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The Role of Feminist Movements in Shaping Women's Empowerment Narratives in Nigeria and Sudan

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Abstract

This paper comparatively examines how feminist movements in Nigeria and Sudan have constructed and mobilised narratives about women's empowerment within distinct political and historical contexts. Drawing on framing theory, postcolonial feminist theory, and Foucauldian discourse analysis, the study conceptualises empowerment as a contested political narrative rather than a neutral development outcome. In Nigeria, empowerment discourse has evolved from nationalist women's activism associated with Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti to policy-driven and digitally mediated movements such as the Feminist Coalition. In Sudan, feminist narratives were forged through resistance to authoritarian Islamisation under Omar al-Bashir and gained global visibility during the 2018–2019 revolution, symbolised by Alaa Salah and evolving into a decentralized survival-based movement during the 2023 conflict. Activism shifted from a Khartoum-focused model to diverse, nationwide initiatives. Even in conservative regions, local women's groups have risen to lead and Feminist Emergency Response Rooms (FERRs) came as a result of women-led (WLOs) feminist activism, navigated the spaces left empty by international aid agencies. The analysis demonstrates that empowerment in Nigeria is largely framed through institutional negotiation and development policy, whereas in Sudan it is rooted in revolutionary citizenship and resistance. Across both cases, digital activism amplifies feminist claims while exposing movements to backlash and securitisation. The study contributes to African feminist political theory by highlighting narrative framing as political infrastructure and challenging universalist empowerment metrics.

Keywords: Women's empowerment; African feminism; Nigeria; Sudan; digital activism; narrative framing; postcolonial feminism; political development.

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1. INTRODUCTION: FRAMING FEMINIST MOBILISATION AND EMPOWERMENT NARRATIVES

1.1 Background and Rationale

Over the past three decades, feminist mobilisation across Africa has undergone significant ideological, organisational, and strategic transformation. Researchers have recorded the transition from nationalist women's movements and state-aligned women's wings to independent feminist groups that emphasise intersectionality, bodily autonomy, and structural critique (Mama, 1995; Tamale, 2020; Tripp, 2015). Contemporary African feminist activism increasingly operates across hybrid terrains—street protest, digital platforms, NGO advocacy, and transnational networks—producing new vocabularies of rights and citizenship (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2011).

Simultaneously, the language of “women's empowerment” has become central within development policy, governance reforms, and global gender frameworks. International institutions and national governments have institutionalised empowerment as both a measurable development outcome and a normative political objective (Kabeer, 1999, 2005; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). However, empowerment discourse has also been critiqued for technocratic dilution, neoliberal individualisation, and depoliticization of feminist struggle (Batiwala, 2007; Cornwall, 2016). The conceptual tension between empowerment as transformative feminist praxis

and empowerment as a development metric forms a core problem for contemporary gender scholarship.

76. Spring J. Empowerment discourses differ significantly between reformist and revolutionary contexts, primarily in their targets of change, organizational structures, and underlying ideologies (2019).

Within this continental trajectory, the political and socio-religious contexts of Nigeria and Sudan offer a particularly generative comparative lens. Nigeria operates as a federal, electorally competitive democracy characterised by strong civil society formations, pronounced religious pluralism (Islam and Christianity), and regional legal variation, including the institutionalisation of Sharia law in several northern states (Ibrahim, 2015; Obadare, 2018). Sudan, by contrast, has experienced prolonged authoritarian rule—most notably under Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019)—marked by Islamisation policies, public order laws regulating women's bodies, and subsequent revolutionary upheaval during 2018–2019 (Abdelaziz, 2020; Gallab, 2018). These divergent trajectories—reformist democratic negotiation in Nigeria and revolutionary-authoritarian rupture in Sudan—produce distinct feminist grammars of empowerment.

This study responds to a critical scholarly gap: while

- African feminist activism has been extensively documented (Mama, 1995; Tamale, 2020; Tripp, 2015), less attention has been paid to how feminist movements actively construct, contest, and reshape empowerment narratives within differing regime types and religious political orders. In the context of African feminism, Sudanese feminism is documented as a sophisticated, historically rooted movement that bridges pan-Africanist anti-colonialism with modern transnational feminist solidarity, Balghis B. (2020), and Liv Tønnessen & Samia al-Nagar 2023, Reem Abbas (2023), Mayada Sedig (2024) and Hala Al-Karib, 2024.

). While often categorized within the broader African feminist framework, it is uniquely characterized by its direct confrontation with state-sponsored militarized patriarchy and its history of mobilizing as a popular, cross-class force.

By examining narrative production as a site of political struggle, this research situates empowerment not merely as an outcome but as a discursive and strategic field shaped by power relations.

Research Questions

This study is guided by three interrelated questions:

1. How have feminist movements shaped empowerment narratives in Nigeria and Sudan? This question interrogates how feminist actors define, articulate, and circulate meanings of empowerment within their respective socio-political contexts.

2. How do political systems, religious organisations, and online activism shape these stories?

Building on social movement theory (Tarrow, 2011) and scholarship on religion and gender politics (Mahmood, 2005; Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2011), this question examines how opportunity structures, legal regimes, and theological contestations shape feminist framing strategies.

3. In what ways do empowerment discourses differ between reformist and revolutionary contexts?

By comparing Nigeria's negotiated democratic framework with Sudan's revolutionary rupture, the study explores how empowerment is framed as policy reform, citizenship claim, moral resistance, or structural transformation. Together, these questions position empowerment narratives as both reflective and constitutive of political order.

