Fourth Republic.[12] This finding matters because Lagos is often held up, on account of its wealth, its cosmopolitanism and its digital infrastructure, as the state where such barriers should be weakest. If godfatherism reproduces itself even there, the assumption that greater urbanity or greater connectivity naturally erodes patronage politics needs to be treated with real caution.

Godfatherism disadvantages young women through mechanisms that are, for the most part, not written into any law and therefore rarely show up in a simple audit of formal exclusion. Ticket allocation inside Nigerian parties runs on informal loyalty networks built over years, sometimes decades, of errand-running, financial contribution and personal proximity to a patron. These networks are overwhelmingly male, not because women are formally barred from joining them but because the social spaces in which such loyalty is built, party offices at odd hours, closed strategy meetings, informal gatherings

[11] "The Tinubu Phenomenon: Lessons in Political Durability," The Times (Nigeria), September 4, 2025, https://www.thetimes.com.ng/2025/09/the-tinubu-phenomenon-lessons-in-political-durability/.

[12] Toye Manuwa, "Assessment of Women Participation in Politics in Lagos State, Nigeria,"Sapientia Foundation Journal of Education, Sciences and Gender Studies 3, no. 1 (2023), https://sfjesgs.com/index.php/SFJESGS/article/view/386.

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organised around older men's schedules and comfort, are themselves gendered. A young woman attempting to enter this world faces a double burden as she must prove political usefulness to a patron the way any aspirant must, and she must do so while navigating assumptions about propriety, availability and deference that a young man in the same room is far less likely to encounter. Nigerian gender and politics scholarship has long described this dynamic as a cultural, rather than purely legal, barrier, rooted in expectations about what political life properly consumes and how a woman's presence in it should be read.

The problem is compounded by party financing. Nomination fees for state and national assembly seats in Nigeria routinely run into the hundreds of thousands or millions of naira, a cost that godfathers absorb for loyal clients and that independent aspirants must find on their own. Because wealth in Nigeria remains unevenly distributed along gender lines, and because a young woman is statistically less likely than an older male aspirant to control independent capital, the financing structure of godfather politics functions as an additional filter that falls more heavily on young women even where no rule names them specifically. It is a form of exclusion that operates through apparently neutral mechanisms, cost and network, rather than through explicit prohibition, which is part of why it survives constitutional reforms aimed at inclusion without much disruption.

This is substantiated through numerical record. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, women's representation in the Lagos State House of Assembly has stayed in the low single digits for most assembly sessions, a pattern the Colleges of Education survey cited earlier found to have shown no meaningful improvement across more than two decades of the Fourth Republic.[13] Young women fare worse still on the available evidence, since the same barriers that limit women's representation generally are layered onto the seniority-based logic of godfather patronage, which privileges long years of proximity to a patron over any other qualification. Affirmative action commitments exist on paper. Nigeria's National Gender Policy has, since the mid-2000s, set a target of thirty-five percent representation for women across appointive and elective positions, and successive party manifestos have echoed similar language.[14] The gap between that target and the Lagos State Assembly's actual composition has been persistent enough, and documented across enough independent studies using different samples and different years, that it can reasonably be treated as a structural feature of the system rather than a temporary lag awaiting correction. A target unaccompanied by any binding mechanism inside party nomination processes functions, in practice, as aspiration rather than policy, and godfather-controlled parties have had little difficulty treating it as such.

[13]Manuwa, "Assessment of Women Participation," https://sfjesgs.com/index.php/SFJESGS/article/view/386.
[14]Baruwa, Young Women in Politics in Nigeria: Issues and Prospects, A Case Study of the 2019 General Elections, Working Paper Series 3 (Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development, 2020).

