When the Present Consumes the Future: Women, Vote-Buying, Political Patronage and The Intergenerational Cost of Electoral Corruption in Nigeria

Lucky Success Ehimeme, Enato, PhD
Ambrose Alli University, Edo State Nigeria
Department of History& International Studies
Faculty of Arts
08162477831/ 08029548749
Nigeria And Africa History with Focus on Socio-Cultural & Economic History; Colonial / Post-Colonial Studies; Leadership, Nation Building and Inter-Group Relations; & Historical Change & Development Studies
puffycolly@gmail.com & puffycolly@aauekpoma.edu.ng

Mr. Stanley Audu Enegbuma
Ambrose Alli University, Edo State Nigeria
History& International Studies
Arts 08035638141
Socio-Economic and Military History
stanllyoung@aauekpoma.edu.ng

Odigie, Albert Omoike
History& International Studies
Arts 07062289494
Economic History
odigieomoike@aauekpoma.edu.ng

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Abstract
Electoral corruption remains a significant obstacle to democratic accountability and sustainable development in Nigeria. Among its most visible manifestations is vote-buying, through which political actors exchange money, food, household commodities and other material incentives for electoral support. Although the practice affects voters across gender, age and socioeconomic categories, its implications for women deserve particular attention because of their responsibilities within households, their participation in informal economic activities and their position within Nigeria's unequal political and economic structures. This paper examines the relationship between women's socioeconomic vulnerability, electoral patronage and the intergenerational consequences of transactional politics in Nigeria. It argues that the commercialisation of electoral choices undermines public accountability, weakens the delivery of essential social services and potentially compromises the conditions necessary for children's

education, nutrition, healthcare and future opportunities. Drawing on historical scholarship, government reports, newspaper investigations, electoral observation documents and contemporary academic literature, the study adopts a qualitative historical and documentary approach. It concludes that addressing electoral corruption requires more than voter enlightenment; it demands institutional accountability, economic inclusion, gender-sensitive political reforms and sustained investment in children's welfare.

Keywords: *Women, vote-buying, electoral patronage, political corruption, child welfare, intergenerational development, Nigeria.*

Introduction

Democracy is ordinarily understood as a political arrangement through which citizens exercise authority over the selection of their representatives and participate, directly or indirectly, in determining the direction of public affairs. Its legitimacy rests not simply on the periodic organisation of elections but on the capacity of elected governments to respond to the needs and expectations of the population. Elections are therefore expected to provide citizens with an opportunity to assess political leadership, examine competing policy alternatives and demand accountability from those seeking public office. However, where electoral competition becomes increasingly dependent on financial inducements, political patronage and the distribution of immediate material benefits, the relationship between citizens and political representatives begins to lose its democratic substance. Nigeria's electoral experience illustrates this difficulty. Since the restoration of democratic government in 1999, elections have expanded political participation and created opportunities for political competition. Nevertheless, the country's democratic development has continued to encounter challenges involving electoral malpractice, corruption, political violence, monetisation of party nominations and the distribution of inducements to voters. Vote-buying has become an important subject in discussions of electoral credibility because it transforms the citizen's vote from an instrument of political choice into an object of transactional exchange (Hoffmann & Patel, 2022; Nnamani, 2022).

The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024) provides important evidence of the scale of the problem. Its national corruption survey reported that 22% of Nigerians were personally offered money in exchange for their votes during the 2023 general elections, compared with 17% in 2019. Nine per cent reported receiving offers of other favours, while 10% indicated that another member of their household had been approached with money or another favour. The findings demonstrate that electoral inducement extends beyond the individual voter and enters the wider household environment. The household dimension introduces an important question concerning women. In many Nigerian communities, women participate in household budgeting, food provision, children's education, informal trading and the management of family needs. Their economic responsibilities frequently place them at the intersection of political decisions and everyday survival. Where political actors distribute money, food items, clothing, household commodities or temporary assistance during election periods, such inducements may acquire particular significance for economically pressured households. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to present Nigerian women as the principal or exclusive agents of vote-selling. Men and women participate in electoral transactions, while political parties, candidates, campaign financiers and local intermediaries frequently organise and finance patronage networks. The central concern of this paper is therefore not to condemn mothers for accepting electoral inducements but to examine the social and political conditions under which immediate household