Conceptual Clarifications

Feminism: African, Islamic, and Postcolonial Perspectives

This research adopts a pluralised understanding of feminism. African feminism, as articulated by scholars such as Mama (1995) and Tamale (2020), emphasises contextualised gender analysis rooted in colonial histories, communal epistemologies, and structural inequalities. It resists universalist liberal feminism while foregrounding agency within African sociopolitical realities.

Islamic feminism, meanwhile, reinterprets Qur'anic texts and Islamic jurisprudence to advocate gender justice from within religious epistemologies (Mahmood, 2005; Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2011). Its relevance is particularly salient in Muslim-majority northern Nigeria and Sudan, where feminist actors navigate religious authority structures. Postcolonial feminism provides the critical architecture for analysing how colonial legacies, global development regimes, and epistemic hierarchies shape gender politics (Mohanty, 2003). It cautions against framing African women solely as victims and insists on analysing global power asymmetries embedded within empowerment discourse.

Women's Empowerment

Following Kabeer (1999), empowerment is conceptualised as the expansion of individuals' ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied. This multidimensional understanding includes:

- Economic empowerment (access to resources and livelihoods),
 - Political empowerment (representation and decision-making authority),
 - Bodily autonomy (freedom from violence and coercive regulation),
 - Epistemic empowerment (authority over knowledge production and narrative framing).
- Humanitarian-Feminist Nexus: Empowerment is currently defined by providing life-saving support—food,

shelter, and medical services—while simultaneously challenging gender inequalities.

Crucially, empowerment is not treated as a static outcome but as a relational and processual transformation shaped by structural constraints (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

Narrative Framing and Discursive Power

Drawing on framing theory (Snow & Benford, 1988; Tarrow, 2011) and Foucauldian notions of discourse and power, this study conceptualises empowerment narratives as strategic meaning-making processes. Narratives are not neutral descriptions but political interventions that define problems, assign blame, and propose solutions. Feminist movements engage in diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing to shape public understanding and mobilise collective action. Thus, empowerment narratives constitute a form of discursive power: they structure what is thinkable, legitimate, and politically actionable within specific regimes of truth.

Justification by Comparison

The comparative selection of Nigeria and Sudan is theoretically purposeful rather than geographically incidental. Nigeria represents a federal democratic system characterised by electoral competition, robust (though contested) civic spaces, and religious pluralism (Obadare, 2018). Feminist activism in this context often operates through legislative advocacy, NGO engagement, and digital mobilisation within formal democratic institutions.

Sudan presents a contrasting trajectory of authoritarian Islamisation, gender-regulatory legislation, and revolutionary upheaval (Gallab, 2018; Abdelaziz, 2020). Women's activism has frequently taken the form of resistance against state-imposed moral codes and political exclusion. The 2018–2019 revolution foregrounded women as visible agents of national transformation, reframing empowerment as revolutionary citizenship rather than incremental reform. This contrast allows the study to examine how regime type, legal frameworks, and revolutionary rupture shape feminist strategies and empowerment narratives. Rather than assuming a universal model of empowerment, the comparison reveals context-dependent articulations of gender justice.

Methodological Overview

This research adopts a comparative qualitative design grounded in interpretive methodology. The aim is not to measure empowerment outcomes but rather to analyse how empowerment is discursively constructed, contested, and circulated.

Data sources include:

- Feminist organisational statements and manifestos
- NGO publications and advocacy documents
- Social media campaigns and digital activism

artefacts

- Protest speeches and visual symbolism
- Semi-structured interviews with activists, scholars, and policymakers

Analytical Approach:

- Critical discourse analysis to examine narrative framing and power relations
 - Comparative thematic analysis to identify divergences and convergences across contexts
 - Attention to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) in analysing class, religion, ethnicity, and regional differences
- This multi-layered methodology enables the study to capture both textual production and lived interpretive practices, situating empowerment narratives within broader political opportunity structures.

This chapter has framed the intellectual architecture of the study by situating feminist mobilisation within African political transformations, clarifying conceptual foundations, and justifying the comparative analyses of Nigeria and Sudan. By foregrounding empowerment as a contested narrative field shaped by regime type, religious authority, and digital activism, the study advances a theoretically grounded and contextually nuanced contribution to African feminist political scholarship.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: HISTORICAL TRAJECTORIES OF FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

This section situates contemporary women's empowerment narratives in Nigeria and Sudan within the longer historical trajectories of feminist mobilisation in both contexts. Rather than treating empowerment as a recent development driven solely by global development discourse, this review foregrounds indigenous activism, political ruptures, and shifting state–society relations that have shaped feminist claim-making over time.

2.1 Nigeria: From Nationalist Women's Activism to Digital Feminism

Colonial-Era Mobilisation and Market Women's Resistance. The genealogy of feminist activism in Nigeria is often traced to women's collective resistance under colonial rule. Scholars have demonstrated that women were central to anti-colonial mobilisation, particularly through market associations and tax protests (Mama, 1995;

Oyèwùmí, 1997). The 1929 Women's War in southeastern Nigeria, though predating formal nationalist parties, exemplified collective resistance to colonial taxation and warrant chiefs, marking one of the largest anti-colonial uprisings led by women in West Africa. In

southwestern Nigeria, the activism of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti illustrates the convergence of nationalist and feminist politics. Through the Abeokuta Women's Union in the 1940s, Ransome-Kuti mobilised market

women against unfair taxation and the authoritarian rule of traditional authorities backed by colonial administrators. As Mba (1982) documents, these mobilisations were not merely “supportive” of nationalist politics but articulated autonomous claims regarding representation, taxation, and women’s political participation.

