

The Gender Parity Imperative: Policy Actions for Inclusive Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Gender issues in Nigeria predominate despite efforts to address them through structural and policy reforms. This paper examines the roots of gender inequality in Nigeria and its effect on national development. It also offers actionable recommendations to advance gender equity and ensure a more inclusive and prosperous future for all Nigerians. These gender inequality issues are exacerbated by regional disparities within Nigeria, with women in rural and Northern areas especially disadvantaged. Critical barriers to achieving gender equality include cultural norms, economic obstacles, and the poor enforcement of existing gender laws. The recommendations to solve these problems include community-level sensitisation programmes engaging community leaders, more robust law enforcement, and comprehensive education reforms implementing gender-responsive curricula. Intensifying support systems for gender-based violence (GBV) victims through special courts and shelters is also crucial. It is estimated that closing the gender gap could boost the global economy by US\$7 trillion (UN Women, 2024). Therefore, achieving gender equality is a moral imperative and the key to unlocking Nigeria's growth potential. This intricate approach is essential for driving inclusive national development and ensuring women can contribute fully to economic and social prosperity in Nigeria.

Introduction

Gender inequality stands as a critical barrier to achieving sustainable development in Nigeria, diminishing economic advancement, hindering innovation, and perpetuating cycles of poverty. Despite legal reforms and policies targeted at addressing these issues, systemic barriers, cultural norms, and economic hindrances continue to restrict the advancement of women and girls across the nation. Patriarchal values, deeply ingrained in many regions and institutional spheres, inhibit the total participation of women in public life and reinforce conservative gender roles. Child marriage, Female Genital Mutilation, and domestic violence are examples of such cultural standards that restrict women's bodily autonomy. Furthermore, the constitutional and foundational frameworks of Nigeria, though hypothetically supportive of gender equality, lack the administrative mechanisms necessary to pilot implementation that can effectively achieve gender equality.

The socio-economic barriers that Nigerian women face further aggravate this imbalance. Restricted access to financial resources, education, and employment opportunities limit the ability of Nigerian women to break away from poverty and engender cycles of socio-economic disenfranchisement. Although laws like the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act and the National Gender Policy (NGP) are in place, implementation remains weak due to certain factors, especially at the grassroots, where cultural opposition and lack of political will from women are lingering challenges.

Tackling gender inequality is not merely a moral imperative but a socio-economic and developmental necessity. Solving systemic barriers towards the participation of young women in Africa's workforce will drive an estimated US\$287 billion to its economy by 2030, boosting GDP by 5 percent (Mastercard Foundation, 2024). Beyond economic benefits, gender equality strengthens institutions, enhances governance, and improves societal welfare.

Nigeria and Gender Inequality: Current State and Issues

Gender inequality permeates all areas of Nigerian society. Although the Nigerian government has made progress through legal reforms and targeted social measures, the nation still ranks 161 out of 193 countries in the 2022 UNDP Gender Inequality Index (GII). The educational, economic, and political sectors reflect significant disparities, particularly in rural and Northern Nigeria.

1. Education: In Nigeria, cultural and religious expectations severely hamper education accessibility for the girl child. The World Bank (2019) reported the overall school enrollment Gender Parity Index (GPI) in Nigeria as 1.01. However, this masks severe regional differences. For instance, nearly two-thirds of women in the North West and North East regions have yet to have an education, compared to less than 15 percent in the South-

South. Over 70.8 percent of women aged 20-29 in the Northwest are unable to read and write compared to 9.7 percent in the Southeast (Idoko, 2021), which means that significant disparities exist amongst regions, adding to poverty cycles and economic dependence.

In addition, Nigeria ranks 138th out of 146 countries in the 2024 WEF Global Gender Gap Report. To improve education access for the girl child, however, through the Girls Education Project Phase III (GEP3), the Federal Government of Nigeria and six northern states engaged with UNICEF and the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) of the United Kingdom to better access to learning, particularly for girls, and to begin to pivot their life opportunities through education (UN SDG, 2023).

