

GENDER AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA: AN APPRAISAL OF SOCIAL INCLUSIVITY STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This study examines the social forces that drive gender and social exclusion, the conditions that mitigate inequality, and the strategies that can promote inclusive social transformation. Gender and social inequalities in Nigeria are deeply embedded in everyday social relations, power structures, and institutional arrangements. These inequalities are produced, reproduced and perpetuated by diverse factors. Using secondary data, relevant academic literature, and policy documents, inequality was analysed through a socio-ecological lens to capture how it operates across interconnected levels of social life, including family, community, institutions, and the state. The findings indicate that cultural norms and structural barriers reinforce exclusion, while inclusion is strengthened by egalitarian socialisation, community dialogue, institutional reform, and coordinated policy action. The study recommends that sustained efforts at both formal and informal levels be encouraged to bridge the gender inequality gap, and that the government and non-governmental organisations design new programmes and policies to promote gender equity and social inclusion in Nigeria.

Keywords: Gender, Social, Exclusion, Inequalities, Challenges and Inclusion

Introduction

Human society has experienced various forms of disparity and preferential treatment throughout the ages. Various cultural norms and institutional measures have favoured some categories of people at the detriment of others. Social inequality manifests in access to resources, employment opportunities, education, leadership positions, and security. These discriminatory practices were often based on gender, race, religious affiliations, ethnicity and other social considerations. Gender-based inequalities are most prominent in many societies; this is evident in countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, and South Africa, among other African countries (Ayuso, 2023).

Gender equality and social inclusivity are essential components of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Global Inequality Index (GII), which measures gender-based inequalities in human development achievements across the labour market, empowerment, and reproductive health, shows high levels of inequality in Nigeria and other African countries. Nigeria, with a score of 0.68, ranks 171st on the Global Gender Gap Index, indicating low gender equality (UNDP, 2025).

Similarly, Uduji& Okolo-Obasi (2022) submitted that unequal access to education, training, and skills acquisition in Kaduna State and across Nigeria confines women and other marginalised groups to low-skilled, low-return activities such as subsistence agriculture. However, much of the existing literature treats Nigeria as homogenous, overlooking subnational and context-specific dynamics. This study addresses that gap by focusing on Kaduna State, examining how socio-cultural and institutional factors shape women's economic participation, and thereby providing context-specific insights for more inclusive human capital development policies.

Theoretical framework

The study is anchored in the Socio-Ecological Theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which explains human behaviour and social outcomes as products of interactions among multiple, interconnected social systems. The theory posits that individuals are embedded in nested environments, ranging from the family and community to broader institutional and societal structures, all of which shape opportunities, behaviours, and life outcomes. At the microsystem level, families serve as primary agents of socialisation through which gender norms, values, and expectations are transmitted. The mesosystem and exosystem encompass community institutions, social networks, and local structures that reinforce or challenge prevailing gender relations. At the same time, the macrosystem consists of broader cultural beliefs, legal frameworks, political institutions, and economic arrangements that shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

The relevance of the theory to gender and social inequality in Nigeria, particularly in Kaduna State, lies in its ability to explain how exclusion is produced and sustained across multiple levels of society. At the family level, patriarchal socialisation practices often prioritise boys' education, inheritance rights, and economic opportunities over those of girls, thereby creating unequal life chances. At the community level, cultural norms, early marriage practices, and restrictive gender expectations may limit women's participation in education, employment, leadership, and public life. These inequalities are further reinforced at the institutional level through unequal access to quality education, healthcare, digital technologies, political representation, and economic resources. At the societal level, weak enforcement of gender-responsive laws, persistent poverty, insecurity, system and structural barriers continue to constrain women's social and economic advancement.

The theory also provides a useful framework for understanding social inclusivity strategies in Kaduna State. It suggests that gender inequality cannot be effectively addressed through isolated interventions targeted at individuals alone. Rather, sustainable inclusion requires coordinated action across families, communities, institutions, NGOs and governmental structures. For instance, promoting girls' education, challenging discriminatory cultural practices, strengthening legal protections against gender-based violence, expanding women's economic opportunities, and supporting community-based advocacy initiatives are mutually reinforcing strategies that operate across different levels of the socio-ecological system. Consequently, the theory offers a comprehensive lens for analysing the factors that exacerbate gender and social inequality, their implications for development, and the effectiveness of social inclusivity strategies in Kaduna State and Nigeria more broadly.

