

Strengthening Women's Voice and Agency in Nigeria

Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial on Women's Advocacy and Men's Allyship Trainings

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Executive Summary

This note presents insights from a randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted across three states of southwestern Nigeria (Oyo, Ogun, and Osun), examining the effectiveness of advocacy and leadership training for women, along with allyship training for men (their husbands), in improving women's voice and agency in community governance. With over 5,800 women participants across 450 communities, this study tested whether training women alone, as well as whether training them in tandem (though in separate sessions) with their husbands, can increase women's political participation in local governance or the responsiveness of local leaders to women's priorities. We show causal improvements in both due to women being trained, though do not find consistent increases in these effects due to additionally trainings husbands. The findings allow us to chart out emerging policy lessons about the prospective value of such trainings in boosting women's political participation, the quality of that participation, and local leaders' responsiveness to it.

1. Introduction and Motivation

While government policies affect everyone, women are underrepresented in policymaking globally (Duflo 2012; Lawless 2015) and in Nigeria specifically (Ragasa et al. 2023). According to data on 29 African countries from Afrobarometer, only 21 percent of women have contacted a local government official in the past 12 months, compared to 33 percent of men; similarly, only 49 percent of women have raised an issue at a community meeting compared to 62 percent of men in the past 12 months (Takeshima et al. 2024). Women's exclusion from civic spaces often leads to policies that inadequately address issues vital to their well-being, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Doepke & Tertilt, 2019). Further, policies have the potential to support or hinder women's livelihoods—raising the stakes for women's involvement (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006).

Women’s political participation remains low for several reasons. A resource-based explanation suggests that women often lack the time, information, and skills needed for active civic engagement. A norms-based explanation highlights societal expectations that women should stay out of public life. Lastly, a psychological explanation points to women feeling disempowered and doubtful about their ability to influence change, further discouraging their involvement. Despite well-documented barriers to women’s political participation, empirical assessments of real-world interventions to counteract these barriers, and specifically of interventions designed to counteract psychological and social barriers, are rare (Burns et al., 2021; Cheema et al., 2019). Our research helps to fill this gap by testing a set of interventions designed to enhance women’s sense of individual and collective efficacy in affecting local policymaking processes.

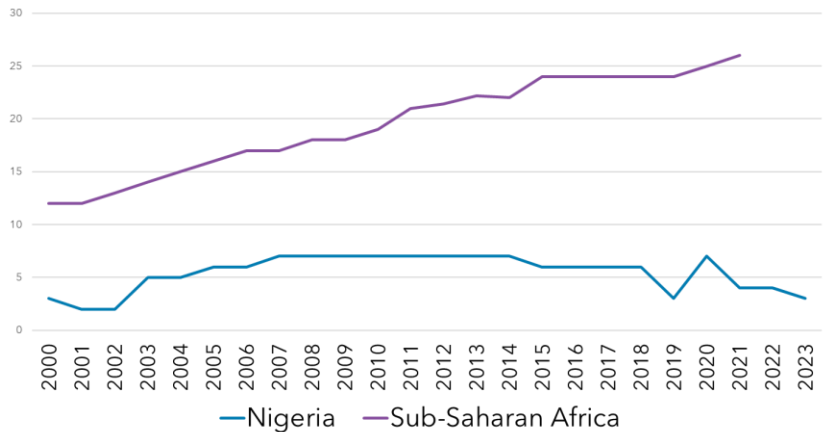
This note shares the causal impacts of a women’s advocacy training program on their engagement in local governance and the responsiveness of local leaders to women’s priorities. In contexts with restrictive gender norms, addressing psychological barriers alone may be insufficient without simultaneously addressing broader societal norms. In such settings, women’s political participation is also influenced by unequal dynamics in household decision-making and the degree of support from their husbands for their political participation. Therefore, we additionally test whether engaging men as allies can foster a more supportive environment, enabling women to participate more fully in local politics. This approach allows us to investigate the interaction between psychological empowerment and normative shifts in enhancing women’s political engagement. The findings contribute new insights into how to empower women within rural communities.

2. Context

Gender disparities in Nigeria’s political, social, and economic spheres are significant. In 2024, Nigeria ranked 125th out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Inequality Index, reflecting substantial structural barriers to women’s empowerment (UNDP, 2024). While women’s representation in parliament has grown elsewhere in Africa, it has remained low in Nigeria—at only 3% as of 2023 (see Figure 1). Women’s participation in local governance is also among the lowest in Africa (Jayachandran, 2015). These statistics highlight the need for interventions that enable women to engage meaningfully in civic and political life and encourage leaders to respond to women’s needs and policy preferences.