Importantly, historians caution against retroactively imposing Western feminist categories onto these movements. As Oyèwùmí (1997) argues, precolonial Yoruba gender systems operated through relational hierarchies not reducible to binary gender frameworks, complicating assumptions about “women’s subordination” Whereas in Sudan prior to colonial restructuring. Thus, colonial modernity both constrained and catalysed new forms of gender consciousness.

Post-Independence Feminist Organising

Following independence in 1960, Nigerian women continued organising through professional associations, labour unions, and political parties. However, the postcolonial state’s patriarchal character and recurrent military rule limited formal political gains (Mama, 1995). Feminist activism during this period often oscillated between state engagement and civil society advocacy.

By the 1980s and 1990s, scholars observed a more explicitly feminist articulation of rights, partly influenced by transnational feminist networks and United Nations conferences (e.g., the 1995 Beijing Conference). Nigerian feminist intellectuals such as Amina Mama contributed to theorising African feminism beyond Western liberal paradigms, emphasising militarism, structural violence, and postcolonial state formation as central analytical concerns (Mama, 1995).

Structural Adjustment and the NGO-isation of Gender Advocacy

The Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of the 1980s, imposed by international financial institutions, profoundly reshaped Nigeria’s political economy. Feminist scholars argue that neoliberal reforms intensified women’s economic precarity while simultaneously expanding donor-funded gender advocacy (Mama, 2001). This period saw the proliferation of NGOs focused on “women’s empowerment”, often framed in development terms such as microcredit, capacity building, and governance reform.

While NGO-isation expanded institutional platforms for gender advocacy, critics contend that it also professionalised and depoliticised feminist activism, shifting emphasis from structural transformation to project-based interventions (Alvarez, 1999; Mama, 2001). Empowerment became increasingly tied to measurable development outcomes rather than collective political struggle.

Digital-Era Movements

The 2010s marked a significant transformation in

Nigerian feminist activism through digital platforms. The global visibility of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign following the 2014 abduction of schoolgirls by Boko Haram exemplifies the convergence of local activism and global digital solidarity. The hashtag mobilisation drew international attention and reframed the security crisis as a gendered issue of state accountability.

Similarly, women played visible leadership roles during the 2020 #EndSARS protests against police brutality. The Feminist Coalition emerged as a central coordinating body, managing protest funds, legal aid, and medical support. Their transparent crowdfunding strategies and digital organising practices reflected a new feminist political economy rooted in accountability and decentralised mobilisation.

Movements such as #ArewaMeToo further illustrate how digital platforms enable Muslim women in northern Nigeria to contest sexual violence within culturally specific contexts. These movements complicate assumptions that feminism is alien to local cultures; rather, they demonstrate contextually embedded feminist reinterpretations of justice, faith, and bodily autonomy.

Collectively, Nigeria’s feminist trajectory reflects negotiation within electoral democracy, neoliberal governance, and global digital publics. Empowerment narratives increasingly combine rights-based discourse with entrepreneurial and technological imaginaries, reflecting both opportunity and constraint within democratic–neoliberal frameworks.

2.2 Sudan: Feminist Resistance under Islamisation and Revolution

Women’s Political Engagement in Pre-1989 Sudan

Sudanese women have a long history of political engagement predating the Islamist regime of 1989. Women were active in anti-colonial struggles and professional unions, particularly through the Sudanese Women’s Union founded in the 1950s. As scholars note, Sudanese feminists historically linked gender equality with broader nationalist and socialist visions (Boddy, 1989).

Throughout the 1964 and 1985 uprisings against military rule, women participated in demonstrations, trade unions, and political parties. However, gains remained fragile amid recurring authoritarianism and political instability.

Gender Politics under the Omar al-Bashir Regime (1989–2019)

The 1989 coup brought Omar al-Bashir to power, inaugurating three decades of Islamist authoritarian rule. Under this regime, gender politics became central to state ideology. The Islamisation project restructured legal and social norms, embedding conservative interpretations of Sharia within state law (Hale, 2016).

Feminist scholars argue that the regime instrumentalised women symbolically—as markers of moral order—while simultaneously restricting their bodily autonomy and public presence. Women activists navigated surveillance, repression, and censorship, often operating through informal networks and diaspora advocacy.

Public Order Laws and Gender Regulation

The Public Order Laws, particularly in Khartoum, regulated women's dress, mobility, and behaviour. Violations—such as wearing trousers or appearing in public without prescribed modesty—could result in fines, flogging, or imprisonment. These laws became focal points for feminist resistance, as they visibly embodied state control over women's bodies (Hale, 2016). Activists such as journalist Lubna Hussein (though not entity-tagged here to avoid overuse) drew international attention to the criminalisation of women's dress in 2009, highlighting tensions between Islamist governance and human rights frameworks.

Women in the 2018–2019 Revolution

Women were widely recognised as central actors in the 2018–2019 revolution that led to al-Bashir's removal. Estimates suggest that women comprised a substantial proportion of protest participants, organisers, and neighbourhood resistance committees.

The global circulation of the image of Alaa Salah standing atop a car, dressed in white, leading chants—became emblematic of women's revolutionary leadership. Her image symbolised both continuity with Sudanese women's historical activism and a generational rearticulation of feminist citizenship.

Scholars interpret women's revolutionary participation as a rejection of decades of gendered authoritarianism and economic marginalisation. Chants such as “Freedom, Peace, and Justice” were often accompanied by explicit calls to dismantle public order laws and patriarchal legal codes.

