

INCLUSIVE MATRIMONIAL GENDER EMPOWERMENT AS IT AFFECTS SUSTAINABLE SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN ISU LGA, IMO STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: Globally, cultural values, changing migration and interaction patterns raise security questions that affect the economic position of women in marriage, to the extent that the quest for existential survival becomes a struggle to contend with. The balance between inclusive and discriminatory empowerment across the gender line points to the increasing conflict lines emerging from most matrimonial contexts, especially in a developing climate such as Africa, particularly Nigeria, where rural economic survival largely depends on subsistence agriculture. This situation has implications for insecurity due to the criminality it throws up to affect women's quality of life and role in the development agenda. Hence, the focus of this paper is to examine Inclusive Matrimonial Gender Empowerment and its effects on Sustainable Security and Development in Isu LGA, Imo State, Nigeria. Combining both descriptive and exploratory designs and guided by patriarchal and systems theories, the paper interrogated the place of security and sustainable development without due cognisance of rurality and the rural economy anchored in inclusive matrimonial gender empowerment. It argues that there is a need for social change that transforms society and enforces stability and security, which requires the inclusive involvement of all stakeholders to drive the needed change. Resting its case, the paper concludes that, since literature statistics show the female population slightly exceeds the male population, there is no economic sense or wisdom in any economy to pursue exclusive economic empowerment, as it has dangerous implications for sustainable security and development in Isu LGA, Imo State, Nigeria.

Keywords: Inclusiveness, Matrimonial Empowerment, Sustainability, Security, Development, Isu LGA

INTRODUCTION

The Global Economy (2024) report states that, based on data sourced from the United Nations Population Division and the World Bank Population Prospects, 2024 Revision, between 1960 and 2023, the female share of the total population in the 47 countries of the African sub-region averaged 50.13. This shows that on average, Sub-Saharan Africa has more women than men. According to the report, Zimbabwe ranked first with 52.38 percent, and Nigeria ranked a distant 40th with 49.44 per cent. The size of the women's population is not only local and regional, but global, as women constitute 49.8% of the world.

In Nigeria, as in many other countries, women continue to face social, economic, political, structural, and systemic exclusion, which manifests as marginalization across various domains. This results in their underdevelopment, undervaluation, lack of recognition, and inadequate compensation from men and society (Olowale et al., 2021; Conner, 2014). Consequently, the majority of women are excluded from economic opportunities, leading to poverty, limited education, and skills deficits. They predominantly dominate low-paying, vulnerable, and informal sectors. According to Enhancing Financial Innovation and Access (EFInA, 2022), their contributions are often undervalued and poorly remunerated (European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 2023). Women lack the economic resources and social assets necessary for self-development and resilience in a rapidly changing environment (EFInA, 2022). Despite their invaluable contributions, they bear the brunt of societal malfeasance, including insecurity and underdevelopment. Women are also disproportionately affected during conflicts, insurgencies, poor governance, and disasters (Sasu, 2024). Nonetheless, there is limited understanding of how women perceive societal security, peace, and sustainable development in Nigeria.

This paper focused on investigating the influence of women's societal exclusion from social, economic, political and cultural life on sustainable societal security development in Nigeria, by reviewing relevant extant literature, using a desk-top research method and content analysis. The paper is guided by five objectives which are to: (a) Understand the causes of women social exclusion ; (b) Review the impact of the existing governance structure on women social inclusion; (c) Review the impact of existing governance structure on women societal security, and the country's development; (d) Examine the effectiveness of policy responses to women inclusion in society; (e) Draw on these insights to proffer solutions to enhance women inclusion in social and promote societal security and development.