needs can become connected to electoral transactions. The expression *when the present consumes the future* captures the central argument. A small electoral payment may provide temporary assistance to a household, but the broader political consequences of patronage can include weakened accountability, inadequate public services and reduced opportunities for future generations. These consequences are not automatic outcomes of every electoral transaction; rather, they represent the structural risks created when political loyalty is purchased instead of earned through public policy and responsible governance. Nigeria's child welfare situation makes this question particularly important. The Federal Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning and UNICEF (2024) reported that approximately 67.5% of Nigerian children aged 0–17 years experienced multidimensional poverty. The report also identified significant challenges involving education, nutrition, healthcare, sanitation and social protection.

The relationship between electoral patronage and children's welfare must consequently be examined within the wider political economy of poverty, public expenditure, gender relations and democratic accountability.

Historical Background of Electoral Patronage in Nigeria

The relationship between political authority and material reward has a long history in Nigerian political development. During the colonial period, indirect rule and administrative arrangements relied substantially on recognised traditional authorities and local intermediaries to facilitate the exercise of colonial power. Although colonial administrative patronage was not identical to contemporary electoral vote-buying, it established important historical examples of political mediation through local authority structures, access to privileges and selective distribution of benefits. Following independence in 1960, political competition increasingly involved regional political organisations, party financiers, traditional institutions, business interests and influential community figures. Political support was often cultivated through access to public appointments, development projects, contracts and other distributive advantages. These practices developed within the broader circumstances of postcolonial state formation, competition for public resources and the expansion of political office as a source of economic opportunity.

The return to democratic government in 1999 provided a new institutional framework for electoral competition. However, the persistence of clientelistic political relationships meant that the formal introduction of multiparty democracy did not automatically produce issue-based political engagement. Political actors continued to rely on influential networks, local intermediaries and selective material distribution to mobilise electoral support.

Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007) explain that clientelism involves relationships in which political support is exchanged for selective material benefits. Stokes et al. (2013) further demonstrate how brokers, political organisations and voters sustain clientelistic networks through reciprocal expectations and the distribution of targeted benefits. In Nigeria, these arrangements have taken different forms, including financial inducements, distribution of food items, transport assistance, temporary employment, gifts and promises of future benefits. Hoffmann and Patel (2022) identify the influence of material circumstances and social expectations in sustaining vote-selling behaviour. Their research demonstrates that citizens may disapprove of vote-selling while simultaneously believing that others in their communities are likely to participate in it. This contradiction helps explain why the practice can persist despite widespread public criticism.

Women, Economic Vulnerability and the Politics of Immediate Survival

Women occupy important positions within Nigeria's economic and social structures. They participate in agriculture, trading, food processing, domestic production, public administration, education and informal economic activities. Their contribution to household survival is considerable, yet many women continue to experience unequal access to productive resources, financial services, secure employment and political influence.

Economic vulnerability can affect the manner in which citizens respond to political inducements. For a woman responsible for feeding children, paying school expenses, supporting elderly relatives or sustaining a small trading business, a financial offer during an election may appear attractive when household resources are severely limited.

This situation should be understood within the wider conditions of poverty rather than through assumptions about women's political morality. The World Bank (2022) and the Federal Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning and UNICEF (2024) document the relationship between household deprivation, limited access to essential services and unequal opportunities for children and families. Ette and Akpan-Obong (2023) examine the difficulties Nigerian women encounter in negotiating access to political participation and representation. Their analysis identifies patriarchal political arrangements, intimidation and institutional barriers as important constraints on women's participation. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace also reported that women occupied approximately 3% of Senate seats and 4% of House of Representatives seats following the 2023 elections (Nkereuwem, 2023). These figures demonstrate that women may participate substantially in the electoral population without enjoying corresponding representation in elected political institutions.