Post-Revolution Feminist Rearticulations of Citizenship and Rights

In the immediate post-revolution period, feminist groups pushed for legal reforms, including the repeal of the Public Order Laws in 2019. Activists framed demands not solely in liberal rights terms but as redefinitions of citizenship itself—asserting women as full political subjects rather than moral dependents of the state. However, ongoing political instability and renewed conflict have complicated these gains. Scholars caution that transitional moments often produce symbolic recognition without structural transformation. Nevertheless, Sudanese feminist discourse has shifted from survival under repression to proactive reimagining of constitutional and civic belonging.

Comparative Insight

A comparative reading of Nigeria and Sudan reveals distinct yet intersecting trajectories. Nigeria's feminist evolution has largely unfolded within formally democratic—though deeply unequal—political structures shaped by neoliberal globalisation. Feminist activism has therefore navigated electoral politics, donor frameworks, and digital capitalism. Empowerment narratives frequently emphasise participation, entrepreneurship, and governance reform.

In contrast, Sudan's feminist history is marked by prolonged confrontation with authoritarian–Islamist state control. Here, empowerment narratives have been forged through resistance to legal repression, moral policing, and militarised governance. Sudanese feminism has often been less institutionalised and more overtly oppositional, linking bodily autonomy directly to regime change and constitutional transformation.

Thus, while Nigerian feminist movements reflect negotiation within democratic and neoliberal constraints, Sudanese feminist movements reflect sustained resistance against authoritarian Islamisation. In both contexts, however, contemporary empowerment narratives are inseparable from historical struggles—anticolonial mobilisation, structural adjustment, Islamisation, and revolutionary upheaval—that continue to shape how women articulate rights, agency, and citizenship.

3. NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

This section analyses how “women's empowerment” is discursively constructed, circulated, and mobilised in Nigeria and Sudan. Rather than treating empowerment as a neutral developmental objective, I approach it as a narrative formation—produced through language, symbols, policy frameworks, and activist repertoires. Drawing on framing theory (Snow & Benford, 1988), postcolonial feminist theory (Mohanty, 2003; Mama, 1995), and Foucauldian discourse–power analysis (Foucault, 1978), empowerment is understood not simply as material change but as a contested field of meaning shaped by state power, neoliberal governance, religious authority, and activist resistance.

3.1 Economic Empowerment Narratives

Nigeria: Entrepreneurship, Microfinance, and the “Girl Boss”

In Nigeria, economic empowerment narratives are strongly inflected by neoliberal development logics. Entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, and self-reliance have framed empowerment since the Structural Adjustment era. Development agencies, private

foundations, and state programmes consistently promote women as micro-entrepreneurs whose economic productivity promises both poverty reduction and national growth (Mama, 2001).

This entrepreneurial framing constructs empowerment as individual upward mobility rather than structural redistribution. The “girl boss” discourse—circulating widely across urban social media spaces—celebrates autonomy, innovation, and branding, often detached from systemic constraints such as unequal inheritance laws, limited access to capital, and care burdens. While such narratives can inspire aspiration, they risk depoliticising inequality by translating feminist struggle into market success.

At the same time, digital feminist organisations such as the Feminist Coalition have strategically appropriated financial technologies—crowdfunding, cryptocurrency, and transparent accounting—to support protest infrastructures. Here, economic empowerment is rearticulated as collective resource mobilisation, complicating the strictly individualist logic of neoliberal discourse.

Sudan: Survival Economies and Collective Resilience

Decades of sanctions, austerity, and political crisis shape economic empowerment narratives in Sudan. Under the regime of Omar al-Bashir, women navigated shrinking formal employment opportunities and expanding informal survival economies (Hale, 2016). As a result, empowerment is less often linked to hopeful entrepreneurship and more often to strength and group endurance.

Women’s participation in tea selling, small-scale trading, and neighbourhood cooperatives has often been simultaneously economic and political. Informal sector labour becomes a site of state surveillance—particularly under public order policing—but also a terrain of everyday resistance. Economic agency is thus narrated not as corporate success but as survival under structural violence.

Sudanese feminist discourse frequently invokes collective resilience rather than individual success. This framing aligns with postcolonial feminist critiques of neoliberal empowerment models that prioritise market integration over social justice (Mohanty, 2003).

3.2 Political Empowerment Narratives

Nigeria: Representation, Quotas, and Legislative Advocacy

Legislative reform and representation frequently articulate political empowerment in Nigeria’s formal democratic setting. Debates around gender quotas and constitutional amendments reflect efforts to increase women’s descriptive representation in parliament. Yet

Nigeria’s national assembly remains one of the lowest in Africa in terms of female representation.

Legislative advocacy around gender bills—such as constitutional amendments seeking reserved seats for women—has exposed entrenched patriarchal resistance. The rejection of several gender equality bills in 2022 sparked nationwide protests, revealing tensions between democratic procedure and substantive equality. Political empowerment, in this context, is narrated as inclusion within existing institutional frameworks.

However, critics argue that representation without structural transformation risks symbolic incorporation. Feminist scholars caution that numerical presence does not automatically translate into feminist policymaking, particularly within party systems shaped by patronage politics (Mama, 1995).

Sudan: Revolutionary Citizenship and Democratic Guardianship

In Sudan, political empowerment narratives are inseparable from revolutionary struggle. Women’s central participation in the 2018–2019 uprising reconfigured public understandings of citizenship. The iconic image of Alaa Salah became emblematic of women not merely as participants but as moral and political leaders of the revolution.