Entrenched patriarchal norms in many Nigerian communities mean that women are expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over civic involvement, limiting their time and resources to pursue political involvement or economic opportunities. Addressing these multifaceted constraints requires interventions that empower women individually while simultaneously working to build more egalitarian social norms.

Figure 1: Women’s share of seats in the National Assembly



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024)

3. Methodology

Sampling and Randomization¹

The study engaged approximately 5,800 women across 450 rural communities in the Nigerian states of Ogun, Osun, and Oyo (Figure 2). The sample was selected from the universe of all rural wards in these three states (wards are the smallest formal administrative unit in Nigeria), randomly selecting 150 rural wards in each, and then randomly selecting one community in each rural ward in which to implement the study.² Communities were randomly assigned to one of three groups, with equal probability:

- ▶ **Placebo Group:** Women received basic civic education on political rights and opportunities
- ▶ **Treatment Group 1 (T1):** Women received the basic civic education on political rights and opportunities as in the placebo group, plus intensive training in leadership, organizing, and advocacy skills, aimed at bolstering women's collective efficacy over the course of 5-6 months
- ▶ **Treatment Group 2 (T2):** Women received the basic civic education on political rights and opportunities as in the placebo group as well as the same intensive training as T1, plus a parallel (but separate from the women's training) training for trained women's husbands focused on fostering male allyship to support women's empowerment in civic spaces (explaining the value of empowering their wives for families and communities, as well as how to do so) over the course of 5-6 months

¹ As this study was guided by a pre-analysis plan (PAP) (Adida et al. 2023), elements of the study design repeat text in the PAP to ensure clarity and continuity from the PAP to the report of study results.

² Before sampling, 3 out of 700 rural wards in these states were removed from the sampling frame due to distance / accessibility, and 8 additional wards were removed due to piloting and focus group discussions conducted. After drawing the sample, 21 out of 450 selected wards had to be replaced in the sample due to accessibility issues identified by our implementing partners. Accessibility issues were primarily due to survey costs. Replacement communities were randomly selected.

Figure 2: Study locations



Notes: Boundaries in this map represent states in Nigeria. This map is for illustrative purposes and does not imply endorsement of any political or territorial claims.

Intervention Overview

The intervention was developed and implemented in partnership with ActionAid Nigeria (AAN), a well-established local NGO with deep experience in women’s empowerment initiatives across Nigeria. This collaboration ensured that the intervention was culturally relevant, accessible, and grounded in local context. Each community’s traditional leader (known as the Baale, and always male) participated in a preliminary meeting with AAN and generated a list of 13 women and their 13 husbands for participation in the training. Requirements were that women must: (1) be married; (2) be between the ages of 21 and 50; (3) have done something to earn money outside of their household in the last month (i.e., economically active); (4) be interested in participating in training at least once per month over the following 5 months; and (5) have a husband they believe is available and willing to participate in men’s training at least once per month over the next 5 months. In choosing these criteria, we prioritized the likelihood of participation and retention over a six-month training period, as well as women who had some mobility within the community due to their preexisting economic activities (even if these were minimal). Within these criteria, we asked Baales to prioritize women who were not leaders within the community and who were not politically active.

Preliminary Meeting for All Communities

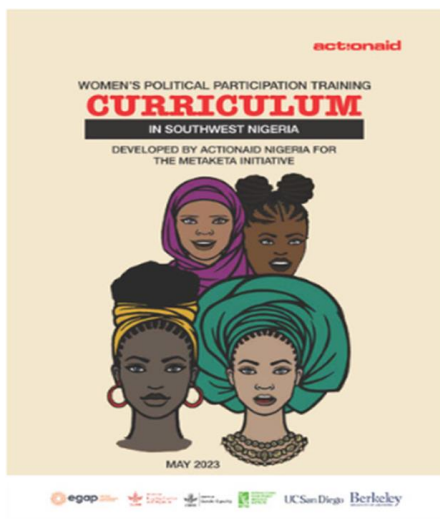
Each community began with an introductory session to establish baseline knowledge and encourage political engagement. This session standardized civic education across placebo and treatment groups, ensuring comparability. Delivered in a one-way format, it screened participants for interest in ongoing training, confirmed eligibility, and collected follow-up contact information. Participants received an overview of national identity, civic engagement, the Nigerian constitution, local governance structures, and leaders’ roles. By including all participants, we isolated the effects of subsequent advocacy training from baseline civic knowledge, as the placebo group did not receive further content on gender identity or leadership skills. Placebo group members were not encouraged to meet afterward by the facilitators, although this was not restricted.