The distinction between women's participation as voters and their representation as political decision-makers is essential. Women may be mobilised to attend rallies, participate in campaign organisations, distribute political materials and encourage household support for candidates, yet remain excluded from important decisions concerning party nominations, political appointments and public expenditure. A report by *The Guardian* (Thomas-Odia, 2023) documented concerns raised by Nigerian women's organisations over women's limited electoral representation and the effects of violence on political participation. The report noted that women secured only 75 legislative seats out of the 1,459 legislative seats contested at state and national levels in the 2023 elections. Thus, the problem is not simply whether women sell their votes. It is also whether political institutions provide them with meaningful opportunities to influence the policies and resource allocations that determine their families' future.

Vote-Buying, Electoral Patronage and the Commercialisation of Democratic Choice

Vote-buying represents one of the clearest manifestations of transactional politics. It occurs when candidates, political parties or their agents offer money, goods or other benefits in exchange for electoral support. The practice may occur before election day through campaign distributions or during voting through direct financial inducements and other arrangements.

The NBS (2024) findings provide a particularly important basis for examining this development. The increase from 17% in 2019 to 22% in 2023 in the proportion of citizens personally offered money for their votes indicates that the problem remained substantial. Equally important is the finding that 40% of those who received an offer of money or another favour said that the inducement influenced their voting choice. The remaining 55% reported that it did not influence their choice. These figures demonstrate that inducement does not necessarily produce electoral compliance in every instance, although it remains a serious challenge to electoral integrity.

The findings were reported by *The Punch* in its July 20, 2024 coverage of the NBS survey (Uthman, 2024). *Channels Television* (2024) also reported the statistical findings, drawing attention to the increase in vote-buying between the 2019 and 2023 general elections.

The practice is not restricted to the distribution of cash. It may involve rice, cooking oil, clothing, household provisions, transport assistance, school-related gifts and other temporary benefits. These arrangements create an environment in which political competition becomes increasingly associated with the immediate distribution of private goods rather than the presentation of credible programmes for public development. A significant illustration emerged during the September 2024 Edo State governorship election. *The Guardian* reported the distribution of food items and other inducements during the election, describing the exercise as an example of the relationship between economic hardship and electoral patronage (Njoku & Egbejule, 2024). In another report, the newspaper documented findings by the Centre for Democracy and Development concerning alleged payments by party agents to voters (Omolaoye, 2024).

The November 2024 investigation by *The Guardian*, titled *Cash-and-Carry: Public Engagements, Debates Fading as Vote-Buying Rules Polls*, further examined the displacement of issue-based political campaigns by electoral inducements. The investigation reported concerns that political parties increasingly devoted resources to material inducements rather than sustained engagement with voters on public policy (Adeyemi et al., 2024). These developments raise fundamental questions about democratic accountability. When citizens are approached primarily as recipients of financial inducements, the relationship between political representatives and the electorate becomes transactional. The elected official may consequently face weaker incentives to explain policy decisions, account for public expenditure or respond to long-term community needs.

Mothers, Household Responsibilities and the Intergenerational Consequences of Electoral Decisions

The relationship between electoral patronage and children's future provides the central social argument of this paper.

In Nigerian society, mothers occupy important positions in the organisation of household life. They frequently participate in decisions concerning food consumption, children's education, healthcare, clothing and domestic expenditure. In many households, women also contribute significantly to family income through trading, farming, craft production and other informal activities. These responsibilities expose women to the immediate consequences of economic hardship. Rising food prices, school expenses, transportation costs and healthcare expenditure can place considerable pressure on household resources. Where government social protection is inadequate, temporary financial assistance may become attractive irrespective of its political implications. However, the consequences of electoral patronage extend beyond the immediate recipient. The broader question concerns what happens when political competition is organised around temporary benefits rather than public policies capable of improving household welfare over time. A political candidate who distributes money during an election may receive immediate electoral support, but that distribution does not necessarily establish a commitment to improving public schools, primary healthcare facilities, maternal services, rural infrastructure or employment opportunities. The intergenerational dimension becomes clearer when examined against the condition of Nigerian children. The Federal Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning and UNICEF (2024) reported that 67.5% of Nigerian children aged 0–17 years experienced multidimensional poverty. The report also identified substantial challenges