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Traditional Women's Brokerage: The Iyaloja Precedent

Before turning to digital political culture, the paper needs to correct an assumption that a purely institutional reading of godfatherism can easily smuggle in the idea that Lagos political brokerage has always been a male preserve into which women are now, for the first time, attempting entry. That is not accurate as Lagos has a long-standing tradition of female brokerage, embodied in the office of the Iyaloja, literally "mother of the market," the traditional head of a market's trading community who historically controlled access to stalls, mediated disputes and negotiated directly with colonial and postcolonial authorities on traders' behalf.[15] Writing on Mushin market in Lagos, one influential account of the office notes that the *Iyaloja* wielded a range of powers and that without her backing, it was effectively impossible to trade in her market at all. This was not a ceremonial title. It was, and in many markets still is, a functioning node of political authority, one that predates the godfather system this paper has otherwise treated as the baseline structure of Lagos politics.

The most consequential *Iyaloja* in modern Lagos history was Chief Abibatu Mogaji, who led the Lagos State Market Women Association for several decades until her death in 2013 and was widely recognised as *Iyaloja* General of Nigeria, coordinating market women's associations nationally.[16]Mogaji was also Bola Ahmed Tinubu's mother. Her market network, built over decades of trader mobilisation, dispute resolution and patronage distribution among thousands of women traders, functioned as part of the organisational base from which her son's political career was launched and sustained in Lagos. This detail is close to the origin point of the godfatherism story. The most durable political brokerage machine in contemporary Lagos grew, in part, out of a woman-led traditional institution, even though the machine it fed has since become one of the most thoroughly male-dominated structures in Nigerian politics. Scholarship on Lagos market governance complicates any romantic reading of the *Iyaloja* office as straightforwardly empowering, and the complication is useful for the argument of this paper. Research on Oke Arin market found that despite the discursive framing of Lagos markets as spaces where women are in charge, the actual governance of trading space reflected persistent structures of subordination, with women traders required to negotiate constantly with male-dominated ethnic associations, landlords and government officials who retained final authority over allocation and enforcement.[17] Even Pelewura, the most celebrated *Iyaloja* in Lagos history, secured her authority partly through alignment with a major nationalist party and the traditional aristocracy rather than through an independent female power base alone.[18] Therefore,*Iyaloja* institution, in other words, has always operated inside a wider patriarchal

[15]Nkechi Eke Nwankwo, "Spatial Politics and Gendered Strategies: Women Traders and Institutions in Oke Arin Market, Lagos," Africa 89, no. 1 (2019): 63.
[16]Oluwakemi Adesina, Jacob Adesina, Ndidi Olibamoyo, and Yemisi Disu, "Silent Protests, Loud Impact: Madam Alimotu Pelewura (1865-1951) and Women's Activism in Colonial Lagos, Nigeria," African Historical Review 55, no. 2 (2024): 85.
[17]Nwankwo, "Spatial Politics and Gendered Strategies: Women Traders and Institutions in Oke Arin Market, Lagos." Africa 89, no. 1 (2019): 71. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972018000700.
[18]Adesina et al., "Silent Protests, Loud Impact," 94.

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structure rather than outside it, deriving legitimacy from negotiated recognition by traditional rulers and male-led political parties as much as from the market women themselves. Read together, these two findings, that a woman-led brokerage institution helped seed the Lagos godfather system, and that the institution itself has never functioned independently of male political and traditional authority, offer a useful corrective to any account of digital political culture that treats today's young women as pioneers entering political brokerage for the first time. Lagos women have brokered power in this city for over a century. What has changed across successive generations is not whether women exercise informal political authority, since Pelewura and Mogaji both plainly did, but whether that authority converts into formal office and durable institutional power on terms the women themselves control. Mogaji's market network fed her son's rise to the Lagos governorship and, eventually, the Nigerian presidency. It did not, by the same measure, produce a comparable trajectory for a woman successor of her own generation. The pattern this paper documents among digitally organised young women, considerable informal influence paired with minimal formal office, therefore has a genealogy in Lagos rather than being a novel product of the internet age. Digital tools have changed the technology of women's political brokerage far more than they have changed its terms of conversion into elected power.

