


## Chapter 21

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# Women Living with Disabilities and Political Inclusion in Nigeria: The Extent and Dimensions

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### Abstract

All over the world, politics and governance inclusion are activities that involve both males and females in society. It is usually a fierce competition amongst contesting groups for a political office. Men have been the dominant group in politics. Despite the global affirmative action for women inclusion in politics, they are mostly excluded from this contest because of the ‘rough’ (money politics, sit-tight-syndrome, godfatherism, winner-takes-all and violence, amongst others) nature of politics in developing countries. This exclusion is most obvious amongst women living with disabilities (WLDs) in Nigeria. This chapter examines the dimension of inclusion and the extent of the exclusion of women living with disabilities in Nigeria and how to mitigate the trend to enable a fair inclusion in governance. The Michigan School’s Psychological Theory of Party Identification of Civil Participation is utilised to reveal why WLDs are excluded in Nigerian politics and how to reintegrate them appropriately. Data is collected through an archival study of events, Afrobarometer survey and interviews of people, including WLDs, amongst others. Data is analysed explanatorily. Findings reveal that WLDs have a psychological inferiority complex coupled with the ‘rough’ nature of politics in Nigeria that further makes them unfavourably fit for inclusion. WLDs must be seen as part of society and participate in governance through grassroots participation, which will eventually make them visible nationally.

**Keywords:** Disabilities, Election, Governance, Politics, Poverty, Women

## Introduction

Politics is not a ground for sympathy. It is a pedestal for people who can lead and deliver good governance to the people. The global population can be divided into two groups by gender classifications: male and female. Using physical disabilities as a yardstick, these include people living with disabilities and people living without disabilities. People living without disabilities are mostly prominent and active participants and political office holders in the politics and governance landscape of many countries in the world. People living with disabilities may be included or appointed in political offices based on compassion but with certain limitations. The people living with disabilities (PLDs) are part of the members of every society; therefore they have the right to contest for any political office and be included in governance provided that they can cope with the necessary rigour required in such office and governance.

Globally, politics and governance are activities that encompass the inclusion and contribution of both males and females regardless of physical disabilities. It is a quest to contribute to the development quest of society and opportunities for individuals to contribute their personal quota to the development of the country (Aluko, 2020a; Bonkat-Jonathan, 2021). It is usually a tug of war amongst opponents vying for a political office or seeking for governance inclusion. The requirement for this political inclusion should be passion and capability to deliver the popular mandate. Political participation and inclusion in national politics qualifications should not be based on gender or physical disability as a yardstick.

On the gender discourse, females who are not physically impaired are not making a significant impact in the entire political contest and quest for political relevance in many regions of the world (Eniola et al., 2023; Idahosa & Ihensekhien, 2023). This, therefore, gives the women living with disabilities (WLDs) an uphill task (Van Hees et al., 2019; Shakespeare et al., 2019). Despite the global affirmative action for women's inclusion in politics, they are mostly excluded from this contest because of the 'rough' (money politics, sit-tight-syndrome, godfatherism, winner-takes-all and violence, amongst others) nature of politics in developing countries (Schur & Adya, 2013; Ambali & Asiyanni, 2023). This exclusion is most obvious amongst WLDs in Nigeria (Shittu et al., 2022; Balogun, 2022).

This chapter examines the dimension of inclusion and the extent of the exclusion of women living with disabilities in Nigeria and how to mitigate the trend to enable a fair inclusion in governance. The Michigan School's Psychological Theory of Party Identification of Civil Participation is utilised to reveal why WLDs are excluded in Nigerian politics and how to reintegrate

them appropriately. Data is collected through an archival study of events, Afrobarometer survey and interview of people including WLDs, amongst others. Data is analysed explanatorily.

## Conceptual clarification

This section of the research deals with two concepts to be clarified. These include political inclusion and disabilities. Political inclusion is the act of perception of people about others in the political sphere of a particular location. The people within the sphere have varied tendencies and procedures of accepting new members into the political sphere of their society. Ideally, political inclusion is obtained by birth of an individual as a citizen having a right to vote and be voted for in a political sphere. Other ways include by legal provisions such as the number of years that the individual is required to spend in such society before that person could enjoy certain political inclusion privileges.