involving nutrition, education, health, sanitation and access to essential services. Approximately 90% of rural children experienced multidimensional poverty, demonstrating the unequal geographical distribution of deprivation. UNICEF (2024) separately reported that approximately 11 million Nigerian children under five experienced severe child food poverty. The organisation warned that children experiencing severe dietary deprivation face substantially increased risks of wasting and other nutritional complications. These statistics cannot be attributed to vote-buying alone. They reflect broader structural conditions involving poverty, inequality, insecurity, public service delivery and economic management. Nevertheless, they demonstrate what is at stake when public institutions fail to protect the welfare of future generations.

Electoral corruption may contribute to this problem by weakening the mechanisms through which citizens demand effective public services. Where political representatives secure office through inducement rather than credible public commitments, accountability can become less meaningful. A mother who accepts a temporary electoral benefit is not necessarily consciously sacrificing her children's future. The more fundamental concern is that a political system may exploit immediate economic needs while failing to provide the long-term social conditions that families require. This distinction is important. The responsibility for sustainable development rests primarily with political institutions, elected representatives and the wider governing structure, not with economically disadvantaged mothers alone.

Gender, Political Representation and the Exclusion of Women from Decision-Making

An important contradiction exists within Nigerian democratic development: women constitute a substantial proportion of the electorate, contribute to political mobilisation and participate in electoral activities, yet remain inadequately represented in elective political institutions.

The 2023 general elections exposed this contradiction. Nkereuwem (2023), writing for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, observed that women's representation in Nigeria's National Assembly had declined following the elections. The study identified political party gatekeeping, financial barriers, conservative social expectations and intimidation as important obstacles confronting women aspirants. Ette and Akpan-Obong (2023) similarly demonstrate that women seeking political office must negotiate institutional and social arrangements that frequently privilege male political actors. Their research provides a useful framework for understanding why women's participation in electoral processes does not automatically translate into political influence. The implications extend beyond gender equality. When women remain inadequately represented in legislative and executive institutions, their opportunities to influence public expenditure, social protection, maternal healthcare, education and child welfare may also be restricted. This does not mean that women politicians necessarily represent women's interests more effectively than men. Rather, inclusive political institutions provide a wider range of citizens with opportunities to participate in decisions affecting public life.

The *Centre for Democracy and Development* (2023), in its report on women and electoral politics in Nigeria, identifies the importance of addressing electoral violence, discrimination and barriers to women's political participation. The report also advocates stronger institutional procedures for addressing gender-based misconduct and improving women's access to political processes. Women's political exclusion must therefore be understood as part of the wider political economy of electoral patronage. Where access to party nominations and campaign resources depends heavily on financial capacity and established political networks, women with limited access to economic resources may find it more difficult to compete.

Political Patronage, Public Accountability and the Failure of Social Investment

Electoral patronage becomes particularly problematic when it weakens the relationship between public expenditure and citizens' needs. A democratic government is expected to use public resources to provide education, healthcare, infrastructure, security, employment opportunities and social protection. These responsibilities cannot be replaced by temporary gifts distributed during election campaigns. Stokes et al. (2013) explain how clientelistic relationships can encourage political actors to direct benefits selectively towards supporters instead of developing broad-based public programmes. Demarest (2021), examining elite clientelism in Nigeria, also demonstrates how party structures can encourage the allocation of resources to political elites and party interests rather than strengthening direct relationships between elected representatives and constituents. This raises an important historical and institutional question: to what extent does electoral patronage encourage political leaders to prioritise the maintenance of political networks over the provision of public goods? The issue is particularly relevant to children. Public investment in schools, qualified teachers, textbooks, healthcare facilities, nutrition programmes and sanitation produces benefits that extend beyond the immediate electoral cycle. When these services are inadequate, children experience disadvantages that may continue into adulthood. The World Bank's human capital research has repeatedly emphasised the relationship between health, education, productivity and long-term economic development. Its 2026 report on human capital development in Nigeria further highlights the economic consequences of deficits in nutrition, learning and skills development.