Literature Review and Methodology

The study uses content analysis to explore how gender and social inequalities are shaped and challenged in Nigeria. Relevant academic studies, policy documents, and institutional reports

were carefully reviewed using key concepts related to gender inequality, social exclusion, and inclusion, and the review materials were thematically analysed.

1. Factors Exacerbating Gender and Social Exclusion

Contemporary literature increasingly acknowledges that gender and social exclusion in Nigeria are regionally patterned, shaped by historical, socio-cultural, economic, and institutional contexts. In the North-West geopolitical zone—particularly Kaduna State—gender inequality is sustained by the interaction of social, cultural or traditional, religious, educational, economic, and political factors (Onah et al., 2024). These dynamics distinguish the North-West from other geopolitical zones and make the region a critical site for comparative gender analysis in Nigeria. Some of the notable factors influencing this gap include:

a. Social and Cultural Norms

Social and cultural norms remain the most influential drivers of gender and social exclusion in the North-West. Patriarchal family structures dominate social organisation, assigning authority, inheritance rights, and public visibility primarily to men. Women are largely socialised into domestic and reproductive roles, while men are positioned as decision-makers and economic providers. In Kaduna State, especially in rural and semi-urban communities, early and forced marriage continues to be socially sanctioned, limiting girls' educational attainment and reinforcing long-term social exclusion. Scholars like Onah *et al.* (2024), Mensah (2025), and Adieze *et al.* (2025) argue that these cultural practices are not merely traditions but mechanisms of social control that regulate women's mobility, aspirations, and access to opportunities. Empirical evidence indicates regional disparities in Nigeria's human capital development, with the South-West outperforming the North-West in education and female labour participation due to socio-cultural constraints (Ajani & Ayeni, 2021).

b. Cultural Factors

Religion plays a complex role in shaping gender relations in the North-West. While religious teachings do not inherently promote inequality, conservative interpretations are often deployed to justify restrictions on women's education, employment, and public engagement. Practices such as female seclusion (*purdah*), prevalent in parts of Kaduna State and neighbouring states, reduce women's interaction with formal institutions and limit their participation in social and economic life. Otu and MacAlex-Achinulo (2025) noted that such interpretations reinforce women's exclusion from political leadership and decision-making spaces, thereby weakening inclusive governance. Compared to Southern Zones, where cultural diversity enables greater negotiation of gender roles, the North-West's more homogenous cultural structures in some communities tend to reinforce rigid norms that sustain gender exclusion.

c. Economic Factors:

Economic exclusion further entrenches gender inequality in the North-West. Women are disproportionately concentrated in informal, unpaid, and low-income economic activities such as subsistence agriculture, petty trading, and household labour. Limited access to land ownership, credit facilities, and formal employment restricts women's economic autonomy and reinforces dependency on male relatives. Economic factors are found to exacerbate gender and social exclusion. Oladipupo and Emmanuel (2025) conducted a study on gender

inequality and socio-economic development in Nigeria. The study examines the impact of gender inequality on socio-economic development with emphasis on religious and cultural beliefs, employment opportunities, political participation, and access to education and healthcare. The scholar is essentially arguing that gender inequality operates as an economic constraint on development by limiting women's participation in productive economic activities. These barriers reduce human capital development and weaken overall socioeconomic performance.