Political inclusion in other words is the extent to which an individual perceives themselves to be relevant to the political matrix of a society (Aluko, 2020b). This is not how society perceives the individual but how an individual perceives their worth in the political landscape of society. A politically qualified person (regarding *de jure* and *de facto*) may exclude themselves from the politics of the state because of ignorance or lack of political interest (that is, dormant political participation).

Political inclusion is therefore the entire activities of politics regarding active political participation and passive political involvement. These include political activities such as joining a political party, engagement in political campaigns and political education, contesting for public offices, ability to accept political appointments such as non-elective public offices (ministerial, commissioners, director of national agencies and ambassadorial appointments, amongst others).

Disability, on the other hand, is differently perceived depending on various paradigms, schools of thought or models being considered. The medical model of disability is based on the individual's medical predicament or condition. People are regarded as disabled on the platform of being restricted greatly or mildly to utilise any part of the body effectively (UN, 2009; Series, 2019; Shittu et al., 2022; Oluwadele & Aluko, 2023). Disability as an impairment condition in human beings implies the circumstance that makes a person not suitable to fully realise their life dreams or potentials in participating in an event and developmental processes of society (WHO, 2020). Disability, as perceived by Barton (2013) and Disabled World (2021), is a mental or physical deformation that reduces or somewhat limits any

aspect of life activities of an individual having such impairment. Human disability could be a form of physical limitations of deformation, sense organ impairment or memory-intellectual based. It can also be partial or total. It can be caused from birth or congenitally, by embryo-infectious diseases, by human error or accident, through negligence, by judicial pronouncement or any form of neglects.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020) submit that disabilities are impairments which affect any victim's chances to perform a given role. These impairments are caused by various negative changes in the biological functioning of human body. Persons with disabilities (PwDs) vary in types and their forms. Therefore, they could be with visible disability, with affected limb functions, those with partial or total loss of sight, those with hearing impairment, those infected with leprosy, those with intellectual disability, the albinos and those with spinal cord injury.

Woodward (2015) attempted a classification of disability into a number of categories, which include the following:

1. **Mobility and Physical Impairments:** This disability category includes people with different degrees and types of physical disabilities. It includes: Upper and lower limb(s) deformity and different organs of the body co-ordination disability. Mobility and limbs function disability can be a congenital or acquired problem because of negative situations (Waldschmidt & Sépulchre, 2019; Kasnitz, 2020). It could also be disease-related effects. People with accidental broken bones could be categorised as having a disability.
2. **Spinal Cord Disability:** this could be from birth or from an accident. This injury can be either complete loss of function or incomplete spinal cord loss of function because of dis-functioning of the sensory organs.
3. **Head Injuries - Brain Disability:** This could be brain injury that could be mild, moderate or severe.
4. **Vision Disability:** There are a lot of people who are suffering from minor or major vision impairments. It could result into blindness and other ocular trauma.
5. **Hearing Disability:** Hearing disabilities includes people who are partially or completely deaf. Deafness can be evident at birth or occur later in life from several biologic causes, for example Meningitis can damage the auditory nerve or the cochlea.
6. **Learning or Cognitive Disabilities:** These are the kind of disabilities that express learning difficulties such as dyslexia and speech disorders, amongst others.
7. **Psychological Impairment:** These include disorders of feeling or mood. It is part of the mental health disorders term used to describe people with

psychiatric problems or illness such as: personality disorders, which is an irregular pattern of behaviour to day-to-day activities and schizophrenia which is basically thinking, mood, and behaviour disorders.

Disability can therefore be summed as the condition that limits individuals from participating in any lawful activity as they should freely be able to. In political science parlance, “man is born free but everywhere he is in chains” implies here that things like laws in society may become a source of handicap to a person’s free will actions in society. Social limitations such as culture, traditions, beliefs and some religious practices may hinder some practitioners from participating in politics, thereby limiting their political inclusion.

### **Theoretical framework**

This section explains the Michigan School’s Psychological Theory of Political Participation. This is explained in relations with people living with disabilities’ political participations. The Michigan School advances a psycho-behavioural theory of voting and participation in political activities, which is known as Political Party Identification Theory. In 1960 and 1966 respectively, scholars from the Michigan School, such as Campbell Angus, Miller E. Warren, Converse E. Philip, Stokes E. and Donald opined that the citizens are not actually determined for political party participation by selecting a political party subject between a few alternatives, but they irrationally incline towards a subject (Bañales et al., 2020; Chyn & Haggag, 2023).