2. Labour Market Participation: Although the WEF (2024) Global Gender Gap Report ranks Nigeria 49th out of 146 countries in terms of economic participation and opportunity, the involvement of women in the Nigerian labour market remains at 56 percent, and for men, it is 80 percent. Moreover, the gender pay gap significantly affects women in Nigeria, as they earn an average of 45 percent less than men in similar jobs (ActionAid Nigeria, 2024). Nonetheless, the dedication of the Nigerian government to increasing women's economic power is evident in its creation of the WEE Policy to serve as a blueprint for the economic interventions of women in diverse areas, including finance, entrepreneurship, and technology, and drive a pathway to comprehensively transforming Nigerian women from limited economic power to having the vital skills, resources, and opportunities necessary to access and compete equitably in markets, as well as the agency to control and benefit from economic activities (IOM, 2023).

3. Safety: In Nigeria, one in three women has experienced physical violence, 9 percent have experienced sexual violence (UNICEF, 2022), and about 20 million women have undergone female genital mutilation (UNICEF, 2013). These distinct examples demonstrate the prevalence of Gender-based violence (GBV) in Nigerian society, and responding to these issues, the federal government passed the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) 2015, which penalises various forms of violence, including physical and sexual violence, and female genital mutilation (VAAP Act, 2015). However, implementation has been slow; only a fraction of Nigerian states has domesticated the law.

4. Politics and Legislature: The participation of Nigerian women in politics remains subpar. Women occupy only 3 percent of Senate seats and 4 percent of House of Representatives seats in the 2023 elections (Nkereuwem, 2023). According to Alliance for Africa (2018), although a National Gender Policy formulated a 35 percent Affirmative Action for Women in 2006 to increase the involvement of women in governance, the continuous marginalisation of women undermines the creation and implementation of gender-specific policies that target gender inequality. If more Nigerian women who experience firsthand this inequality had opportunities to lead and legislate, there would be more emphasis on gender equality. Consequently, this would drive Nigeria on the path of transformation to a better and more equitable society.

Policy Recommendations for Achieving Gender Equality

Achieving gender equality and unlocking Nigeria's full growth potential would require a comprehensive and multi-dimensional strategy. The following tactical strategies can address the gender imbalance in Nigeria:

1. Local Sensitisation Programmes: As cultural resistance is one of the significant challenges to achieving gender equality in Nigeria, grassroots initiatives, such as Community-based workshops, that engage traditional and religious leaders in dialogue are vital to changing community attitudes toward the rights of women and girls. Public sensitisation campaigns tailored to accommodate cultural nuances while promoting

gender equality should be embarked upon. The proposed campaigns should focus on the economic and social advantages of women's empowerment and target local areas where cultural norms are most change-resistant. Mass media initiatives like radio programmes can also effectively reach underserved areas, educating the public on gender equality laws and the rights of women and the girl-child.

2. Domestication and Enforcement of Gender Laws: The Nigerian government should ensure the complete domestication and implementation of existing gender equality laws, including the VAPP Act and the NGP, are implemented by all states. Many Nigerian states have yet to domesticate these enactments. Therefore, the federal and state governments should have an established partnership. Furthermore, states that domesticate and successfully implement gender policies should receive fiscal stimulus such as increased federal grants. Also, as a deterrent, sanctions should be imposed on states that fail to protect the rights of women and girls. Tracking agencies should be created across all regions of the federation to ensure harmonious enforcement of the laws and to identify lagging states.

3. Gender-Responsive Education Reformation: Education reformation is vital to solving gender inequality in Nigeria. Schools should inculcate gender-responsive content in their curricula, teaching respect for the rights of women and girls, gender-based violence prevention, and gender equality, focusing on changing societal perceptions towards gender roles. Gender-based education should also include vocational training, ensuring that women and girls gain experiential skills that prepare them for the labour market.

4. Strengthening Support Systems for GBV Victims: Gender-based violence remains one of the significant challenges for women in Nigeria. The government should establish special courts to handle GBV cases. These courts will ensure accelerated legal proceedings. Additionally, more shelters and counselling centres, funded through national budgetary allocations, should be provided for survivors, especially in underserved areas. These centres should offer prompt shelter, legal aid, and psychological counselling to help the affected women rebuild.

Conclusion

Gender inequality remains a composite and persistent problem in Nigeria. Solving gender inequality in Nigeria is a developmental necessity and a pathway to realising the nation's socio-economic potential. By focusing on law enforcement, cultural engagement, education reformation, economic empowerment, and political inclusion, Nigeria can unlock the prospects of its female population. Achieving gender equality would require a multi-dimensional approach, integrating grassroots sensitisation, robust law enforcement, and strategic investments in education and social infrastructure.

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