In examining the causes of women's societal exclusion and ways to include them, three themes emerged. These themes covered socio-cultural explanation of women exclusion Conner, (2014); Matthaei, (1982); perceptions supporting women inclusion in all strata of society Olowale, et al., (2021); EFInA, (2022), institutional and systemic restructuring and review of cultural practice to promote equity in social reward, such as equal valuation, recognition and reward of women contributions. The paper argues that sustainable security and development are achievable only within an inclusive society that promotes inclusive security and development (United Nations, 2016). The paper concludes that to achieve sustainable security and development, Nigeria needs to integrate the excluded half of its population, represented by women, into governance. This means women's inclusion in sustainable security and development. It recommends: 1. Structural, systemic and cultural transformation that dismantles the barriers to women's inclusion. 2. Promotion of gender equity in representation, resource distribution and social reward. 3. Value reorientation to promote gender sensitivity, inclusion, teamwork, equity, reciprocity, and good governance based on the rule of law, to safeguard societal security and enhance inclusive development. These recommendations have policy implications for the law reform and policy review for the provision of social security for homemakers and domestic workers, such as recognising care-giving as a social service to be supported by the government through the establishment and funding of community Care centers and subsidisation of care services

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender dependency

Despite making up 49.8% of the global population and 49.44% in Nigeria, women remain socially, economically, and politically marginalised. In Sub-Saharan Africa, women slightly outnumber men, yet remain underrepresented and their contributions undervalued (The Global Economy, 2024). In Nigeria, women face systemic exclusion, which leads to widespread poverty, limited education, lack of skills, and overrepresentation in the vulnerable informal economy. Women's roles are often overlooked in governance, security, and development. As Sasu (2024) notes, they bear a disproportionate burden during crises, despite their vital roles in community resilience. This study examines the consequences of women's exclusion on societal security and the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria. Using a literature-based content analysis, three major themes emerge: the need for inclusive participation, structural reform, and cultural transformation. The study finds that sustainable development and societal security are unattainable without the full inclusion of women. Key recommendations include: promoting mutual gender respect through attitudinal reorientation and educational reform; ensuring women's representation in governance via legal and structural reforms such as quota systems; and fostering gender-responsive policies that provide equal access to opportunities, resources, and decision-making spaces. These measures are essential to enhance peace, stability, and inclusive development in Nigeria.

Social Exclusion. Conversely, social exclusion describes a state in which individuals are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such a state.

Causes of Women's Social Exclusion and the Consequences. Women in Nigeria continue to face social exclusion due to a complex interplay of cultural, institutional, economic, and political factors. Patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded, dictating gender roles and limiting women's access to education, land, capital, decision-making, and politics (Akiyode-Afolabi, 2020; Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2003). Socio-religious beliefs also reinforce stereotypes, portraying women as primarily homemakers rather than contributors to governance or national development. Additionally, discriminatory laws and weak enforcement of gender equality policies further entrench exclusion (UN Women, 2020). The consequences are far-reaching: women's underrepresentation in politics leads to policy neglect of gender-specific needs; economic exclusion reduces household welfare and national productivity; and social alienation contributes to rising vulnerability and insecurity among women and girls. Furthermore, social exclusion fuels intergenerational poverty and contributes to societal instability, as marginalisation breeds disaffection and disenfranchisement. Without systemic reforms to dismantle structural barriers, gender inequality will remain a major obstacle to national cohesion and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Impact of Women's Social Exclusion on Women and Societal Security

The exclusion of women from mainstream social, economic, and political processes poses a serious threat to societal security. Women's limited participation in decision-making processes undermines inclusive governance and weakens conflict-resolution mechanisms, especially at the community level, where women traditionally play peacebuilding roles (Olaitan & Oyelade, 2021). The absence of gender-responsive security policies also leaves women vulnerable to gender-based violence, trafficking, and displacement during crises. National security is undermined when half of the population is denied access to critical platforms for empowerment and protection. For example, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria exploits socio-economic disparities, particularly among women and youth in the Northeast. Exclusion exacerbates these risks by denying women access to economic independence, legal protection, and social capital. As highlighted in the World Bank Group (2025) report, nations with high gender inequality also experience greater degrees of social unrest. Therefore, women's exclusion is not merely a gender issue; it is a national security issue that must be addressed through systemic inclusion and policy integration.