Women's Training (T1 and T2)

Women in the treatment communities (T1 and T2) participated in five structured, group-based training sessions, developed collaboratively with AAN to foster political and civic engagement and adapt content based on local pilot testing (Figure 3). These sessions aimed to activate three critical components of the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA): (1) recognizing shared injustices, (2) fostering a collective gender identity, and (3) building a capacity for collective action. Training modules, tailored to local needs, included participatory activities, discussions, and take-home exercises. Key components included:

- ▶ **Group-Based Injustice:** In their first training after the preliminary meeting, women discussed gender-based inequities in local services, public participation, and economic opportunities. Activities included mapping community resources and identifying who controls them, helping women articulate shared grievances and understand their rights (Van Zomeren et al., 2008).
- ▶ **Collective Identity as Women:** Additional sessions encouraged women to define their shared identity and values, using exercises to identify collective goals and formulate community needs. These discussions not only increased women's sense of solidarity, but also empowered them to advocate for gender-specific concerns within their communities.
- ▶ **Perceived Collective Efficacy:** Later sessions emphasized practical skills for coordinated advocacy, including how to identify and approach decision-makers, understand local governance, and leverage shared grievances to gain influence. Interactive exercises, such as "Collective Dream Mapping" and "Stakeholder Analysis," provided women with hands-on experience in planning civic interventions and communicating with officials (Bandura, 1997).

Figure 3: Women's training curriculum



Source: *Women's Political Participation Training Curriculum in Southwest Nigeria* (2023).

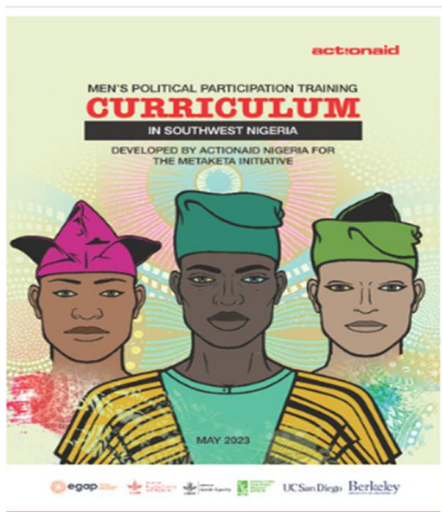
Men's Training (T2)

For communities in the T2 condition, husbands of trained women participated in five parallel training sessions (held separately from the women's trainings), focusing on the importance of supporting women's political and civic engagement (Figure 4). This aspect of the intervention recognized the role

men often play as “gatekeepers” in patriarchal settings and aimed to support men in becoming allies for women’s empowerment. The male training curriculum highlighted:

- ▶ **Understanding Gender Equality:** Sessions introduced men to basic gender concepts, reinforcing how women’s empowerment benefits households and communities. Discussions covered men’s potential roles in reducing gender inequities and supporting women’s leadership within civic spaces.
- ▶ **Supporting Women’s Civic Engagement:** Using community case studies, men explored ways to actively encourage women’s participation. These discussions included tangible actions, from encouraging women to attend local meetings to publicly supporting women’s initiatives.
- ▶ **Effective Allyship:** Sessions concluded with strategies for advocating alongside women on community issues, encouraging men to view women’s success as a shared community benefit.

Figure 4: Men’s training curriculum



Source: *Men’s Political Participation Training Curriculum in Southwest Nigeria* (2023).

Implementation and Localization

AAN engaged local facilitators, including teachers, social workers, and health workers familiar with the dialects and cultural norms of each community. This staffing strategy built trust and ensured the training materials were both linguistically and culturally relevant. The training sessions were adapted based on pilot feedback, and activities were designed to accommodate participants’ schedules and learning preferences. Additionally, AAN conducted extensive consultations with local leaders to secure community buy-in, which was essential for overcoming initial skepticism about the program.