Women were widely described as “guardians of democracy”, a narrative that both elevated and burdened them symbolically. While transitional arrangements promised inclusion, feminist activists noted the gap between revolutionary rhetoric and actual power-sharing. Women were often under-represented in formal negotiation bodies despite their frontline presence.

Thus, political empowerment in Sudan oscillates between symbolic celebration and structural marginalisation. The revolutionary moment expanded discursive space for women’s citizenship, yet enduring militarised politics continue to constrain institutional transformation.

3.3 Bodily Autonomy and Legal Reform

Nigeria: Gender-Based Violence and Religious Contestations

Bodily autonomy constitutes a central axis of empowerment narratives in Nigeria. Campaigns addressing gender-based violence (GBV), sexual assault, and domestic abuse have gained national traction, particularly through digital activism. These movements frame bodily integrity as foundational to citizenship and economic participation.

However, religious pluralism complicates legal reform. In several northern states operating under Shariabased penal codes, feminist advocacy must negotiate Islamic jurisprudence, customary law, and constitutional guarantees. Debates over child marriage,

inheritance, and sexual rights illustrate how empowerment discourse intersects with faith-based moral frameworks. Postcolonial feminist scholarship warns against simplistic portrayals of religion as inherently oppressive, urging instead attention to internal reform movements and Islamic feminist reinterpretations (Mahmood, 2005). In Nigeria, empowerment narratives therefore operate within layered religious and constitutional terrains.

Sudan: Public Order Laws and Moral Policing

In Sudan, bodily autonomy has been directly legislated through the now-repealed Public Order Laws. These regulations governed dress, movement, and public conduct, disproportionately targeting women. The repeal of these laws in 2019 was widely celebrated as a feminist victory.

Dress codes and morality policing had rendered women's bodies symbolic battlegrounds for national identity under Islamist governance. Feminist activism reframed these controls as violations of citizenship rather than merely cultural norms (Hale, 2016). Thus, empowerment discourse in Sudan links bodily autonomy explicitly to dismantling authoritarian state structures.

3.4 Digital Feminism and Transnational Influence

Digital platforms have transformed empowerment narratives in both contexts. Social media operates as a narrative amplifier, enabling activists to bypass state-controlled media and construct alternative publics. Hashtag campaigns connect local grievances to global feminist solidarities, generating transnational visibility. Diaspora activism plays a particularly significant role in Sudan, where exile communities have historically mobilised international advocacy. In Nigeria, diasporic networks amplify campaigns such as anti-GBV protests and electoral reforms.

Yet digital empowerment carries risks. Surveillance, cyber-harassment, and securitisation of online dissent expose activists to new vulnerabilities. Authoritarian backlash and digital misinformation campaigns can distort feminist messaging. From a Foucauldian perspective, digital space is not inherently liberatory; it is a contested terrain where power circulates, disciplines, and produces subjects (Foucault, 1978).

Theoretical Anchor

Applying framing theory, empowerment narratives in Nigeria and Sudan can be considered strategic constructions that diagnose injustice, propose remedies, and motivate collective action (Snow & Benford, 1988). Nigerian movements frequently frame injustice in terms of governance deficits and economic exclusion, while Sudanese movements frame it as authoritarian repression and moral regulation.

Through a postcolonial feminist lens, these narratives reveal tensions between global development scripts and locally grounded struggles. Empowerment is not a universal concept; rather, it is a historically contextualised expression influenced by colonial legacies, neoliberal restructuring, and religious politics (Mohanty, 2003; Mama, 1995).

Finally, a Foucauldian discourse–power approach illuminates how empowerment discourse both resists and reproduces power. States deploy empowerment rhetoric to signal modernity and legitimacy; development institutions operationalise it through metrics and projects; activists reclaim it as a language of rights and revolution. Empowerment, therefore, is not a stable outcome but an ongoing negotiation within fields of power.

4. CONTESTATION, BACKLASH, AND INTERNAL MOVEMENT TENSIONS

While empowerment narratives in Nigeria and Sudan have expanded discursive space for women's rights and political participation, they remain deeply contested. This section critically interrogates the limits, contradictions, and internal tensions embedded within these narratives. Drawing on postcolonial feminist critique (Mohanty, 2003; Mama, 1995) and discourse–power analysis (Foucault, 1978), I argue that empowerment discourse is neither linear nor uniformly emancipatory. It is a negotiated field shaped by religious authority, class stratification, geopolitical intervention, and state power.

- The "Backlash-First" Model: In many Western contexts, backlash occurs after feminist successes. In Sudan, the authors argue that the violent Islamization under the al-Bashir regime specifically targeted women's bodies and restricted them to the private sphere before they could organize. This sustained state violence became the mobilizing force that ignited the 2018–2019 revolution. Liv and Samia El Naggar (2023) argued that backlash preceded the feminist movement rather than reacting to it

- "Women, Revolution, and Backlash: Igniting Feminist Mobilization in Sudan" (2023): Published in *Politics & Gender*, this article uses the 2018–2019 revolution to show how a new generation of women transformed "private" grievances into public, revolutionary demands, sparking a massive state backlash.

- Internal Backlash: Critically, Liv Tønnessen and Samia al-Nagar, (2023) (document that backlash didn't just come from the regime. It also emerged from within the revolutionary movement itself. Female protesters faced sexual harassment from male counterparts and were often silenced or excluded from formal political negotiations following the uprising.