This theory of identification with a political party and civil participation observes politics as a means of identifying and expressing a phenomenon, in which the members of the group share the same interest, which are compatible with the group values. According to the theory, the voters observe the parties that have their interest and use political participation as a yardstick of their adherence to a certain political option. This theory to some extent explains why the differences in social status are not always reflected in the voting during the elections. That is, why in a way people with similar social status or disability will vote for the same political parties and vice versa, why people with different social status vote for the same or different political party (Withers, 2020).

Citizens have the natural instinct to belong to any social group of choice and personal interest. Political parties, with their various ideologies, values and traditions, attract and appeal to the citizens’ sense of living, compatibility and sense of belonging. Different people with different characters and disabilities determine the term ‘party identification’ as a tendency for long-term determination of their allegiance to select candidates who are advocates of a certain political party and various levels of political

inclusion. The identification criteria are achieved when the party has a special way of taking care of special needs of different people. This means that the person has adherence to a certain party that caters for their special needs such as female gender and people living with disabilities, amongst others. This enables them to have a feeling of responsibility for the same, and not only temporary voting for the party.

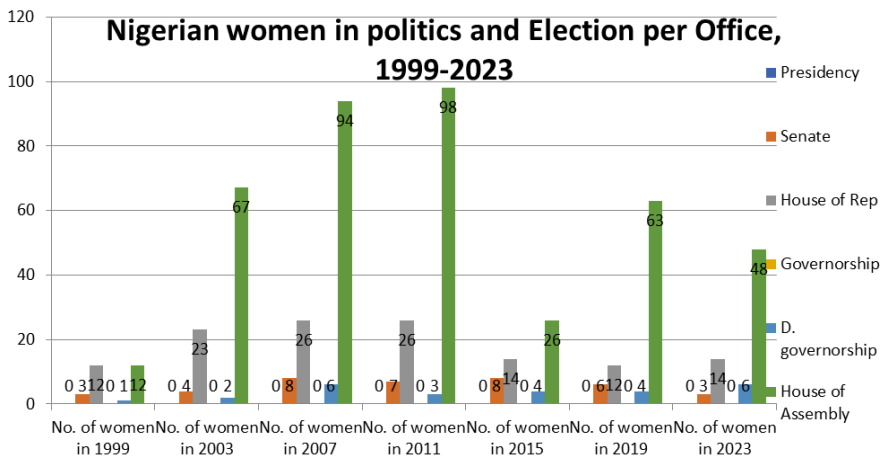
The authors from the Michigan School indicate that in order to understand the political inclusiveness of a certain set of people and the citizens generally, one must take into consideration some long-term factors that have influence on their manner of living. Additionally, party identification is a psychological force by means of which social actors interpret the events that are relevant for politics, who should participate and who should benefit. Women and WLDs in politics have the psychological attachment to political parties that have special slots for them so as to be able to physically compete with others and have a chance of political inclusion in governance.

### **Women, women living with disabilities (WLDs) and political inclusion in Nigeria**

Using the yardstick of global and regional standards, Nigeria has low rates of female representation in politics. Interestingly, between 1999 and 2007, there is a slight increase in proportions of women elected into positions, with an average increment between both houses of legislature from 2.3% to 7.8%. Sadly, these small gains were not replicated in the 2011 general elections. The number of women elected into positions in the 2015 election, was 20 out of 359 positions in the lower legislative chamber (5.6%) and in the upper legislative chamber, there were 7 out of 109 seats (6.4%). This ranking (UN Women, 2021) put Nigeria at 180<sup>th</sup> in the world. Consequently, women made up 7.3% of the Nigerian Senate and 3.1% of the House of Representatives in the 2019 elections. No state in Nigeria has a woman as governor (NWTF, 2019). The total number of women who served in executive capacities, either minister or special advisers, at the federal level is also very low. There is a total of 11 out of the 636 appointed executives between 1999 and 2015 as women (17.5%) and ministers are 15% from 1999 until 2015 (NCWD, 2016). In 2023, this figure has no significant improvement as the percentage of women's inclusion in politics dropped to 9% (Osimosu & Adefisoye, 2023). In all, the statistics of women living with disabilities' inclusiveness in politics is not significant and virtually does not exist (Melugbo et al., 2022; Ambali & Asiyambi, 2023).