Data Collection

Data were collected through baseline (May - June 2023) and endline (January - February 2024) surveys with women participants and local leaders. Surveys measured political participation, self-efficacy, group efficacy, and leaders’ responsiveness to women’s priorities. Further data came from community grants program applications. Also, we collected data on women’s aspirations, livelihoods, and economic outcomes. Additional surveys of men and local elites provided insights into shifts in gender attitudes.

4. Findings: Impacts on Women's Voice and Agency Outcomes

In this section, we describe causal impacts of our interventions on women's voice and agency in their communities, as well as whether they perceive elites to be responsive to their needs. We present results based on analysis of our endline survey data, as randomization ensures that any differences between the placebo group, T1, and T2 are due to the effect of the trainings alone. For women in the placebo group, T1, and T2, respectively, the bar graphs below (Figures 5-9) display the mean of each outcome variable from the endline survey.

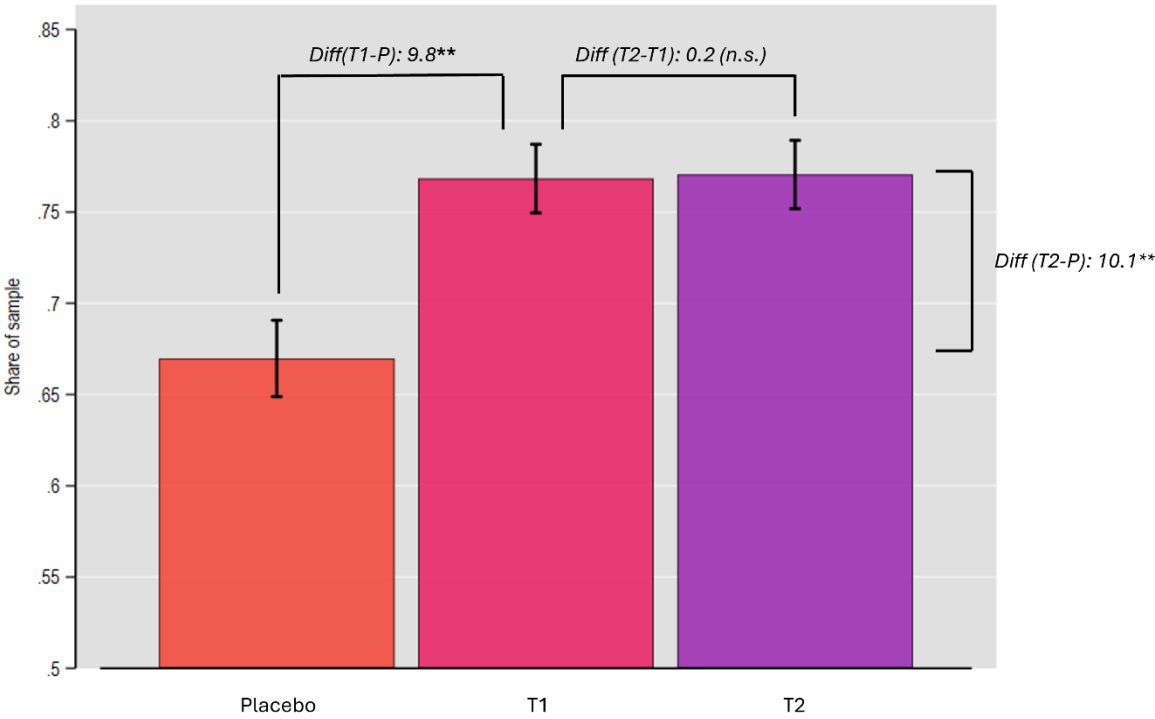
Overall, we find that both T1 and T2 significantly improve women's voice and agency in local governance. However, we find little evidence that T2 had any additional effect on women's political participation beyond what we see in T1. In other words, while we see the same positive effects on women's political participation in villages where men were also trained, it does not seem to be the case that men's trainings further boosted women's political participation beyond the effects of training just women.

In this note, we examine two key pathways for women's engagement and influence within local policy processes: (1) their participation in community meetings and (2) their individual contact with local leaders. Each of these pathways are important means of communicating policy preferences and sharing views on community development in rural areas. For each of these pathways, we additionally examine whether women perceive that local leaders are responsive to their ideas and demands.