4.1 Religious and Cultural Counter-Narratives

Islamic Reformist vs. Secular Feminist Tensions

In both Nigeria and Sudan, feminist empowerment projects frequently encounter counter-narratives grounded in religious reformism. In northern Nigeria and in Sudan under the regime of Omar al-Bashir, state and non-state actors framed gender equality demands as threats to Islamic moral order. Feminist claims regarding inheritance reform, dress autonomy, and sexual rights were often recast as Western impositions incompatible with Sharia.

Yet the landscape is more complex than a binary opposition between “Islam” and “feminism”. Islamic feminist scholars and reformist activists have articulated gender justice through Qur’anic reinterpretation, challenging patriarchal jurisprudence from within religious epistemologies (Mahmood, 2005). The tension, therefore, is less between faith and feminism per se and more between competing interpretive authorities over religious meaning.

In Sudan, the repeal of public order laws after 2019 intensified debates between secular constitutionalists and Islamist constituencies. Feminist gains were portrayed by conservative actors as moral erosion, demonstrating how empowerment reforms can trigger cultural backlash.

Christian Conservative Responses in Nigeria

In southern Nigeria, Christian conservative movements have also mobilised against feminist reforms, particularly sexuality education, reproductive rights, and gender legislation. Legislative debates on gender equality bills have often invoked biblical frameworks that emphasise male headship and heteronormative family structures.

These counter-narratives frame empowerment initiatives as destabilising the family and undermining divine order. The accusation of “Westernisation” frequently accompanies feminist advocacy, positioning gender equality discourse as externally imposed rather than locally rooted. Such claims obscure Nigeria’s long history of women’s political activism while reinforcing nationalist–religious boundaries against perceived cultural imperialism (Mama, 1995).

Accusations of Westernisation

Across both contexts, empowerment discourse is vulnerable to charges of neo-colonial influence. Postcolonial feminist scholarship warns that global development institutions sometimes universalise Western liberal models of autonomy, inadvertently validating claims that feminism is foreign (Mohanty, 2003). These accusations function politically: they delegitimise activists, justify state surveillance, and reassert cultural sovereignty. Yet they also compel feminist movements to articulate more grounded, historically situated narratives of gender justice—drawing on indigenous precedents and

religious reinterpretations to contest the “foreignness” label.

4.2 Class, Ethnicity, and Regional Divides

Urban Elite Feminism vs. Grassroots Activism

Empowerment narratives often circulate most visibly through urban, English-speaking, digitally connected elites. In Nigeria, prominent feminist organisations and social media campaigns are frequently headquartered in Lagos or Abuja, generating criticisms that feminism represents middle-class priorities rather than rural or working-class concerns.

Grassroots activists, including market women’s associations and informal labour networks, may prioritise economic survival over symbolic representation. The language of “intersectionality”, while analytically robust, can appear abstract when detached from material redistribution.

This class divide reflects what Alvarez (1999) describes as the professionalisation of feminist activism: leadership becomes concentrated among educated elites fluent in donor language and international norms. Such dynamics risk reproducing inequality within movements ostensibly committed to dismantling it.

Northern vs. Southern Nigeria

Regional divides further complicate empowerment discourse in Nigeria. Southern states, with higher female literacy rates and different religious demographics, often produce more visible feminist advocacy. Northern Nigeria, shaped by distinct colonial histories and Islamic legal pluralism, encounters different socio-legal constraints.

Movements such as #ArewaMeToo have attempted to localise feminist activism within northern Muslim communities, demonstrating that empowerment narratives are regionally differentiated rather than nationally uniform. These divergences challenge any singular account of “Nigerian feminism”.

Arab–African Identity Politics in Sudan

In Sudan, identity politics intertwine gender with racialised and ethnic hierarchies. The Arab–African binary, intensified by conflicts in Darfur and other marginalised regions, complicates feminist solidarity. Women from peripheral regions often experience compounded marginalisation shaped by ethnicity, displacement, and class.

Empowerment narratives emerging from Khartoumbased professional networks may not fully capture the experiences of rural or conflict-affected women. Thus, Sudanese feminism must navigate not only gender oppression but also racialised state violence and regional inequality.

4.3 NGO-isation and Donor Influence

Professionalisation of Activism

Since the 1990s, feminist activism in both Nigeria and Sudan has increasingly operated through NGOs funded by bilateral donors and international organisations. This institutionalisation has enabled sustained programming, research, and policy engagement. However, it has also reshaped activist priorities.

Professionalisation often requires adherence to donor timelines, measurable outcomes, and technical reporting structures. Activists become project managers, and advocacy becomes programmatic. While such structures provide resources, they can constrain radical critique.

Language Shifts toward Development Metrics

Empowerment discourse has increasingly adopted technocratic language: “capacity building”, “gender mainstreaming”, “stakeholder engagement”, and “impact indicators”. These terms, though useful for policy dialogue, risk diluting structural critiques of patriarchy and capitalism.

Foucauldian analysis suggests that such language constitutes a form of governmentality—transforming feminist demands into administratively manageable categories (Foucault, 1978). Empowerment becomes measurable performance rather than transformative redistribution.

Risks of Depoliticisation

Critics argue that NGO-isation can depoliticise feminist struggle by shifting focus from collective mobilisation to service delivery (Mama, 2001). When empowerment is framed primarily through workshops and training sessions, its insurgent dimension may be muted. However, it would be reductive to portray NGOs as uniformly co-opted. Many organisations strategically navigate donor frameworks while sustaining grassroots alliances. The tension lies not in institutionalisation per se, but in the balance between professional sustainability and political radicalism.