The political inclusion in terms of the proportion of women to men in top public executive offices and parliamentary positions, as well as the duration as head of state over the last fifty years measured by the World Economic Forum (2018 to 2022) (WEF, 2023) revealed that their global gender gap report positions Nigeria 139<sup>th</sup> out of a total of 149 countries. Nigeria is ranked as having the largest gender differential gap in political inclusion, participation and empowerment. This survey shows how generally poor the female was represented in active political positions and a very poor and unrealistic fate of women living with disabilities is in Nigerian politics.

The Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024) report revealed that 7% in the years 1999–2023 of councillors (local government) were women, of judges in the federal court, 24% were women, and of each type of high-level government officials and senior administrators such as permanent secretary, head of service, special adviser, central bank governors, special assistant, chief executive officer, executive secretary and director general, an average of 7% were women (Aremu & Aluko, 2016; Aluko & Oladele, 2023). There were no female central bank governors (of four positions). The post of special assistant has 28% which is the highest percentage for women so far. This revealed that women are considered more for non-elective positions as a consolation political inclusive role instead of the decisive political offices. The women living with disabilities are simply excluded from political offices and they are mostly categorised with the few women who were given political roles in Nigeria.



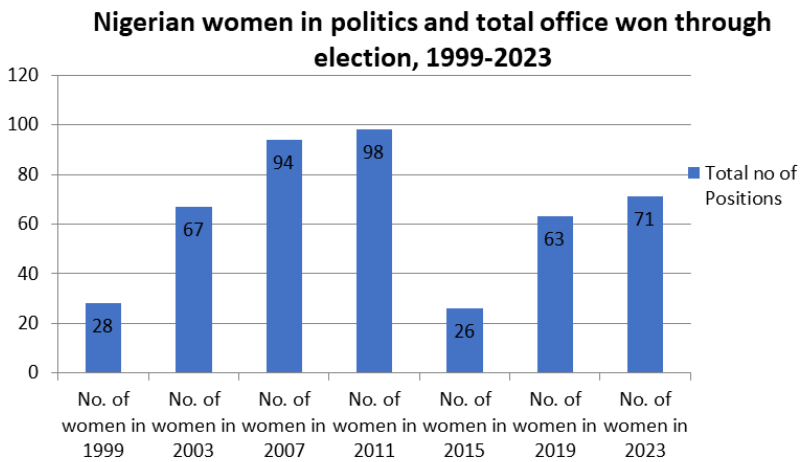
**Figure 12:** The performance of women in Nigerian politics across six offices from 1999 to 2023. Source: Author’s own

**Table 26:** Time series of the number of offices available and women occupying such offices in Nigeria, 1999–2023

#	Position	Available seats	Women 1999	Women 2003	Women 2007	Women 2011	Women 2015	Women 2019	Women 2023	Total Women elected 1999–2023
1	Presidency	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	Senate	109	3	4	8	7	8	6	3	39
3	House of Representatives	360	12	23	26	26	14	12	14	127
4	Governorship	36	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	D. governorship	36	1	2	6	3	4	4	6	26
6	House of Assembly	990	12	67	94	98	26	63	48	408
	Total	1533	28	67	94	98	26	63	71	447

Source: Author's compilation 2023

It is obvious that no woman has ever become the president of Nigeria and governor of any of the 36 states. The office of deputy governor is the highest office occupied by women. From Figure 12, the performance of women in the 2007 and 2011 general elections marks the peak of performance of women in Nigerian politics especially in the house of assembly. It is shown that the number of women in the senate chamber climaxes in the 2003 general elections with 67 elected seats, while it has decreased to 48 in the 2023 general election. No woman living with disabilities has ever occupied any of these offices but are simply given special considerations in other political participation such as voting priority as the mode of their disability requires during elections.