Matrimonial Gender Inclusiveness

Considering the developments in society around the world, such as the surge in violent conflicts (World Bank Group Report, 2025), the persistence of extreme poverty and gender inequality (EIGE, 2023), insecurity endures despite various governmental, nongovernmental, and institutional efforts to improve the quality of human life. These, coupled with persistent poverty, unsustainable social injustices, and inequalities in society, have kindled multidisciplinary interest in exploring women's social inclusion to enhance societal security as a pathway to sustainable development. Thus, there is no better time than now to explore the concept of "women's social inclusion" as an essential component of sustainable development in any society, particularly in Nigeria. Such inclusion extends to all aspects of life where there are inequalities, addressing biases, discriminatory attitudes, behaviours, norms, values and practices that are at play in the distribution of power, resources control, such as systemic denial of access or recognition that constitute barrier to some groups participation in society, upward mobility in society, life, economics and politics as well as enjoyment of goods, services, justices, opportunities for advancement of personal and group interest.

Gender Empowerment

Social inclusion is a complex concept that is contextually and conceptually adaptable. It encompasses every form of discrimination, exclusion, or inequality, such as gender, economic, educational, digital, cultural, and political exclusion. The paper posits that for women, gender inclusion leads to "gender equality." This refers to a state where women enjoy equality of rights, responsibilities, privileges, respect, self-agency and opportunities for self-actualisation, and participation in societal activities as men. In a socially inclusive society, women and men can contribute to and benefit from socio-political and economic development, regardless of their gender identity.

Economic inclusion means equal rights and access to safe and affordable financial products and entrepreneurial opportunities, as well as to decent work in a safe work environment. For instance, in the workplace, it refers to creating a safe environment where all individuals, regardless of gender, race, age, class, or sexual orientation, are treated fairly, equally protected, valued, respected, and provided equal opportunities to participate, contribute and benefit from their contributions. Educational, digital, cultural, and all other forms of inclusion imply gender diversification and equity in these areas of societal activity to bridge the existing gender gap and promote inclusive participation on mutual terms. The World Bank Group 2025 Report on social inclusion identifies these areas of social inclusion with gender equality as multidimensional processes that strive to break down systemic barriers and discriminatory biases, such as gender inequality. Literature recognises the role of women in the welfare of humanity and the development of countries (World Bank, 2023).

In the context of women's inclusion and sustainable security and development in Nigeria, social inclusion refers to the process of enhancing women's capability and opportunity to participate in society with men on equal terms, attain their full potential in life in dignity and enjoy mutual respect. It emphasises the need to dismantle systemic barriers and biases that result in and sustain the marginalisation of women in every sphere of life. Promoting social inclusion involves collective participation in addressing unconscious biases, implementing inclusion, equity, and diversity training, and adopting inclusive policies that foster fairness, equal respect, and equitable rewards for participation. By actively involving all stakeholders, especially women, in policy development, implementation and decision-making processes, communities, organisations, and governments can leverage diverse perspectives, enhance productivity, and contribute to broader societal stability and sustainable development. According to the United Nations (2016), social inclusion, which is a core aspiration of the 2030 Agenda, is defined as the process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for people who are disadvantaged, through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights. This inclusive approach aligns with the core goals of gender equity and social justice, which are essential for achieving social stability, peace, sustainable development and national security in Nigeria.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development has been widely defined in existing literature, without a universally accepted definition. The *World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987 Report*, also known as the Brundtland Report, refers to it as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." According to Sachs (2015), "Sustainable development (SD) is both a theoretical lens for looking at the world with focus on the linkages of economic, social, and environmental aspects (the three-pillars-model) and a normative framework for describing shared aspiration for a decent life, by combining economic development, social inclusion and environmental integrity.

Scholarship shows that Sustainable Development rests on some interconnected principles. Key among them are: (a) Economic sustainability. This is achieved by inclusive production, ensuring long-term economic growth without creating significant economic imbalances. (b) Social sustainability. This aims at promoting social inclusion, equity, justice, and access to basic services

for all. (c) Environmental sustainability operates as the inter-generational sustenance pillar, preserving natural resources and ecosystems for future generations (Sachs, 2015). On the other hand, Good Governance, which entails institutional sustainability, ethical governance, and long-term policy planning, secures the continuous operation of the first three principles to maintain overall sustainability (Kates et al., 2005). Thus, sustainable development becomes a holistic approach to progress that ensures human well-being, equitable growth, and environmental health, while aiming for intergenerational justice and resilience. To birth and thrive, sustainable development requires the existence of security, stability and peace in society based on equity and inclusion in the face of diversity.