Another dimension of economic factors is economic segregation. Sector segregation in the labour market impedes gender equality. This happens when persons of a specific gender have more employment opportunities in some economic sectors than others. For instance, men tend to be employed in the manufacturing sector, while women most likely work in sectors such as education and health services with low pay and sometimes with lesser job security, which positions them in poverty. Poverty is another economic factor that exacerbates gender and social exclusion. That is, people living in poverty are more vulnerable to gender and social inequalities (Sukare& Abdullahi, 2025).

d. Inadequate Access to Information

Inadequate access to information is another factor exacerbating gender and social exclusion. This is because when people lack access to information about laws, policies, and other established measures intended to ensure gender and social inclusivity, they remain in a state of submission to practices that may have been abrogated (UN Women & DESA, 2025).

e. Armed Conflict and Large Insecurity

Armed conflict and other forms of crises amplify existing gender inequalities and may create new forms of inequalities and social exclusion. People's experiences during these crises may be influenced by their gender. On the global stage, armed conflicts such as the World Wars were caused and largely executed by men. On the African scene, violence such as the Rwandan genocide, which displaced many Rwandans both internally and beyond, was also a product of chauvinism championed largely by men. Here in Nigeria, both the Civil War and the ongoing insurgency, which have displaced many people, are also products of disagreements championed by men (Ajayi, 2020; Agbonifo, 2020). Insecurity has emerged as a significant driver of gender inequality in Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgency has disrupted girls' education through abductions, forced marriages, and gender-based violence, thereby limiting women's human capital development and socioeconomic opportunities (Zenn & Peeearson, 2014). Similarly, armed banditry in the North-West Nigeria has increased women's vulnerability to displacement, sexual violence, livelihood loss, and educational exclusion, particularly in Kaduna, Zamfara, and Katsina States (Aina and Long 20240). In the Niger Delta, militancy and conflict-related interventions have further constrained women's access to economic opportunities and development benefits (Akinyoade, 2015). Consequently, insecurity not only threatens physical safety but also reinforces structural gender inequalities in education, employment, and social participation.

It is common knowledge that a crisis usually affects everyone within the crisis area in one way or another (Yasukawa *et al.*, 2023). However, children, youth, women, men, older people, people living with disabilities and people from marginalised groups all experience the impacts of crisis differently (Cazabat *et al.*, 2020). In Kaduna State, persistent armed banditry and other related insecurity challenges have left many women widowed or responsible for injured spouses, forcing them to assume greater household responsibilities

and engage in low-paying informal activities for survival. This deepens their economic vulnerability and exacerbates existing gender inequalities (Aina & Long, 2024).

f. Disability and Health Challenges

Women with disabilities and chronic health conditions face significant barriers in accessing quality healthcare, education, employment, and social support services. The situation creates what Omorogiuwa & Aladeselu (2025) describe as “double jeopardy”, where gender-based discrimination intersects with disability-related exclusion. These challenges are particularly pronounced in North-Western Nigeria, where poverty, insecurity, and limited healthcare infrastructure further restrict women’s access to essential medical services and economic opportunities. As a result, many women with health challenges experience reduced earning capacity, social isolation, and dependence on informal survival strategies such as street begging. Their vulnerability also exposes them to higher risks of sexual exploitation, abuse, and other forms of gender-based violence.

g. Political Factors

Political exclusion remains a defining feature of gender inequality in Kaduna State and the wider North-West. Women’s representation in elective and appointive offices is extremely low, reflecting structural barriers such as patriarchal political culture, financial constraints, electoral violence, and weak enforcement of gender inclusion policies. Otu and MacAlex-Achinulo (2025) argue that women’s political marginalisation undermines democratic accountability and perpetuates policy outcomes that fail to address women’s needs. Women politicians are often treated with disdain, and some are stigmatised and described as prostitutes or as having weak moral virtues. All these served as discouraging factors for women’s active political participation, thereby rendering them political serfs.

2. Impacts of Gender and Social Inequalities on National Development

Gender and social inequalities have profound implications for national development, particularly in regions where exclusion is structurally embedded. In Nigeria’s North-West geopolitical zone, with Kaduna State as a focal point, persistent gender inequality undermines social stability, economic growth, and population health, thereby constraining both regional and national development outcomes.

a. Social Impacts

Socially, gender inequality weakens social cohesion and limits inclusive governance. In Kaduna State, women’s marginalisation from community leadership, traditional institutions, and peace-building mechanisms reduces the effectiveness of social decision-making, especially in areas affected by ethno-religious conflict and insecurity. The exclusion of women from these spaces diminishes collective problem-solving capacity and perpetuates gender-blind responses to social challenges. Adieze et al. (2025) demonstrate that gender discrimination increases women’s vulnerability to social exclusion, gender-based violence, and psychological distress. In the North-West, these outcomes are intensified by cultural silence surrounding domestic abuse and limited access to social support systems. Gender inequality in Nigeria reduces women’s civic participation and slows national development by limiting access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, particularly in the Northwest compared to Southern regions (World Bank, 2022).

b.

