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Protest or Partnership? How Nigerian Women's Organizations Navigate Shrinking Civic Space

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Summary

Why do Nigerian women's rights organizations rarely rely on protest? While human rights activism is often associated with confrontation and public dissent, many organizations instead pursue change through partnership, technical advising, and engagement with state institutions. Drawing on interviews with women's rights activists, this brief argues that these strategies are not simply a response to shrinking civic space, nor an indication of apathy or co-optation. Rather, they reflect strategic forms of adaptation to a context shaped by material constraints, legal uncertainty, reputational concerns, and gendered social norms.

Women Protest Less than Men

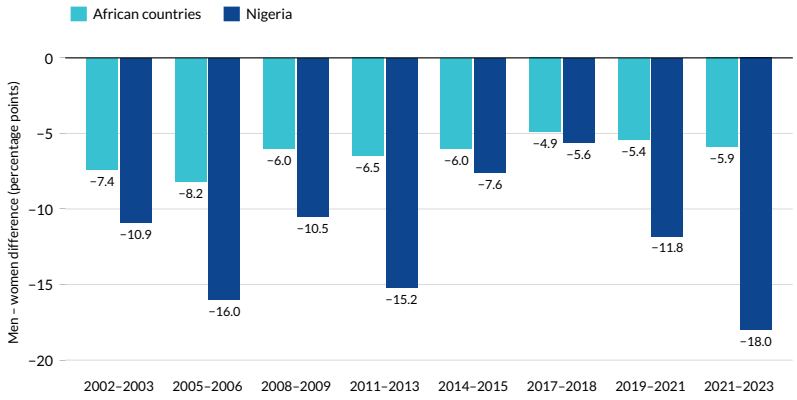
Public protest has long been a central feature of political life in Nigeria. From fuel subsidy demonstrations to the #EndSARS movement, public protest has become a visible and important form of political expression. But participation in protests is highly gendered. Nigerian women are significantly less likely than men to take part in protests. Survey evidence from Afrobarometer, a public opinion survey that measures attitudes on economic, political, and social issues across Africa, shows a clear and consistent gender gap in protest participation. As shown in Figure 1, women report much lower willingness to join demonstrations, and this gap is larger in Nigeria than in many other African countries.

Not only are women less likely to protest, but protests are also rarely focused on women's rights. Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), a global dataset that tracks protest activity, shows that among 7,036 protest events recorded between 1997 and 2023, only 277 centred on women's rights (3.9% of all protests).

Key insights

- Restrictions on civic space have limited the use of protest among women's groups
- Women's rights activists have adopted alternative and often less confrontational forms of advocacy to advance their claims
- Such activism often relies on active engagement and partnership with state institutions
- This form of activism is a strategic response to constrained political environments and should not be misunderstood as co-optation

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Note: Share of respondents stating they would never protest. Source: Afrobarometer survey rounds.

Figure 1: Nigeria's Protest Gender Gap in Comparative Perspective

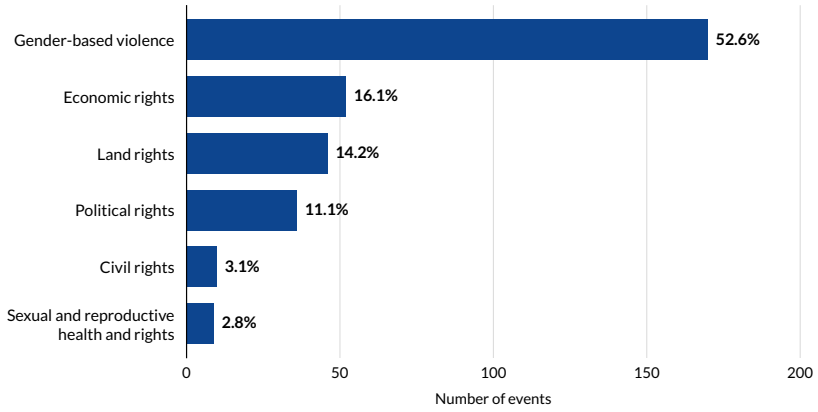


Figure 2: Women-Centred Protests by Issue

As Figure 2 demonstrates, protests centred on women's rights focus disproportionately on gender-based violence and sexual assault. Broader claims related to economic redistribution, labour rights, land access, or structural inequalities receive less attention. This pattern persists despite worsening economic inequality, insecurity, and persistent governance challenges across the country. It raises important questions about the conditions under which women engage in collective action in Nigeria and why they may choose not to protest. Interviews with women's rights activists suggest that the limited use of protest is not a matter of low mobilization capacity. Rather, many respondents described protest as a high-risk strategy that may jeopardize relationships with government actors and reduce opportunities for policy influence.

Why do Women Protest Less than Men?

Interviews with women's rights activists in Nigeria suggest that the limited use of protest is often the result of strategic calculations rather than an absence of political engagement. Respondents repeatedly described protest as costly, risky, confrontational and often ineffective for achieving their goals. Instead, many explained that they carefully weigh the potential benefits of protest against a range of material, legal, reputational, and social constraints.