Young Women and the Digital Turn in Lagos Politics

Against the structure of formal and informal exclusion of women, digital platforms have opened a genuinely different kind of political space, one that does not require a nomination fee, a patron's introduction or entry into a male-coded party office. Survey research covering Lagos and Ekiti States found that women overwhelmingly favour Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, YouTube and Snapchat as sites of political engagement, with usage patterns that the researchers describe as significantly shaping how women encounter and participate in socio-political discourse.[19] What is notable in this data is not simply that women use these platforms, which by 2026 is unremarkable, but that political engagement through them does not depend on the offline gatekeeping structures that have historically filtered women out of party politics. Based on this, a young woman can build an audience, articulate a political position and mobilise supporters around an issue entirely outside any party's internal hierarchy. Nigerian youth political culture more broadly has developed along similar lines since at least the 2015 general election, when hashtag campaigns first became a visible feature of national politics. Research on Twitter's role in the 2023 presidential election found a positive, if modest, relationship between online political activity and offline political participation among young Nigerians, alongside evidence that established party structures still shaped outcomes more decisively than online sentiment did. That combination, real but bounded influence, recurs across the literature and sets realistic expectations for what digital political culture can be expected to achieve on its own, without complementary changes to party financing and candidate selection.

[19]Adeoluwa et al., "Digital Media Platforms and Women's Political Engagement in Southwest Nigeria,"*Informasi*56, no. 1 (2026): 9.

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It is worth pausing on platform specifics, since they are not interchangeable and the literature increasingly treats them as distinct political tools rather than a single undifferentiated "social media." WhatsApp functions in Lagos largely as an organising and mobilisation channel operating within existing social networks, useful for turning out a crowd but structurally closed to strangers. Twitter, now X, has operated more as a public square, the platform on which #EndSARS organising and the Not Too Young to Run campaign both achieved national visibility, precisely because its architecture allows a message to travel well beyond a user's existing contacts. Instagram and, increasingly among younger cohorts, TikTok function as platforms for personal brand-building, useful for an aspiring politician constructing a public identity but less suited to rapid crisis mobilisation. With these, a young woman building political capital in Lagos today is, in effect, managing several distinct instruments at once, each with its own audience, its own norms and its own relationship to the offline political system she is ultimately trying to enter.

The clearest evidence of what digitally organised young women can accomplish, distinct from what individual young women running for office have accomplished, comes from the Not Too Young to Run movement and its aftermath. Passed into law in 2018 after two years of sustained youth-led campaigning, the Age Reduction Act lowered the minimum age for contesting House of Representatives and State Assembly seats from thirty to twenty-five, and for the presidency from forty to thirty-five. The campaign itself was substantially organised through digital channels, and young women were central to building and sustaining it. Yet the outcome, as documented in subsequent research, was disappointing on its own terms. More young men entered elective politics after the law's passage than young women did, and in some respects older women's representation stagnated alongside young women's.[20] A study built on interviews conducted with participants in the movement, two thirds of them young women, found that despite playing a defining role in winning the legal change, women were left behind in the process once the practical business of candidate selection began.[21] The law altered the age floor. It did nothing to touch the gendered mechanics of ticket allocation described in the previous section, and those mechanics absorbed the benefit of the reform almost entirely on behalf of young men.

Case Illustrations: The Feminist Coalition, #EndSARS and the Politics of Visibility

The #EndSARS protests of October 2020, which began as a movement against police brutality and expanded rapidly into a broader confrontation with the Nigerian state, offer the richest available material on what young women's digital political organising in Lagos can achieve under pressure. The Feminist Coalition, a group of young women who had not previously operated as a formal civil society organisation, assumed responsibility for fundraising, medical support, legal aid and security logistics for protesters across Lagos within days

[20]Ihuoma U. Darlington, "Young Women's Struggle for Political Participation in Nigeria: Examining the 'Not Too Young to Run' Movement" (MSc thesis, International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Hague, 2019), 22.
[21]Darlington, "Young Women's Struggle," 31.