Economic Impacts

Economically, gender inequality represents a significant constraint on productivity and growth in the North-West. Women's limited access to education, skills development, and productive resources reduces labour force participation and suppresses household and regional income levels. Mohammed (2020) argues that societies that systematically restrict women's educational and economic opportunities experience long-term developmental stagnation due to the underutilization of human capital. In Kaduna State, women are predominantly engaged in unpaid domestic labour and low-return informal economic activities, limiting their capacity to contribute meaningfully to economic growth. Muhammed et al. (2025) further observe that structural barriers facing women entrepreneurs—such as limited access to credit, markets, and business networks—impede innovation and economic diversification. Empirical evidence shows regional variation in women's economic participation in Nigeria, with Southern women more engaged in diversified informal entrepreneurship and urban-based income activities. In contrast, women in the Northwest are more concentrated in subsistence agriculture and lower-income informal work due to structural barriers such as lower education attainment and limited access to credit. These patterns reflect broader gendered constraints on economic mobility that reinforce regional disparities in productivity and income generation (World Bank, 2022). This also revealed that, irrespective of geographical divides, women can contribute to national development.

Similarly, Ubangida et al. (2023) conducted a study on empowering Nigerian women through entrepreneurship and bridging the gender gap in economic activities in Kaduna State. Their findings revealed that women's productivity in agriculture and trades has a significant and positive impact on poverty reduction and job creation. Thus, when this positive contribution is impeded by gender and social inequalities, it impedes the growth and development of the national economy. It has been observed that while men earn more than women in wage employment, women relatively earn more than men among the self-employed (Olasehinde et al. 2023).

c. Health Impacts

Health outcomes are another critical dimension through which gender inequality affects national development. Gender-based violence, identified as both a cause and consequence of gender inequality, further exacerbates women's physical and psychological health burdens (Adieze et al., 2025). These health inequalities have broader developmental implications. Poor maternal health outcomes reduce workforce productivity, increase healthcare costs, and negatively affect child survival and development. In varying degrees across the Northwestern states, early marriage, high fertility, and limited reproductive autonomy remain persistent challenges, particularly in rural areas. Empirical evidence from the Nigeria Demographic and Health Surveys (NDHS, 2018) shows that the northwest records the highest rates of early marriage and fertility, as well as the lowest levels of maternal healthcare utilisation in the country. These conditions increase women's exposure to adverse health outcomes, including maternal morbidity, malnutrition, and related psychosocial health challenges. However, the severity varies by state due to differences in education, urbanisation, and health service availability (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

In Kaduna State, the cumulative health impacts of gender inequality place additional strain on already limited healthcare infrastructure, slowing progress toward national health and human development goals. Health disparities have adverse effects on work productivity, maternal

and child health, and the environment. This inequality in healthcare significantly affects national development, in that a significant proportion of the population who would have actively contributed to the labour force end up being incapacitated by illness and inadequate access to healthcare (Oladipupo & Emmanuel, 2025; Nkpe, 2025).

d. Systemic Exclusion

A significant impact of gender inequality in Northern Nigeria is the widening digital divide among women and girls. Limited access to education, digital technologies, and skills acquisition restricts their participation in the digital economy and reduces their ability to benefit from emerging opportunities in technology-driven sectors. As digitalisation and generative artificial intelligence increasingly shape labour markets, women with inadequate digital competencies face greater risks of economic exclusion and unemployment, thereby reinforcing existing socioeconomic inequalities (Dennis & Zom, 2025; UN Women & DESA, 2025). Many women in rural Northern Nigeria remain excluded from online learning, e-commerce, and digital financial services due to limited access to digital technologies and internet connectivity.