Material constraints: Many interviewees described their organizations as heavily dependent on donor funding, which was often inflexible and not available for protest-related activities. Several also noted that organizing demonstrations requires substantial financial and logistical resources, making sustained protest difficult to maintain. As a result, activists frequently pursue less resource-intensive forms of advocacy to vocalize discontent with new government policy such as press statements. One notable exception is the Bring Back Our Girls movement, which

About this publication

This brief draws on qualitative interviews conducted with representatives of Nigerian civil society organizations working on women's rights, civic and political rights, LGBT rights, and economic rights. Interviews were carried out between 2022 and 2025 through a combination of 14 online interviews in 2022 and 26 interviews during fieldwork in Abuja and Lagos in 2023 and 2025. Interviews focused on advocacy strategies, relations with state institutions, experiences of protest, and the opportunities and constraints shaping civic engagement.

has deliberately rejected international donor funding and has maintained a visible presence through regular street protests.[1]

Legal constraints: Bureaucratic hurdles and uncertainty surrounding the regulation of public assemblies were frequently raised in the interviews. Many described concerns about police intervention, and the lack of effective legal protection for activists. These risks were often cited as reasons for preferring engagement through established institutional channels.

Reputational constraints: Concern about how participation in protests might affect activists' credibility and continued access to decisionmakers emerged as a recurring theme. Interviewees explained that public confrontation can lead women's rights organizations to be labeled as radical, disruptive, confrontational or politically partisan. Such labels could damage relationships with partners, reduce access to funding opportunities, and limit entry into important political and institutional spaces.

Normative constraints: Interviewees also emphasized the importance of gendered social expectations. Many described how women who engage in contentious politics are more likely to face criticism and hostility than men. According to several interviewees, advocacy on women's rights is often regarded as acceptable when pursued through dialogue and partnership, but becomes more controversial when linked to public protest.

How Women Adapt Activism in a Constrained Civic Space

Rather than abandoning advocacy, women's rights activists we interviewed described adapting their strategies to a political environment where public confrontation can carry significant political and personal costs. Many explained that they reserve protest for exceptional circumstances and instead rely on what some referred to as "quiet advocacy": strategically employing non-confrontational approaches to political and social change.

Rather than viewing activism as a choice between protest and partnership, the findings suggest that women's rights organizations adapt their advocacy strategies in a constrained civic space. These adaptations take different forms, including changing the language used to frame advocacy (discursive adaptation), presenting themselves as technical experts or policy partners (organizational adaptation), cultivating relationships with government officials and other influential actors (relational adaptation), and relying on lobbying, training, coalition-building, and other non-confrontational forms of action (tactical adaptation)

"Quiet advocacy" frequently emphasize collaboration with state actors rather than direct opposition to them, allowing activists to continue advancing their agendas while reducing the risks of political repression. These approaches were described as pragmatic responses to a political environment in which confrontational activism can carry significant social and political risks.

For example, activists working on reproductive rights issues often frame their advocacy in terms of maternal health and reducing preventable deaths from unsafe abortion rather than abortion rights. The women activists we interviewed argued that this approach enabled them to work with the Federal Ministry of Health, contribute to clinical guidelines, and expand access to care by supporting the training of nurses and midwives to provide post-abortion services. An organization puts it like this; "*The government wants to reduce maternal mortality* (…) *Complications*

1 The #BringBackOurGirls Movement was Never Funded by USAID - Opinion Nigeria

from unsafe abortion is a major cause. They know this. They will not go out in public and support abortion, but they work with us. (…)" (Interview, 2023). By presenting themselves as technical experts offering training to the government and thereby helping them reduce maternal mortality, they were considered allies and partners as long as the organization did not cross the red line of advocating for decriminalization of abortion. Rather than signaling retreat, such strategies allow activists to pursue incremental policy and service-delivery gains while navigating deeply conservative social norms and restrictive political conditions.

Several women's rights activists emphasized that maintaining access to policymakers is often viewed as more effective than public confrontation. As one activist explained; "*We have been forthcoming in engaging the government, and they have been listening*" (Interview 2023). Others described working closely with government ministries, legislators, and international organizations, positioning themselves as policy partners rather than political challengers. Others also pointed to concrete achievements resulting from these strategies. They highlighted the role of women's rights organizations in shaping gender policies, and contributing expertise to legislative processes like for example the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act 2015. But they also acknowledged that progress is often slow and incomplete. Several referred to the repeated failure of the so-called Gender Bills, which sought to expand women's political representation and citizenship rights, despite years of advocacy and engagement with policymakers, as a reminder that maintaining access to decisionmakers does not always translate into legislative success. For several activists, the rejection of the bills also marked a moment when public protest became necessary, serving as a means of expressing collective disappointment and signaling opposition to the government's failure to advance long-standing demands for gender equality.

Concluding Reflections

The findings presented in this brief suggest that the limited use of protest by women's rights organizations in Nigeria should not be interpreted as political passivity or co-optation. Far from withdrawing from politics, women's rights organizations continue to pursue change through a diverse repertoire of advocacy strategies shaped by the opportunities and constraints of their operating environment. The strategies available to women's rights organizations are shaped by more than shrinking or opening of civic space. Funding arrangements, material dependencies, reputational concerns, and gendered social norms all influence which forms of activism are viewed as legitimate and feasible. Understanding women's political agency therefore requires attention not only to political restrictions, but also to the broader structures that shape strategic choices.

Women's organizations' strategic adaptations take multiple forms. Organizations reframe their claims in ways that resonate with dominant political and social priorities, position themselves as technical experts and policy partners, cultivate relationships with government actors and other influential stakeholders, and rely on lobbying, training, coalition-building, and selective public mobilization to advance their goals. In doing so, they seek to maintain both political influence and organizational survival.

At the same time, these strategies involve trade-offs. Close engagement with state institutions can create opportunities to influence policy and practice, but progress is often slow, difficult to document, and vulnerable to criticism from those who equate activism primarily with confrontation. Further, adaptations that help organizations secure funding, maintain legitimacy, preserve access to policymakers, and reduce political risks may also de-radicalize the women's rights agenda. Recognizing these tensions is essential for understanding both the possibilities and limitations of women's "quiet advocacy" in contemporary Nigeria.

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