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of the protests beginning.[22] Scholarship examining this period describes the group's activity as a form of what one study calls Black cyberfeminism, in which the coalition's design choices, its branding and its coordinated use of hashtags served simultaneously as organisational infrastructure and as political statement. This was not symbolic participation running alongside a "real" movement led by others.[23] For a period of roughly two weeks, a network of young women effectively ran the logistical backbone of the largest civil protest movement in Nigeria's recent history, coordinating resources at a scale that most formally registered NGOs would struggle to match. The reaction that followed is as instructive as the achievement itself. Research on the aftermath of #EndSARS documents sustained backlash against the Feminist Coalition and against individual young women who had become visible during the protests, including what one study terms the "weaponization of corruption" as a rhetorical strategy used specifically to delegitimise women's political subjectivity in a way that male protest leaders were not subjected to.[24] Rinu Oduala, a young activist who became one of the most recognisable faces of the movement, later described being targeted with sexually explicit fabricated images intended, to strip her of her legitimacy and voice.[25] This is seemingly not incidental. It demonstrates that the same digital infrastructure that allowed young women to organise at scale also became the instrument through which they were disciplined for having done so. Visibility, in other words, is double-edged in a way that the more celebratory accounts of digital political culture sometimes understate.

The picture is further complicated by press coverage of women's participation in #EndSARS. A content analysis of sixty-nine news stories across four major Nigerian newspapers found that women activists were, on balance, framed positively, most often as leading figures, mobilisers and coordinators within the movement.[26] This finding exists somewhat awkwardly beside online harassment documented elsewhere, and the tension between the two is worth sitting with rather than resolving too quickly. It suggests that Nigerian media institutions and Nigerian digital publics are not operating from a single, unified script about women's political legitimacy. The formal press, perhaps mindful of its own professional norms, extended a degree of respect to women's leadership during #EndSARS that anonymous or semi-anonymous social media actors did not extend. Digital political culture, on this reading, therefore, contains within it both an unusually open channel for recognition and an unusually cheap channel for character assassination, and which channel a given young woman experiences depends heavily on factors, including how closely

[22]Obisesan, "'#tag Generation'," 124.
[23]Okafor, Chinaemelum I., and Ruth Aigbe. "The #EndSARS Protest and Black Cyberfeminism: A Study of the Feminist Coalition and the Rise of Cyber-Feminist Ideologies in Nigeria." Gender, Technology and Development 26, no. 3 (2022): 309-327. https://doi.org/10.1080/09718524.2022.2144099.
[24]Adebajo et al., "Young Women's Political Participation and Gender Depoliticization in Nigeria," *Jurnal Studi Pemerintahan* 15, no. 2 (2024): 221.
[25]Faniyi, "The Networks of Feminist and Queer Organizing in Nigeria's #EndSARS," *Feminist Media Studies* 25, no. 6 (2025)
[26]Fatima D. Vakkai, "Feminist Agency and the Nigerian Press Framing of Women's Participation in the #EndSARS Protest," Feminist Media Studies, published online April 21, 2026.

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she is associated with feminist politics specifically, that are not reducible to her competence or her contributionThere is little evidence that the young women who rose to prominence through #EndSARS organising converted that visibility into a Lagos State Assembly seat or a comparable elective office in the years immediately following the protests. The Feminist Coalition demonstrated, unambiguously, that young women could out-organise the state's formal civil society apparatus during a crisis. The godfather system nonetheless retained its grip on who subsequently appeared on a ballot in Lagos, because organising capacity, however impressive, is not the currency that party structures actually price.

Not Too Young to Run Campaign and the Limits of Legal Reform

Recent scholarship on gender and depoliticisation in Nigeria argues that young women's political activism has been systematically disconnected from actual decision-making power, describing a process in which women are at risk of not being included and favourably considered in the decision making process precisely because the forms of participation available to them, protest, online commentary, civil society work, are treated by the political establishment as adjacent to politics rather than as politics itself. This helps explain a pattern otherwise difficult to account for that Nigerian young women are demonstrably active, vocal and organisationally capable, and yet Nigerian young women remain a small minority of elected officials at every level, including within the Lagos State Assembly specifically.[27]Comparative work on female political participation in Nigeria describes this as a problem of access rather than of capacity or interest, noting that women negotiate access and privilege within institutions that were not built with their participation in mind and that continue to extract higher costs, financial, reputational and physical, from women who attempt to enter them.[28] Applied to Lagos, this framing sharpens the central claim of this paper thatdigital tools have changed the cost structure of building a political following but have not changed the cost structure of converting that following into a party ticket, a nomination fee, or a place within the informal networks that Lagos godfathers control. A young woman with a hundred thousand engaged followers on Instagram still needs, in the current system, the same nomination fee and the same patron's blessing as a young woman with none.