3. Strategies to Mitigate Gender and Social Inequalities

The global community, national and regional governments, organisations, and various other social units have shown a commitment to mitigating gender and social inequalities. A global snapshot of gender equality in 2025 by UN Women and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN Women & DESA, 2025) revealed that there have been about 100 positive legal reforms in the past five years, which have helped remove gender-based discriminatory practices and laws. Most of these laws were replaced by gender equality legislation. Despite these gains, the report by UN Women and DESA revealed that gender inequality persists in many societies.

a. Policy and Legal Enforcement

Addressing gender and social inequalities requires more than the enactment of gender-responsive laws and policies; it demands effective implementation, enforcement, and accountability. Although legal frameworks exist to combat gender-based violence, discrimination and economic exclusion, their effectiveness is often undermined by weak institutional capacity and inadequate monitoring mechanisms. Strengthening gender-focused units within ministries and local government structures can enhance compliance monitoring, violation reporting, and policy implementation, thereby improving the translation of legal commitments into tangible outcomes for gender inclusion.

For example, the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) framework explicitly calls for ending discrimination and violence against women and girls as a legal imperative. Such frameworks provide a blueprint for institutionalising gender equality strategies, including regional plans. Sviatschi & Trako (2024) advocated that a legal framework, if properly implemented, can promote women's justice and improve broader social outcomes. The outcomes will help in closing the existing gender gap and inequality.

b. Education and Skills Development

Education remains one of the most transformative interventions for reducing gender inequality. Beyond mere access to schooling, quality and equitable education, including gender-responsive curricula, equips girls with critical thinking, economic skills, and the

confidence to participate meaningfully in society. Ludger (2015) and UNESCO (2021) demonstrate that education not only improves individual socio-economic outcomes but also contributes to broader societal benefits, including reduced poverty, improved health, and enhanced environmental resilience. In the North-West, targeted programs such as conditional cash transfers, scholarships for girls, school feeding, and gender-safe school infrastructure can increase school completion rates. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) highlights the importance of collaborative strategies to ensure girls' access to all levels of education.

c. Economic Empowerment and Social Protection

Economic empowerment strategies such as microcredit tailored for women, vocational training, and cooperatives can enhance financial independence and bargaining power within households and communities. Evidence from regional studies underscores that women's economic inclusion through cooperatives and small-scale enterprises increases agency and reduces dependence on male relatives. Ogbari et al. (2024) show that economic and social support increases economic assets, strengthens education outcomes, and improves health. Additionally, national social welfare initiatives like the National Social Investment Program provide conditional cash transfers and entrepreneur support that indirectly cushion vulnerable women and households, contributing to social mobility and economic inclusion. Kilburn et al. (2020) noted that conditional cash transfer programs reduce poverty and gender gaps by increasing school enrollment, especially for girls, and by increasing household investments in education and nutrition. They also enhance women's bargaining power in the household because most transfers are made to women, increasing their financial autonomy and decision-making capacity, which they did not have hitherto.

d. Political Inclusion and Leadership Development

Women's underrepresentation in governance is a symptom of inequalities. Strategies to increase political participation include gender quotas, leadership training, mentorship, and financial support for aspiring female candidates. Organisations such as the Nigerian Women's Trust Fund have pioneered such approaches by providing training, advocacy, and campaign support for women in politics (NWT, 2021). Increasing women's participation in leadership and decision-making improves policy responsiveness to gendered needs and promotes inclusive governance (Nchofoung et al., 2024). According to Duflo (2012), women's political empowerment can lead to more inclusive social policies and improved outcomes for children and households, particularly in socio-economically stressed environments.