The danger of patronage politics is therefore not simply that money changes hands during elections. It is that political competition may increasingly reward immediate distributive gestures while insufficiently rewarding long-term investment in human development.

Media Reports, Public Opinion and the Exposure of Electoral Patronage

Nigerian newspapers and broadcast media play an important role in documenting electoral inducement, reporting citizens' experiences and drawing attention to weaknesses in electoral administration. Newspaper investigations provide useful contemporary evidence because they capture developments that may not immediately appear in official statistics. They document the activities of party agents, the distribution of incentives, the experiences of voters and public reactions to electoral malpractice. For instance, *The Guardian* (Adeyemi et al., 2024) investigated the increasing influence of vote-buying on political campaigns. Its reporting connected the declining emphasis on policy debates with the growing use of financial inducements. Similarly, *The Guardian*'s coverage of the 2024 Edo governorship election documented allegations of vote-buying and the distribution of food items during voting (Njoku & Egbejule, 2024). These reports are particularly useful for examining the local manifestations of electoral patronage. The academic study by Kadiri et al. (2026) on newspaper coverage of vote-buying during Nigeria's 2023 general elections also provides a useful perspective on the media's role. Their research examined coverage by *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, *Daily Trust* and *Daily Sun*, identifying the importance of media attention in shaping public perceptions of electoral credibility. However, newspaper reports must be evaluated critically. Reports of alleged payments should be attributed to the journalists, observers or organisations making the claims. They should not automatically be presented as judicially established facts. The media's responsibility should extend beyond reporting individual incidents. Investigative journalism should examine the financial networks behind electoral inducement, the role of political

intermediaries, the enforcement of electoral laws and the relationship between political financing and public accountability.

Legal and Institutional Responses to Vote-Buying in Nigeria

Nigeria possesses legal and institutional provisions intended to protect electoral integrity. The Electoral Act 2022 provides an important statutory framework for the conduct of elections and the regulation of electoral offences. Section 121 addresses bribery and related electoral offences, including the giving and receiving of money, gifts or other inducements in connection with voting. The Act establishes penalties for electoral bribery and provides a legal basis for addressing the commercialisation of electoral choices (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022).

However, the existence of legislation does not automatically guarantee effective enforcement.

The NDI/IRI Joint International Election Observation Mission (2023), in its final report on the 2023 general elections, identified several challenges involving electoral integrity, political violence, administrative shortcomings and public confidence in the electoral process.

The Chatham House assessment of Nigeria's 2023 presidential and National Assembly elections also examined weaknesses in the legal framework and the enforcement of electoral offences, including concerns about candidate liability for bribery committed by campaign agents (Hoffmann et al., 2024). The challenge is therefore not simply the absence of legal provisions. It also involves investigation, prosecution, institutional independence, political interference and the willingness of relevant authorities to enforce existing regulations.

Effective responses require coordinated action by the Independent National Electoral Commission, security agencies, the judiciary, political parties, civil society organisations and the media.

Reconstructing Women's Political Agency Beyond Electoral Transactions

The discussion of women and electoral patronage should not end with the condemnation of vote-selling. Such an approach would overlook the broader political and economic conditions that shape women's participation in Nigerian democracy.

Women should be recognised as political actors with the capacity to organise, question government policies, demand accountability and influence the direction of national development. Their participation should not be reduced to campaign attendance, political mobilisation or the distribution of electoral incentives. One important intervention is the expansion of women's economic independence. Access to affordable credit, agricultural support, vocational training, secure employment and business development opportunities can strengthen women's ability to participate in political life without depending excessively on temporary political assistance.