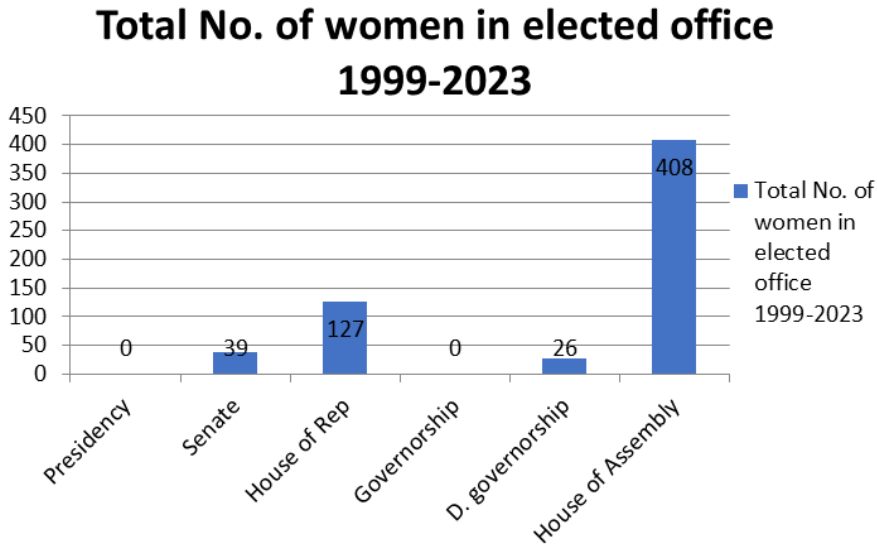


**Figure 13:** Time series of total number of seats won by women in Nigerian politics from 1999 to 2023. Source: Author’s own

Figure 13 presents that the peak year of women’s involvement in elective office in 2011 was 98 total seats, closely followed by 94 seats in 2007. The lowest number recorded in Nigeria’s history was in 2015, with 26 seats and it has gradually risen to 63 and 71 in the 2019 and 2023 elections respectively. In all of these time series under review, no woman living with disabilities has won a public elected seat in Nigeria.

Figure 14 shows that the House of Assembly is the most patronised office with little resistance and good affinity for the women in Nigerian politics. 408 women have occupied the office from 1999 to 2023. This is closely followed by the House of Representatives with 127 total women from 1999 to 2023. It appears that the higher the number of seats available, the better the chance of women competing. This implies that women may never have the opportunity to occupy offices with minimum seats such as president

and governors. It is, however, dismaying that women living with disabilities have no elected seat position and may not have such opportunity until special legal and non-legal provisions and considerations are given to them.



**Figure 14:** Total number of seats occupied by women in Nigerian politics across five offices from 1999 to 2023. Source: Author’s own

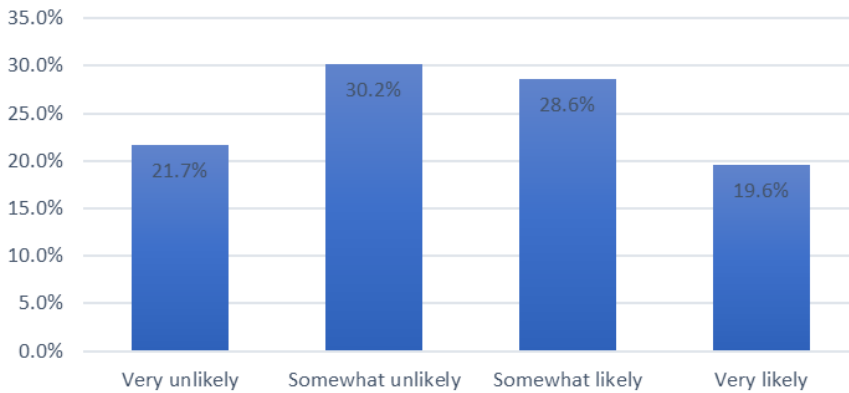
### Reasons for WLDs’ low political inclusion

Although Nigeria has about 49% females, and many of them have the aspiration to hold political office, many of the aspirations are short-lived. A general nomenclature adduced for this low political participation and inclusion in politics is the problem of marginalisation in the country’s democratisation process. The political marginalisation concept explains that females’ electoral victory rate is low compared to their male counterparts. Other particular factors that can be adduced for women living with disabilities’ low level of political participation and inclusion in politics generally include frontline issues such as political violence, money or financial incapability, *godfatherism* as well as the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society (Shittu et al., 2022). Other issues include a low level of compliance with existing laws enabling equal participation in politics and socio-cultural reasons (Evans & Reher, 2022).

The Afrobarometer time series data (1999-2022) (Afrobarometer, 2023) revealed that 48% of people in Nigeria perceived that women who run for office are either criticised or harassed. Therefore, women are not given

free societal opportunity. This makes a perception that a total of 78% of women who run for office may be criticised or harassed, therefore they may not boldly participate in politics or seek political inclusion.