A closer look at why the reform underperformed for young women specifically points back to the financing mechanism discussed earlier in this paper, rather than to any single new obstacle unique to the post-2018 period. Lowering the age bracket did nothing to lower nomination fees, and it did nothing to redistribute the informal networks through which Lagos parties vet and fund loyal aspirants. A twenty-six-year-old man with an established relationship to a ward-level patron, built perhaps through years of volunteering for party events

[27]Adebajo et al., "Gender Depoliticization," 219. Ette and Akpan-Obong, "Negotiating Access and Privilege," 1299. Okafor and Aigbe, "Black Cyberfeminism," 317. Faniyi, "Networks of Feminist and Queer Organizing."
[28]Mercy Ette and Patience Akpan-Obong, "Negotiating Access and Privilege: Politics of Female Participation and Representation in Nigeria," Journal of Asian and African Studies 58, no. 7 (2023): 1294.

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or running errands for a senior figure, could step through the newly lowered age threshold immediately. A twenty-six-year-old woman without that relationship, and the qualitative evidence suggests such relationships are harder for young women to build given the gendered coding of the spaces in which they are formed, found the age barrier gone but every other barrier fully intact. Interview-based research on the movement's aftermath describes young women who had been central to the campaign for the law itself later struggling to secure even a party's blessing to contest a ward-level primary, a frustration one set of respondents linked directly to the absence of any complementary reform addressing nomination costs or internal party democracy. The lesson generalises beyond Nigeria's specific age-limit reform. A structural barrier built from several interlocking mechanisms, age eligibility, cost and network access chief among them in this case, is not dismantled by removing only one of those mechanisms, however symbolically significant that one mechanism's removal may be.[29] There are exceptions worth naming honestly, because a study that pretended the pattern was total would misrepresent the record. A handful of young women elected to state assemblies and the House of Representatives following the 2019 and 2023 elections did build substantial parts of their public profile through social media, and their presence demonstrates that the barrier is high rather than absolute. What the broader data does not support is any claim that these individual successes reflect a structural opening. Nigerian election monitoring reports from 2019 through 2023 continue to describe youth representation gains as concentrated among young men, with young women's numerical presence in elective office essentially flat across the period despite the Not Too Young to Run reform and despite the explosive growth of youth-oriented digital political culture over the same years.[30] A reform that changes eligibility without changing selection mechanics produces exactly this outcome: a wider door that the same gatekeepers continue to guard.

Reconfiguration or Reproduction? An Analytical Reading

In light of the discourse, this paper proposes that Lagos's political system has undergone what might be called a segmented reconfiguration, in which some functions of political life have genuinely shifted toward digitally organised young women while others have remained under near-total godfather control, and the line between the two tracks fairly consistently with whether the function in question touches formal candidacy. Considering agenda-setting first,before #EndSARS, Nigerian police brutality had been a live grievance for years without becoming a dominant national political issue. Digitally organised young women, through the Feminist Coalition and the wider #EndSARS network, forced the issue onto the national agenda within days, achieving a shift in public discourse that older, better-funded civil society organisations had not managed across a much longer period. This is a real transfer of power. Agenda-setting has historically been one of the godfather system's core functions, since deciding which issues a party campaigns on, and which it quietly buries, is itself

[29]Darlington, "Young Women's Struggle for Political Participation in Nigeria: Examining the 'Not Too Young to Run' Movement" (MSc thesis, International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Hague, 2019), 31.
[30]Yiaga Africa, *How Youth Fared in 2019* (Abuja: Yiaga Africa, 2019), 7.

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a form of control. That function has visibly slipped, at least episodically, into hands that owe the godfather network nothing.