Engagement in Community Meetings

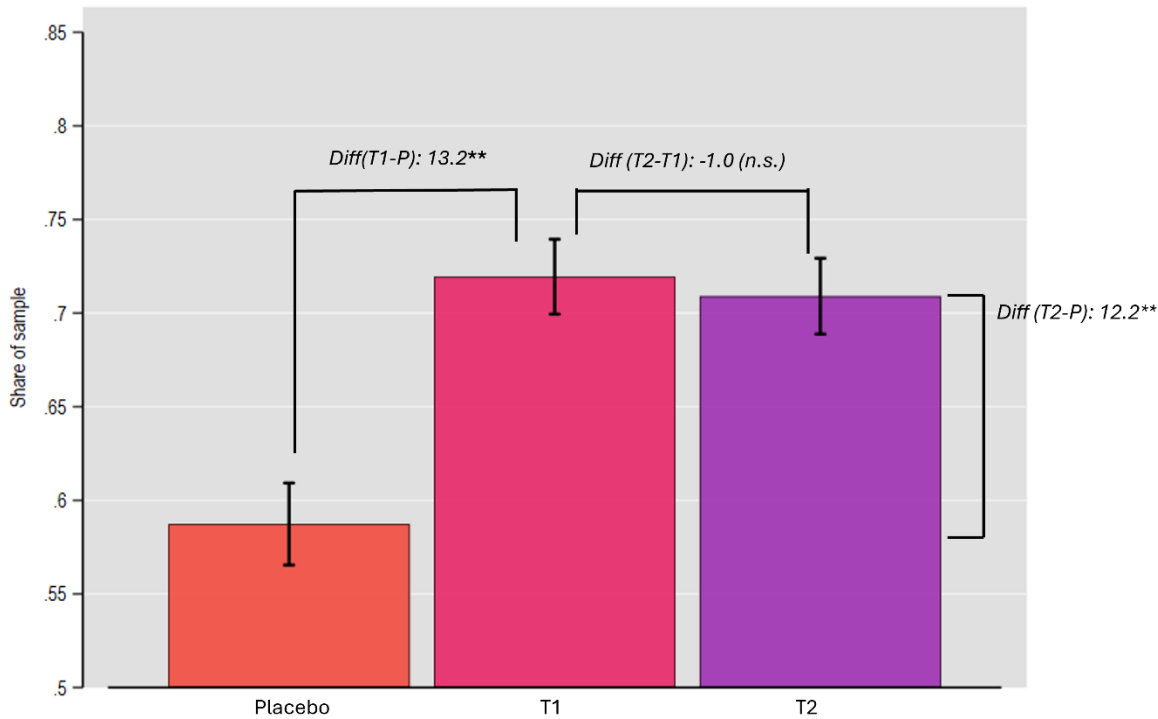
Treated women were between 9.8 percentage points (for the case of T1) and 10.0 percentage points (for the case of T2, in which husbands were trained as well) more likely to report that they attended community meetings compared to those in the placebo group, demonstrating an increased willingness to participate in civic activities (Figure 5). Moreover, these women were between 12.2 percentage points (for the case of T2) and 13.2 percentage points (for the case of T1) more likely to report that they spoke up in such meetings (Figure 6), suggesting that the training boosted their confidence and capacity to voice concerns in public settings. All of these comparisons between treatment and placebo are statistically significant at conventional levels. However, we do not find significant differences between women in T1 and women in T2 in participation levels in attendance at or participation in community meetings; thus, for these outcomes, the additional men's trainings did not boost women's participation beyond the effects of training women alone.

Figure 5: Attending community meetings



Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. ** indicates a p -value < 0.01 ; * indicates a p -value ≤ 0.05 , and + indicates a p -value of < 0.10 .