Sustainable Security

This refers to a society's capacity to maintain its vital functions and protect its people's lives, health, and core values, especially during crises. Developed by the Copenhagen School of security studies in the 1990s, the concept focuses on the protection of societal identity and essential characteristics from threats and the preservation of its coherence to safeguard the continuous functioning of its primary institutions in the face of risks, such as surge in crime and endemic corruption, that might threaten the fabric of the society, without external assistance. It encompasses the ability to reproduce its patterns of identity, culture, and social structures in the face of various threats. These threats can be natural disasters, technological failures, or human-caused issues such as terrorism, large-scale migration, or immigration (United Nations, 2016).

Impact of Women's Social Inclusion on Women, Family, Society, and Development in Nigeria

Women's social inclusion positively transforms individuals, families, and society. When women are economically empowered, family well-being improves through better health, education, and nutrition outcomes (UNDP, 2023). Inclusion in governance allows women to influence policies that prioritise social welfare, healthcare, maternal health, and community development. Social inclusion also strengthens social cohesion by reducing inequalities that fuel crime, conflict, and political instability. On a national scale, gender-inclusive development contributes to GDP growth, innovation, and sustainable development. Countries that have invested in gender equality, like Rwanda and South Africa, have seen corresponding gains in social stability and economic resilience. In Nigeria, promoting women's inclusion in sectors such as agriculture, education, and technology could significantly reduce poverty and increase productivity. Study shows that "when women work, economy grows", child health, women's health, education and family welfare improve (EFInA, 2022). This secures a better future for the upcoming generation. Besides, a Nigerian study projects a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 23% or \$229 billion USD for Nigeria in 2025, if women participate equally with men (EFInA, 2022). This enhances development, reduces crime, boosting social stability and resilience. Ultimately, women's inclusion fosters holistic development that is equitable, participatory, and sustainable.

Effectiveness of the Existing Governance Structure and Policies on Promoting Security and Development

While Nigeria has adopted various national and international frameworks promoting gender equality and development, such as the National Gender Policy (2006), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, implementation remains inconsistent and ineffective. Political will is weak, and budgetary allocations for gender programs are often insufficient. Institutional structures lack coordination, and accountability mechanisms are underdeveloped. The quota system for women's political representation has not significantly altered gender imbalances in leadership. Furthermore, most gender policies lack grassroots penetration and are hindered by patriarchal resistance and cultural inertia. Despite these setbacks, there are emerging opportunities for reform. Civil society advocacy, increased digital access, and youth-led movements offer new avenues for amplifying women's voices. However, without robust monitoring, increased funding, and legal reforms, existing structures will continue to underdeliver on their promise to promote gender-inclusive security and development.

Conclusion

The persistent exclusion of women from vital aspects of national life, governance, economy, and social systems poses a fundamental threat to Nigeria's development and societal security. Evidence from literature and content analysis reveals that gender inclusion is not just a matter of equity but a necessity for national peace, economic resilience, and sustainable development. Where women are included, communities flourish; where they are excluded, inequality festers, and insecurity thrives. Therefore, addressing women's social exclusion must be central to Nigeria's policy and development agenda moving forward.

Recommendations

1. **Institutionalisation of gender inclusiveness:** Establish independent bodies to monitor the implementation of gender-inclusive policies at the federal, state, and local levels.
2. **Capacity Building and Education:** Promote women's education and vocational training, especially in rural areas, to equip them for economic and political participation.
3. **Political and economic Inclusion:** Enforce quotas and political party reforms to ensure greater representation of women in elective and appointive positions.
4. **Cultural Reorientation:** Launch public awareness campaigns to challenge and transform harmful gender norms and stereotypes.

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