Another important measure involves civic education. Electoral education should explain the difference between immediate electoral inducements and the long-term responsibilities of elected representatives. Women should have access to information concerning government budgets, public expenditure, education policy, healthcare provision and the responsibilities of elected officials. Political parties also have a responsibility to develop internal democratic arrangements that encourage women's participation. The cost of nomination forms, discriminatory party practices, intimidation and financial barriers should be addressed through transparent and enforceable reforms. The objective should not be to portray women as morally superior or inferior to men. It should be to create political conditions in which all citizens can exercise their electoral rights without coercion, economic exploitation or discriminatory institutional arrangements.

Rebuilding the Future: Children, Social Protection and Democratic Responsibility

The future of Nigeria cannot be secured through electoral competition alone. It requires a political system capable of translating public resources into measurable improvements in human welfare. Children must occupy a central position in national development planning because their education, health, nutrition and protection determine the quality of the future workforce and the sustainability of national development. UNICEF (2024) emphasises that Nigeria's approximately 105 million children and adolescents represent a major opportunity for human capital development. However, the persistence of multidimensional poverty, inadequate educational access, nutritional deprivation and weaknesses in child protection demonstrates the scale of the country's developmental responsibilities. The government should therefore strengthen child-sensitive budgeting and ensure that allocations to education, healthcare, nutrition and social protection are transparently implemented. Public expenditure should be evaluated according to the actual benefits delivered to communities rather than the size of budgetary announcements.

A functioning social protection system is equally important. Vulnerable households should have access to targeted assistance that is independent of political affiliation or electoral support. This will reduce the opportunities for political actors to exploit economic vulnerability during election periods. Furthermore, the Independent National Electoral Commission should intensify voter education and strengthen mechanisms for documenting and prosecuting electoral bribery. Political parties should be required to maintain transparent campaign financing arrangements, while civil society organisations should expand independent electoral observation.

The ultimate objective is to establish a democratic environment in which political leaders compete through public programmes, policy commitments and accountable governance rather than the distribution of temporary material inducements.

Conclusion

The relationship between women, electoral patronage and children's future reveals a significant contradiction within Nigeria's democratic development. Women participate in electoral processes, contribute to household survival and play important roles in community political organisation, yet they continue to encounter economic disadvantages and institutional barriers to effective political representation. Vote-buying is not simply an isolated electoral offence. It is connected to wider patterns of political clientelism, economic vulnerability, weak institutional accountability and the unequal distribution of political opportunities. Its consequences extend beyond election day because the commercialisation of political choices can weaken the incentives for responsible government and the provision of public goods. The available evidence demonstrates the seriousness of the problem. The NBS (2024) findings show that vote-buying increased between the 2019 and 2023 general elections. UNICEF's 2024 assessment of children's conditions further demonstrates the scale of multidimensional deprivation confronting Nigerian households. These developments should be understood as connected concerns within the wider challenge of democratic accountability and sustainable development, although the available evidence does not establish that vote-buying alone causes child poverty.

The argument of this paper is not that Nigerian mothers are responsible for the country's electoral or developmental difficulties. Rather, it is that political institutions should not exploit the economic responsibilities of mothers and other vulnerable citizens to sustain transactional electoral relationships.

A political system that approaches women primarily as electoral instruments while neglecting their economic empowerment, political representation and social welfare cannot adequately

respond to the needs of future generations. The protection of children's future therefore requires more than appealing to mothers to reject electoral inducements. It requires political leadership that recognises the relationship between democratic integrity and human development. It requires institutions that protect public resources, parties that respect electoral competition, and governments that invest in the welfare of citizens. The most important question is not how much money a politician distributes to a household during an election. It is what that household receives from government after the election has ended. Nigeria's democratic future must be measured not by the money distributed during campaigns but by the opportunities created for children to live, learn, develop and contribute meaningfully to society.

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