Figure 6: Speaking up at community meetings



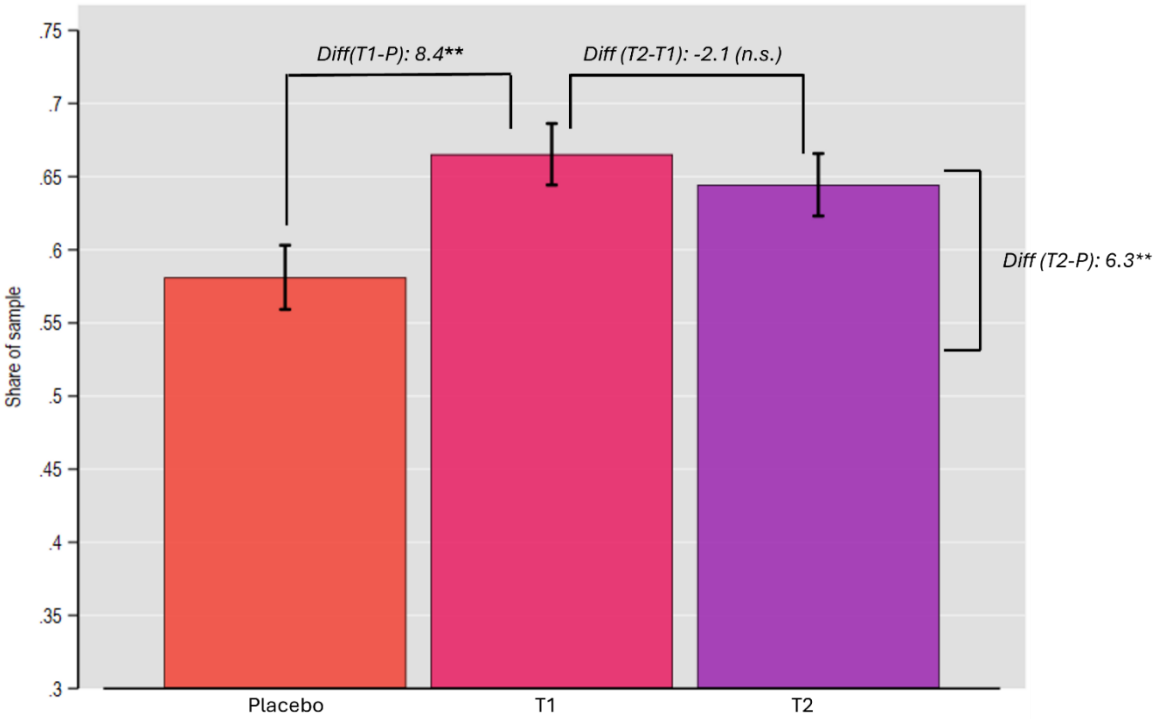
Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. ** indicates a p -value < 0.01; * indicates a p -value \leq 0.05, and + indicates a p -value of <0.10.

Contacting Local Officials

The training also increased women’s reported individual interactions with local leaders (Figures 7 and 8). Trained women in T1 were 8.4 percentage points more likely to report that they contacted the Baale and 4 percentage points more likely to report that they contacted their ward councilor. Women in T2, meanwhile, were 6.3 percentage points more likely to report that they contacted the Baale but not more likely than women in the placebo group to report that they contacted their ward councilor. While women in T2 on average contacted their Baales and ward councilors at lower rates compared to women trained in T1, the difference between T1 and T2 is statistically insignificant for both outcomes.

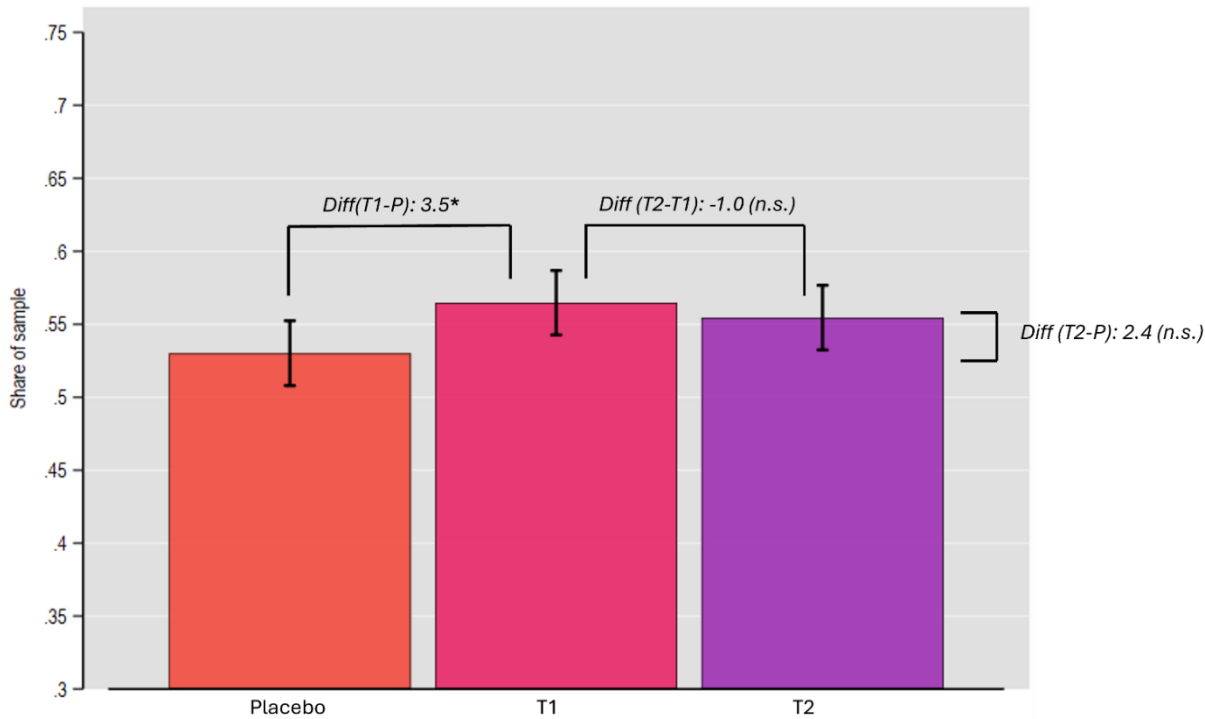
These findings indicate that the trainings equipped women with the skills and motivation to approach leaders with their community concerns, challenging traditional gender norms that restrict women’s civic engagement. However, simultaneously training their husbands in male allyship could affect their willingness to contact some types of local leaders in nuanced ways. For example, it is possible that men’s trainings increase men’s own skills at contacting local officials and that husbands and wives work together in T2 to contact higher level elected officials rather than women reaching out on their own. Unpacking these complex relationships will be the subject of a future paper, which will additionally leverage endline survey data from husbands.