4.4 Authoritarian Retrenchment and Political Instability

Post-Revolution Instability in Sudan

The ousting of Omar al-Bashir in 2019 opened a transitional window for legal reform, including the repeal of public order laws. Yet subsequent military interventions and ongoing conflict have severely constrained civic organising.

Authoritarian retrenchment illustrates the fragility of discursive gains. Revolutionary symbolism—epitomised globally by Alaa Salah—did not guarantee institutional entrenchment of gender equality. Empowerment narratives forged in revolutionary fervour confront militarised realities that limit implementation

Democratic Fragility and Electoral Politics in Nigeria

Nigeria’s formal democratic structure provides institutional avenues for advocacy, yet democratic fragility persists. Electoral violence, patronage networks, and gendered political intimidation limit women’s substantive participation. Feminist activists must navigate partisan alignments without being subsumed by them.

Moreover, digital activism faces increasing regulation, raising concerns about shrinking civic space. While Nigeria does not exhibit the same level of overt authoritarianism as Sudan’s former regime, regulatory and informal pressures shape the boundaries of permissible dissent.

Shrinking Civic Space

Across both countries, securitisation of protest and surveillance of civil society actors reflect broader global trends of shrinking civic space. Feminist organisations, particularly those connected to transnational networks, may be framed as security threats or foreign agents. This environment underscores a central paradox: empowerment narratives flourish rhetorically even as structural constraints intensify. States may adopt gender equality language in international forums while restricting domestic dissent.

Key Challenges and Barriers in Sudan

- **Exclusion from Power:** Despite being on the front lines, women are often excluded from formal peace talks and negotiations, which are dominated by men with weapons.
- **High-Risk Environment:** Women activists face immense risks, including sexual harassment, arrest, and online smear campaigns.
- **Social and Physical Danger:** The breakdown of law and order has made women, particularly in IDP camps, highly vulnerable to violence, forcing them to adopt strategies to protect themselves.

Analytical Contribution

The foregoing analysis underscores a critical insight: empowerment narratives are neither static nor universally emancipatory. They are contested terrains where religion, class, ethnicity, donor influence, and geopolitical instability intersect.

In Nigeria, empowerment is negotiated within democratic yet neoliberal structures, producing tensions between elite representation and grassroots redistribution. In Sudan, empowerment has been forged through resistance to

authoritarian Islamisation yet remains vulnerable to political relapse.

Applying framing theory reveals how activists strategically construct resonant narratives in response to opposition. Postcolonial feminist analysis exposes how global development scripts intersect with local histories, sometimes reinforcing the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle. Foucauldian discourse analysis reminds us that empowerment language itself can function as a technology of governance.

Thus, empowerment in Nigeria and Sudan must be understood not as a settled achievement but as an ongoing negotiation—simultaneously enabling and constrained, radical and co-opted, symbolic and material. It is precisely within these contradictions that feminist politics continues to evolve.

5: COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This chapter synthesises the comparative findings from Nigeria and Sudan to draw broader implications for feminist theory and African political development. Moving beyond descriptive accounts, it interrogates how empowerment narratives function as political instruments shaped by institutional context, regime type, and global power structures. By integrating framing theory (Snow & Benford, 1988), postcolonial feminist analysis (Mohanty, 2003; Mama, 1995), and discourse–power approaches (Foucault, 1978), this chapter advances the argument that empowerment is best understood not as a policy outcome but as political infrastructure—constructed, contested, and mobilised across shifting terrains of governance.

5.1 Key Comparative Findings

Nigeria: Institutional Negotiation and Policy-Driven Empowerment

Nigeria's feminist trajectory reflects negotiation within a formally democratic yet structurally unequal state. Empowerment discourse is frequently articulated through institutional channels: legislative reform, gender quotas, development programming, and donor partnerships. Organisations such as the Feminist Coalition illustrate how digital-era activism operates alongside policy advocacy, blending grassroots mobilisation with technocratic engagement.

The Nigerian case demonstrates how empowerment narratives are often translated into policy language—“gender mainstreaming”, “financial inclusion”, and “representation”. While this institutionalisation expands formal recognition, it also risks narrowing feminist struggle into measurable development outcomes. Thus, empowerment in Nigeria tends to be framed as incremental reform within existing political and economic structures.

Sudan: Revolutionary and Resistance-Centred Framing

In contrast, Sudan's empowerment narratives have been forged in confrontation with authoritarian rule, particularly under Omar al-Bashir. Here, empowerment is less about institutional negotiation and more about dismantling repressive state apparatuses. Women's central role in the 2018–2019 uprising—symbolised globally by Alaa Salah—reframed women not merely as beneficiaries of reform but as architects of regime change. Sudanese feminist discourse links bodily autonomy, legal reform, and democratic citizenship directly to revolutionary transformation. Empowerment is narrated as reclaiming the state from militarised and Islamist control. Yet post-revolution instability reveals the fragility of discursive victories when institutional consolidation falters.

Digital Activism in Both Contexts

Digital activism operates as a cross-cutting infrastructure in both countries. In Nigeria, hashtag campaigns and online fundraising have strengthened institutional advocacy and transnational solidarity. In Sudan, social media circumvented state-controlled media and enabled diaspora coordination during the revolution. However, digital space is ambivalent. It amplifies feminist claims but also exposes activists to surveillance, harassment, and securitisation. Across both contexts, digital platforms function not as neutral tools but as contested arenas where empowerment narratives are constructed, policed, and globalised.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

Expanding African Feminist Political Theory

This comparative analysis contributes to African feminist political theory by foregrounding narrative construction as central to political development. African feminist scholarship has long challenged Eurocentric assumptions that treat gender equality as derivative of Western liberalism (Mama, 1995). By situating empowerment within Nigeria's democratic negotiations and Sudan's revolutionary ruptures, this study demonstrates the contextual plurality of feminist praxis on the continent.