4. Approaches to Promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusivity

Promoting gender equality and social inclusivity requires multi-level, coordinated strategies that transform entrenched norms, expand access to opportunities, and strengthen institutional capacities. In Nigeria's North-West geopolitical zone, with Kaduna State as a critical reference point, sustainable gender inclusion hinges on leveraging actions from the family unit through to national governance structures. Such a multi-tiered approach aligns with global gender frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasise gender equality as central to inclusive development (UN SDG 5).

a. Family Level: Socialisation and Early Gender Norms

Families serve as the primary context for socialisation, where children first learn gender norms, roles, and expectations. Research by Guerrero *et al.* (2023) and Wilhelm *et al.* (2023) consistently shows that egalitarian family practices, such as equitable distribution of household tasks and balanced educational support, contribute to more gender-equal attitudes later in life. Aksoy *et al.* (2022) noted that evidence from gender socialisation research indicates that children raised in households where parents exhibit egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles are more likely to internalise gender-equitable values in adulthood. This early socialisation process shapes not only individual attitudes but also later behavioural orientations that support inclusivity in family relations and community interactions, thereby contributing to the reproduction of more gender-equal social norms across generations.

In Kaduna State, this can translate into practical interventions such as parental education programs that encourage non-stereotyped caregiving roles, promotion of both girls' and boys' education without bias and family counselling sessions that challenge traditional gender norms. These strategies build early foundations for inclusive gender identities and help reduce lifelong discriminatory attitudes. Findings show that gender identity and roles learned within the family context shape children's expectations, self-concept, and future behaviour (Sindhura & Kumar, 2025).

b. Role of Community

At the community level, social inclusivity is enhanced through collective dialogue, advocacy, and community mobilisation. In many parts of the North-West, traditional and religious institutions shape social behaviour and often reinforce gendered expectations. Engaging these influential actors in sustained dialogues can slowly erode harmful norms and promote equitable practices. O'Mara-Eves *et al.* (2013) find that community engagement interventions are effective in reducing social inequalities by fostering participation, empowerment, and shared ownership of change processes. They maintained that through dialogue, the community collectively question traditional assumptions, enabling gradual shifts in attitudes toward gender roles.

c. Legal Framework and Political Commitment

Empirical evidence from Africa suggests that gender quotas and other affirmative action measures are effective tools for increasing women's political representation and participation. Studies by Tambe & Jormfeldt (2025) and Ndayiragije *et al.* (2023) show that quota systems have significantly increased women's representation in legislative and executive institutions, thereby enhancing opportunities for gender-responsive governance. Additionally, Muhammed *et al.* (2025) contend that sustainable development is only feasible when all citizens, regardless of gender, are empowered to contribute meaningfully to social, economic, and environmental progress. This underscores the interdependence of gender equality with broader national development outcomes.

d. Role of NGOs in Promoting Gender Equity

Beyond government interventions, NGOs and civil society organisations play a crucial role in reducing gender inequality in Kaduna State and the wider Northwest. Through advocacy, girls' education programmes, women's economic empowerment initiatives, legal aid services, and support for survivors of gender-based violence, organisations such as UNICEF,

ActionAid Nigeria, and Plan International have helped challenge discriminatory norms and expand opportunities for women and girls (UNICEF,2023; ActionAid Nigeria, 2022). Their collaboration with government agencies, traditional institutions, and community leaders strengthens policy implementation and ensures that gender-inclusive values are translated into tangible social and developmental outcomes. Consequently, sustained civil society engagement remains essential for promoting gender equality, social inclusion, and inclusive development in the region (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2021).

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that gender and social inequalities in Nigeria are shaped by interconnected and reinforcing social norms and institutional structures. Sustainable inclusion, therefore, requires intentional coordinated change across family, community, and policy levels. This study offers a sociological framework for advancing gender equity and social inclusion across contemporary societies.

Recommendation

The paper, therefore, recommends that governments at all levels should expand access to education, vocational training, and digital literacy to reduce structural inequalities affecting women and marginalised groups. Also, legal and policy frameworks on gender-based violence and discrimination should be funded and monitored, particularly in Northern Nigeria. Women's economic empowerment should be strengthened through improved access to credit, land, and employment opportunities, alongside affirmative action to enhance political participation. Overall, gender mainstreaming should be institutionalised across sectors to promote inclusive and sustainable development.

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