Figure 7: Contacting local traditional leaders



Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. ** indicates a p -value < 0.01; * indicates a p -value \leq 0.05, and + indicates a p -value of <0.10.

Figure 8: Contacting local elected leaders



Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. ** indicates a p -value < 0.01 ; * indicates a p -value ≤ 0.05 , and + indicates a p -value of < 0.10 .

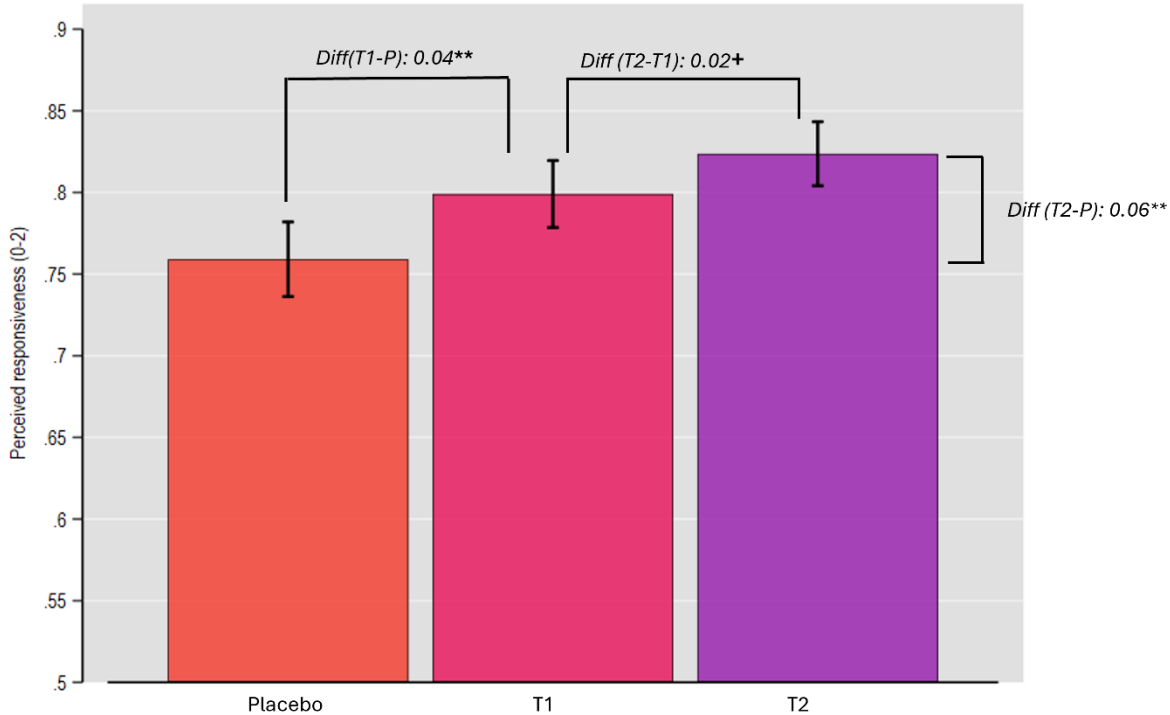
Beyond attendance and engagement, trained women were also significantly more likely to report a perception that local leaders respond to issues they raised in their most recent contact (Figure 9). This analysis is conducted for 72% of the sample who have contacted a local leader of any type (traditional or elected) in the past 6 months. We measure the responsiveness of local officials by asking women whether the local leader that they most recently attempted to contact did not try to help (0); tried but did not succeed in helping (1); or tried and succeeded in helping (2). Our findings suggest that the presence and participation of trained women in community discussions may have started to shift local dynamics, making leaders more receptive to the concerns of women.