### Criticised or Harrassed? Women who run for public office

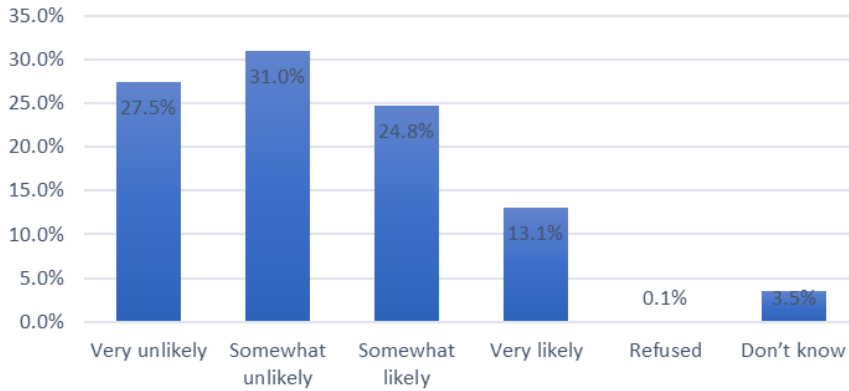


**Figure 15:** Women who run for office are criticised or harassed. Source: Afrobarometer time series data (1999–2022) (2023)

Another problem confirmed by a wide perception of people in Nigeria in the 2022 Afrobarometer survey is ‘women who run for office face family problems.’ Figure 15 reveals that 39% of Nigerians perceived that women who run for office face family problems, while about 30% believed that they are likely to face family problems in the future. This makes a negative perception that about 69% of women who run for office face family problems, therefore they would not participate or seek inclusion in politics.

Figure 16 reveals that most husbands and family members of these politically inclined families are willing to release the women to join political parties and contribute their quota to politics. It also supports the affirmative action of 35% for women in all political spheres for governance and administration. Although women are still under-represented in the executive, judiciary and legislative arms of government and are short-changed in the political activities in the country, there are indicators of their better performances than men (Aluko, 2020b).

### Women who run for office face family problems



**Figure 16:** Women who run for office face family problems. Source: Afrobarometer time series data (1999–2022) (2023)

Capable women are strongly restricted from effectively competing at the political party level. This is because they are seen as weak vessels and some political positions such as the President and Vice president, the governor and the deputy governor, the senate president and speaker of the house of representatives, amongst others, are deemed to have been reserved for the men. No woman has become political party chairperson in any of the front-line political parties nor in other important party positions apart from the statutory ‘women leader position’ in Nigeria. This shows that it will be difficult to position women in elective and high-profile positions in Nigeria. However, the plight of the WLDs is more in jeopardy because, firstly, they are women who fall into the category of politically marginalised people (Waldschmidt & Sépulchre, 2019) and secondly, they have a form of disability which makes them unfavourable to compete with women without disability and much more with the men.

The interview conducted in Kwara and Oyo states in Nigeria with people living with disabilities revealed that people living with disabilities have little trust in the election and governance processes (Ambali & Asiyanni, 2023). This is because they are not carried along effectively in election processes and governance. The ballot papers are not readable by people with visual impairment, and they are made to choose a contestant who may be contrary to their choice.

The Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019) has little provision for persons

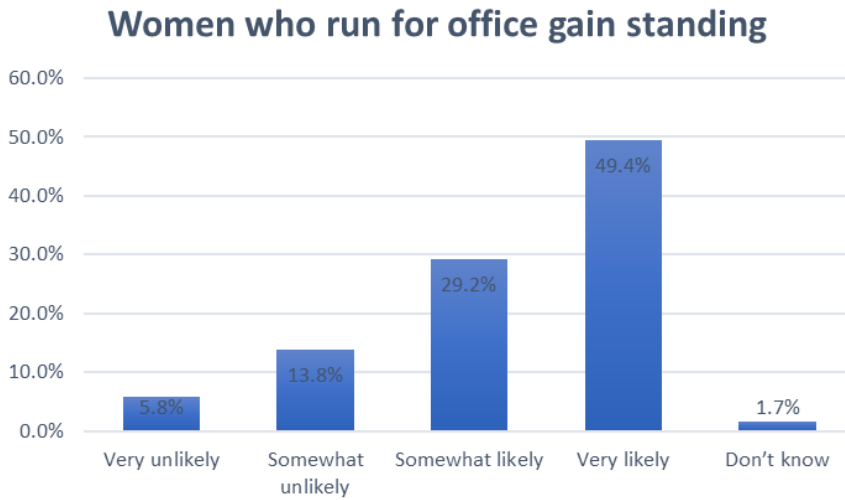
living with disabilities and election matters. The hearing-impaired are not provided with sign language for interpretation of events at the party level and during the election processes. They claim that if the election process did not take care of their various impairments, how will any emerged leader take care of their special needs and include them in governance processes? They also remarked that their special needs have made them a little bit less competitive in politics and amongst members of society at large.