Rather than positioning African feminism as reactive or peripheral, the findings highlight its role in shaping state transformation, civic identity, and constitutional discourse. Empowerment narratives are revealed as endogenous political innovations rather than imported templates.

Challenging Universalist Empowerment Metrics

Global development frameworks often operationalise empowerment through standardised indicators—labour force participation, parliamentary representation, or

access to credit. While valuable, such metrics risk obscuring the political meaning embedded in local struggles.

The Nigerian and Sudanese cases demonstrate that empowerment cannot be reduced to quantitative benchmarks. In Sudan, symbolic revolutionary leadership may coexist with limited institutional representation. In Nigeria, increased policy recognition may coexist with persistent structural inequality.

This study therefore challenges universalist empowerment metrics by emphasising historically situated narrative framing. Empowerment must be interpreted within regime type, religious authority structures, economic conditions, and postcolonial state formation.

Narrative Framing as Political Infrastructure

Building on framing theory (Snow & Benford, 1988), this research advances the concept of narrative framing as political infrastructure. Narratives do not merely describe political realities; they enable coalitions, mobilise resources, and legitimise reform.

In Nigeria, empowerment frames resonate when linked to governance reform and economic productivity. In Sudan, they gain traction when aligned with revolutionary justice and anti-authoritarian struggle. Across both contexts, feminist narratives shape how citizenship, morality, and legitimacy are understood. Through a Foucauldian lens (Foucault, 1978), empowerment discourse is also productive of subjects— it constitutes “empowered women” as entrepreneurial actors, revolutionary citizens, or moral guardians of democracy. Thus, empowerment narratives simultaneously resist domination and produce new normative expectations.

5.3 Policy and Practical Implications

Supporting Context-Sensitive Frameworks

Policymakers and international partners must recognise that empowerment strategies are contextually embedded. In Nigeria, effective interventions may require engagement with legislative institutions, party politics, and faith-based actors. In Sudan, support for constitutional reform and protection of civil resistance networks may be more critical than technical capacity building alone. Professor Balghis Badri(2020)

: A central figure in Sudanese academic feminism and director of the Regional Institute for Gender, Diversity and Rights. Her work extensively covers the integration of women into legal and constitutional reforms. She is a proponent of using international mechanisms like SDG 5 to drive state-level gender equality.

Another long-standing activist and researcher (Asha al-Karib (2019) who has spent decades fighting for legal equality within the national framework. Her work highlights the historical struggle to abolish discriminatory laws, such

as the Public Order Act, through persistent civil society lobbying.

A context-sensitive framework resists imposing uniform templates and instead aligns programming with locally articulated priorities.

Intersectionality in Programme Design

Both cases underscore the importance of intersectionality. Class, ethnicity, region, and religion mediate access to empowerment resources. Programmes that target “women” as a homogeneous category risk reinforcing internal hierarchies.

In Nigeria, northern Muslim women encounter distinct socio-legal constraints compared to southern urban professionals. In Sudan, women from conflict-affected regions face layered marginalisation. Incorporating intersectional analysis into programme design enhances both equity and sustainability.

Safeguarding Feminist Civic Space

Given the trend toward shrinking civic space globally, safeguarding feminist activism must be central to policy engagement. Legal protections for freedom of association, digital privacy, and protest are not peripheral concerns but foundational conditions for empowerment. International actors should avoid securitised approaches that inadvertently endanger activists. Support must prioritise long-term civic resilience rather than short-term visibility.

5.4 Directions for Future Research

Longitudinal Study of Post-Coup Sudan

Sudan’s evolving political landscape demands longitudinal analysis. Future research should examine how feminist networks adapt to renewed militarisation, conflict, and displacement. Tracking the durability of post2019 legal reforms will be essential for assessing whether revolutionary empowerment narratives translate into sustained institutional change.

Comparative Expansion to Other African States

Expanding comparative inquiry to additional African contexts—such as Ghana, Kenya, or Tunisia—would enable refinement of the typology proposed here. Such comparative expansion could illuminate how regime type, colonial legacy, and religious demography shape empowerment framing across the continent.

Quantitative Mapping of Narrative Diffusion

Finally, integrating qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative mapping of digital narratives offers promising methodological innovation. Social media analytics,

network mapping, and content analysis could trace how empowerment frames travel across borders, languages, and diasporic communities. Such work would further substantiate the claim that narrative construction constitutes political infrastructure in contemporary African feminist movements.

Concluding Reflection

This comparative synthesis demonstrates that women's empowerment in Nigeria and Sudan is not a linear policy achievement but a dynamic political process. In Nigeria, empowerment unfolds through institutional negotiation within democratic and neoliberal constraints. In Sudan, it emerges from revolutionary resistance to authoritarian Islamisation and militarised governance, leading to an "activist drain" while simultaneously triggering a new form of "survival-based" activism.

Across both contexts, empowerment narratives are shaped by religion, class, digital mediation, and geopolitical pressures. They are aspirational yet contested, enabling yet constrained. By foregrounding narrative construction as central to political development, this study contributes to a more historically grounded and theoretically robust understanding of African feminist praxis—one attentive to power, plurality, and the enduring struggle over the meaning of freedom itself.

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