Our findings show a 5% increase relative to the sample mean (a 0.04-unit increase in the outcome variable which ranges from 0-2) in perceived responsiveness in T1, and an 8% boost relative to the sample mean (a 0.06-unit increase in the outcome variable) in perceived responsiveness in T2. It is worth noting that this boost in responsiveness is materializing in a relatively short time frame, as our endline survey was conducted in the month after trainings ended. It is possible that local leaders could become more responsive over time if they become more accustomed to being contacted by women after the trainings and if women have a longer time period over which to put their skills into practice, or that effectiveness could decline after the initial boost from the trainings. Understanding whether these effects persist over time and how they may evolve would be worthwhile and important for policy recommendations.

We do see suggestive evidence that women are perceiving elites to be more responsive to their requests in T2 compared to T1 (with 90% confidence). It is possible that local officials are more likely to

be responsive to women when they have their husbands' support, or that trained men are playing a role in helping their wives navigate contact with local officials. Examining data from the men's survey as well as a separate survey that we conducted with local elites will help to unpack the mechanisms behind elite responsiveness in future analysis.

Figure 9: Women's perceptions of leader responsiveness to issues they raise



Notes: Differences between outcome variables across treatment groups are displayed in text on the figure. ** indicates a p -value < 0.01; * indicates a p -value \leq 0.05, and + indicates a p -value of < 0.10.

In summary, the RCT showed that advocacy training for women had substantial effects on women's voice and agency as well as on their perceptions that leaders are following up on their ideas and needs. These effects were also not consistently augmented by—though never significantly harmed by—allyship training for men.

5. Discussion and Policy Implications

The study findings have several important policy implications. First, they underscore the effectiveness of women's advocacy trainings in building women's political skills and confidence—and the value of efforts to scale up such training programs. By increasing women's capacity to articulate demands, such trainings can ensure that public services and local governance better reflect the needs of women, addressing gender disparities in policy outcomes (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Initiatives that foster a sense of collective efficacy among women should be prioritized as a pathway to sustainable political engagement. Training programs that build shared identity and purpose, as well as equip women with skills for collective action, can foster long-term change. Such programs align with psychological research showing that group identity and collective efficacy drive successful collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008; Simon & Klandermans, 2001).

Second, they underscore the need for more critical thinking around how to harness male allyship to increase women's voice and agency within their communities. While our study arm that additionally trained men on the benefits for households and communities of empowering women had no negative effects, it did not on average increase the effectiveness of women's trainings, with the exception of a relatively small boost in women's perceptions that local officials were more responsive to their most recent contact attempt. It may be that such trainings need to be provided to men who are more initially hesitant about their wives participating in a voice and advocacy training. In our study, we specifically sought out men who were willing to participate in the training and thus may have already been supportive of their wife's political participation—making it hard to improve their support any further given its high initial level. There may also be heterogeneity in the impact of the program, and further exploration is needed to verify if that is the case. If particular women or men will benefit more, ensuring they have access to the programming when resources are limited would be advisable. However, the content of training programs may also need to be adjusted, and more work is needed to analyze how.

Overall, this RCT provides valuable insights into effective strategies for promoting gender-inclusive governance in Nigeria and similar low- and middle-income country settings. The evidence suggests that empowering women to develop collective efficacy can create environments conducive to women's voice and agency. Policymakers and development organizations should consider expanding these interventions in contexts with similar cultural and socio-economic barriers. Further research should evaluate the long-term sustainability of these interventions and explore complementary programs, such as those engaging local elites as allies. By addressing both psychological and societal constraints on women's participation, these interventions offer a promising approach to advancing gender equity in political participation and public policy outcomes.

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