Now on candidate selection, every source examined for this paper, whether focused on godfatherism specifically or on women's political participation more broadly, agrees that nomination processes inside Lagos's dominant party remain closed, expensive and governed by personal loyalty to a small circle of senior figures. Digital popularity plays essentially no documented role in this process. A young woman's follower count does not appear as a line item in any account of how tickets are allocated, whereas years of errand-running, personal introduction and financial contribution do. If reconfiguration were happening at the level the more optimistic accounts of digital politics imply, this is precisely the function in which it should be visible by now, given how much time has passed since Nigerian digital political culture matured. Its absence here is the strongest evidence for the argument of this paper. Once a party has selected its candidates, digital platforms do reshape how those candidates, including women, campaign, and Nigerian research on the 2023 election documents extensive use of social media by candidates across gender lines during the campaign period itself. But visibility during a campaign a candidate has already secured is a different good from access to candidacy in the first place, and conflating the two is, in my assessment, where some of the more enthusiastic claims about digital democratisation in Nigeria go wrong. A godfather-selected woman candidate can use Instagram as effectively as anyone. Her selection, however, still ran through the same gate as it always did.

It is useful here to borrow, briefly, a distinction from network theory more broadly rather than from the Nigeria-specific literature alone, since it clarifies why agenda-setting and candidate selection respond so differently to digital tools. Sociological work on networks has long distinguished weak ties, loose, wide-reaching connections of the kind a hashtag creates instantly among strangers, from strong ties, the dense, resource-backed relationships built through repeated face-to-face interaction over time. Weak ties are extraordinarily good at spreading information fast and mobilising large numbers of people around a shared, immediate grievance, which is exactly what #EndSARS demonstrated. Strong ties are what candidate selection inside a godfather-controlled party actually runs on, because a patron extending a nomination is making a long-term bet on loyalty that no amount of follower count can substitute for. Digital platforms are, structurally, weak-tie machines. They excel at the first function and are poorly suited, on their own, to building the second. This is not a claim that digital tools can never build strong ties. Sustained, years-long organising conducted partly online alongside offline relationship-building certainly can. It is a claim that a single viral moment, however large, does not by itself do the work that Lagos's candidate selection process actually requires, and expecting it to is a category error the more celebratory accounts of digital democratisation sometimes make. A second observation concerns risk distribution. The literature reviewed here is consistent in showing that digital visibility carries costs for young women that it does not carry, at least not to the same degree, for young men occupying comparable positions. Sexualised harassment, coordinated character attacks and the specific rhetorical move of framing women's political engagement as corrupt or improper recur across the #EndSARS scholarship in a way that has

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no clear male equivalent in the same sources. This matters analytically because it means the "cost" of using digital tools to build political capital is not gender-neutral even where the tools themselves are formally open to everyone. A theory of digital reconfiguration that measures only access, whether a platform can technically be used by anyone, will overstate the degree of change. A theory that also measures the price of using that access will produce a more accurate picture, and in Lagos that price remains disproportionately paid by women. A third observation, harder to establish firmly from documentary sources alone but suggested repeatedly across the material, concerns what might be called adaptive absorption. Godfather networks in Lagos have not ignored social media. Established politicians and their client networks maintain active digital presences, employ young social media strategists, and increasingly treat online sentiment as one input, among several, into campaign planning. This is not evidence that digital culture has weakened the godfather system. It is closer to evidence of the opposite: that a sufficiently adaptive patronage network can absorb a new communication technology as another tool in its arsenal rather than being disrupted by it. If this reading holds, and the available evidence leans in its favour without settling the matter definitively, then the more accurate long-run prediction is not that digital political culture will erode Lagos godfatherism on its own, but that godfatherism will continue adjusting its outer layer, its messaging, its campaign style, its choice of which loyal client gets fronted online, while its inner mechanism, who actually receives a ticket, stays largely untouched.