The Electoral Act (Amendment) 2022 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022), and its consideration for Persons with Disabilities in Section 54 provides a leeway for PLDs to have smooth election participations such as the provision of special ballot papers for the visually impaired, symbols of political parties for the deaf and fast voting considerations for them before other people. However, these considerations do not translate into governance inclusion. Therefore, they are at the mercy of the government to take care of their special needs, make laws to enable them to be favourable contestants in elections and contest elections only with contestants with similar impairments (Berghs et al., 2019).

### **Prospects for the future**

The plethora of problems facing women and women living with disabilities in politics and their quest for political inclusion in Nigeria is the primary reason why women living with disabilities are largely excluded from politics. Nevertheless, the prospect for their political participation and inclusion in politics is not totally impossible in the near future. In Figure 17, the Afrobarometer time series data 1999-2022 (2023) reveals that women who run for office gain standing for election and political popularity. 78% of people in Nigeria perceived that women who run for office will have the opportunity to gain political standing of election victory and political inclusions. Therefore, women and women living with disabilities have good chances of winning elections if they persist in the quest of representing the people in general elections.

To improve their political prospects, women living with disabilities must distinguish themselves first of all in other works and professions of life such as education, business, international networking and internal political party politics, amongst others. This will strengthen their chances of competing with the other women and their male counterparts in political participation and governance inclusion.



**Figure 17:** Women who run for office gain standing. Source: Afrobarometer time series data (1999–2022) (2023)

The interview conducted in Kwara and Oyo states in Nigeria with people living with disabilities revealed that the fate and political inclusion prospects of people living with disabilities majorly relies on lawmaking such as affirmative actions for the people living with disabilities and national gender policies to politically empower them is inevitable. This will enable them to have a direct slot in governance such as ministry of special needs that will have ministers at the national level and commissioners at the state level from amongst the population of people living with special needs. This will make them have an automatic slot in governance and a permanent inclusion in politics. The prospect could also be improved if a special political office can be created (just as the Paralympics) so as to enable only the people with special needs to contest for political power with one another and not against the able-bodied people.

The prospect of women in politics and WLDs' inclusion in political governance can also be strengthened by making relevant laws to help women in general political participations. Laws such as “every office with deputies must be occupied by the two genders and not dominated by a single gender.” This will make the office of the president, governor, political party chairmen, senate president, house of representatives' top seat and many others to be open to the females to compete for, especially as a deputy which may eventually be translated into the substantive office holder in the near future.

## Conclusion

The nature of politics in developing countries, including Nigeria, is a tug-of-war. The strong, superior and powerful take the entire spoils and the weak, inferior and not powerful remain subjugated. This nature has made the men dominate the political landscape for a long period of time at the expense of the womenfolk. This had grossly skewed the women living with disabilities out of political participation and inclusion in Nigeria politics.

Operationally, women and people living with disabilities had been naturally and physically disadvantaged to fully participate in many activities in society; their political inclusion in the near future is not feasible. Findings from the theoretical framework revealed that women living with disabilities have a psychological inferiority complex. Coupled with the 'rough' nature of politics in Nigeria where men dominate and the winners take all, they are subjected to unfavourable conditions that further makes them unfit for political inclusion. Therefore, general elections should reflect the electoral act provisions for people with special needs such as visually impaired and hearing impairment, amongst others.

To further correct this mal-positioning of the WLDs in Nigerian politics, the law must be utilised to create room for their political inclusion. The law should create a special political office such as the ministry of special needs, where women and people generally with special needs can head as ministers for the federal government and commissioners for the state. This will enhance their political feasibilities at the political party level.

Also, the government can make special provisions for people with special needs to compete for public offices amongst themselves and not against an able-bodied person. These legal actions will make WLDs be seen as part of society and have a stake in governance. Policies such as affirmative action for persons living with disabilities can be institutionalised to enhance their political inclusion. A special ministry can be provided by the executives that will make them an automatic member of the government cabinet. Finally, participating in governance through grassroots politics will eventually and inevitably make them be visible nationally.

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