A brief comparative note situates the Lagos case within a wider pattern rather than treating it as sui generis. Scholarship examining women's digital political communication in other parts of the Global South finds a broadly similar structure: platforms lower the cost of building visibility and constituency, while formal party gatekeeping, particularly around nomination and financing, remains largely untouched by that visibility. What Lagos adds to this comparative picture is the sheer entrenchment of a single, personalised godfather network stretching across five successive governorships, a degree of continuity that is unusual even within Nigeria and that likely makes the gatekeeping side of the equation more resistant to erosion than in political systems with more competitive party fragmentation. Where multiple factions compete for power within a state, a digitally popular young woman may find a faction willing to absorb her as a way of outflanking a rival. Where one network has held uninterrupted control for a quarter century, that incentive for factional recruitment of new digital talent is correspondingly weaker, because the dominant faction has less need to court outside legitimacy in the first place. Where does this leave the young women whose digital organising has been the subject of this paper. Not, I think, in a position that should be described as powerless, and the material reviewed here does not support that conclusion either. They have built something that Lagos politics did not previously contain: an independent public capable of setting agendas, applying pressure and holding political actors accountable through means that do not run through any godfather's office. That capacity is real and, based on the #EndSARS record, considerable. What they have not yet built, and what the documentary record gives no strong reason to expect will follow automatically from continued digital activity alone, is a parallel route into the specific institutional positions, party nomination, assembly seats, executive office, that the godfather system

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still controls almost completely. Closing that second gap will likely require changes that digital tools by themselves cannot deliver: party financing reform, internal democracy within Lagos's dominant party, and a sustained willingness among young women's digital networks to convert online capital into the unglamorous, years-long work of building loyalty inside the very structures they currently organise against. Whether that conversion happens is a question this paper cannot answer from documents alone. It is, however, the question future research, ideally combining the documentary method used here with direct interviews of young women who have attempted the transition from online organiser to political candidate, should take up next.

Conclusion

Lagos politics has not been transformed by digital political culture so much as it has been split into two tracks that operate on different logics. On one track, young women exercise a form of power that is new, real and, at moments such as #EndSARS, genuinely formidable: the power to set agendas, mobilise resources and shape public discourse without asking anyone's permission first. On the other track, the older mechanics of godfatherism, nomination fees, personal loyalty, informal networks built over years of proximity to a patron, continue to decide who actually holds elective office, largely unmoved by how many followers an aspirant commands. The Not Too Young to Run reform changed the legal floor for candidacy and still left this second track almost entirely intact, a result that should temper any assumption that formal or technological openings translate automatically into substantive inclusion. This paper has tried to hold that complexity rather than resolve it into a simpler story in either direction. Overstating young women's digital gains risks treating visibility as though it were representation, when the documentary record shows plainly that it is not. Understating those gains risks missing what actually did shift during #EndSARS and in the years since, an achievement that deserves to be named accurately rather than folded into a narrative of total continuity. The honest conclusion is that Lagos's political system has absorbed a genuinely new form of young women's political agency without yet rebuilding its core distributive mechanism, candidate selection, to accommodate it. Until that mechanism changes, digital political culture in Lagos will remain what this paper has found it to be: a powerful instrument for voice, and a still-limited instrument for entry.

Two implications follow, one for scholarship and one closer to practice, and the paper closes with both stated plainly. For scholarship, the Lagos case argues against treating "digital democratisation" as a single variable that either occurs or does not. It occurs unevenly, function by function, and a study that measures only visibility or only formal office will miss half of what is actually happening. Future work would do well to build instruments, whether documentary or interview-based, that track these functions separately rather than folding them into a single index of political participation. For practice, the finding that Lagos's female political brokerage tradition runs back through Pelewura and Mogaji to the present #EndSARS generation suggests that young women organising digitally today are not without institutional precedent to draw on, even if that precedent was itself constrained. A market woman's stall-by-stall network and a hashtag's overnight reach are different technologies built for different eras,

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but both were, in their own time, attempts by Lagos women to convert informal authority into durable public power. Whether the current generation succeeds where earlier ones achieved only partial gains will depend less on the platforms themselves than on whether young women's digital networks can be patiently rebuilt into the kind of embedded, multi-year institutional presence that the godfather system, for all its faults, has always understood as the real price of admission.

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