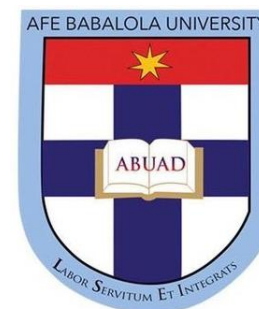




# The Journal of Sustainable Development Law and Policy



ISSN: 2467-8406 (Print) 2467-8392 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jsdlp>

## The Role of Young Lawyers in Promoting Gender Justice, Human Rights, and Sustainability in Nigeria

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**To cite this article:** Adenike A. Akinsemolu (2024). The Role of Young Lawyers in Promoting Gender Justice, Human Rights, and Sustainability in Nigeria. The Journal of Sustainable Development, Law and Policy. Vol. 15:1. 398-410. [DOI: 10.4314/jsdlp.v15i1.14](https://doi.org/10.4314/jsdlp.v15i1.14)

**To link this article:** DOI: [10.4314/jsdlp.v15i1.14](https://doi.org/10.4314/jsdlp.v15i1.14)



Published online: April 26, 2024.

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## THE ROLE OF YOUNG LAWYERS IN PROMOTING GENDER JUSTICE, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND SUSTAINABILITY IN NIGERIA

Adenike A. Akinsemolu\*

Being the text of the keynote lecture delivered at the 3rd Annual Symposium of the Young Lawyers' Forum, Ikere Ekiti, Nigeria in honour of Professor Damilola S. Olawuyi on Monday, 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2024.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Honoree, Professor Damilola Sunday Olawuyi, SAN, the Nigerian Bar Association Chairman, Asiwaju Dr. M.S. Afolayan, distinguished guests, amiable colleagues, and the future of legal excellence—the young lawyers of Nigeria. I am deeply honoured to stand before you today as a comrade in the pursuit of justice, equality, and sustainability.

I am not a lawyer; I am an environmental scientist. My journey has spanned continents and disciplines, from the classrooms of Ondo to the academic halls of Qatar, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Kenya, reaching audiences worldwide. As a National Geographic Explorer, I've traversed diverse cities, uncovering the layers of our natural and built environments. I've contributed to policy discussions at prestigious gatherings like the Global Solutions Summit. Working alongside erudite scholars such as Professor Damilola

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Sunday Olawuyi, SAN, I am exploring the complexities of Gender Justice in the Global South and the critical importance of Biodiversity and Nature Conservation. Our collaborative efforts are poised to enrich the academic libraries of Oxford and Cambridge Press, offering new perspectives and insights into pressing global challenges.

First, let me express my profound gratitude to Professor Damilola Olawuyi, who has been instrumental in my journey both as a young professional and as a person. Professor Olawuyi is undoubtedly one of the finest legal minds globally, a pillar of wisdom and compassion in the field of environmental law and policy. He has earned respect and recognition on international stages for his contributions to sustainable development and legal scholarship. A source of national pride, he has received numerous awards for his pioneering work and his dedication to mentoring the next generation of legal practitioners, as well as non-legal practitioners like myself. But most importantly, he is a remarkable human being, whose empathy and commitment to justice are as luminous as his professional achievements.

Growing up, an event in my hometown, Ondo, forever etched the importance of human rights in my mind. A local woman, well-respected and the mother of three, was unjustly evicted from her home due to a land dispute skewed by gender bias and corruption. Her plea for justice echoed through the community, but her voice was drowned out by the systemic failures of our legal system. This was a woman who, despite her limited resources, had always contributed to our community's well-being, teaching us the values of kindness and resilience. Witnessing her despair, I felt a deep-rooted call to advocate for those silenced by injustice. My dream was to become a lawyer,

to fight for the rights of those like her, ensuring fairness and equality under the law.

However, following the untimely death of an uncle in court, who was passionately fighting a case for another underrepresented community member, the legal profession became a taboo in our family. The grief and fear that enveloped us steered me away from the path of law and towards science, a field where I naturally excelled. Yet, the flame of justice and advocacy for the underprivileged never died within me. Professor Olawuyi, recognising this undying passion, encouraged me. He showed me that my background in environmental science could be a powerful tool in advocating for environmental justice. He highlighted how intertwined environmental issues are with human rights, especially for marginalised communities in Nigeria. Professor Olawuyi's mentorship and belief in interdisciplinary approaches inspired me to use my scientific expertise to fight for environmental issues passionately. This journey led me from a lecturer questioning the meaning of "going green" to a global advocate for sustainability and environmental justice, proving that one does not need to be a lawyer to champion the causes of justice and human rights.

In 2014, while teaching my students at the then Adeyemi College of Education, I asked them, "What does it mean to go green?" Faced with over 250 blank stares, I realised the urgency of educating them on the importance of sustainability and how our actions affect us socially, economically, and environmentally. This led to the birth of the Green Campus Initiative, which later transitioned into the Green Institute, with a mission to build the next generation of sustainability leaders through education, advocacy, and innovation. We have

proudly trained over 25,000 sustainability leaders, hosted over 100 events, and taken over 2,500 pledges to promote sustainability.

Then, I pursued my PhD in Environmental Science. My research on ecotoxicological analyses in the Ilaje coastal communities of Ondo State, Nigeria, which are affected by oil production activities, sea-level rise, and more, revealed the vulnerability of coastal populations to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. One day, during my fieldwork, I encountered a 14-year-old girl whose story I will never forget. In the early hours of the morning, before the sunrise, this girl embarks on her daily journey. Balancing a 20-litre container on her head, she navigates the treacherous path from her village in the Ilaje community to the nearest water source. This journey, fraught with danger, is a necessity on which her family's survival depends. But one day, this routine task turns tragic when she is attacked and raped by assailants lying in wait along the secluded path—a stark, harrowing reality for many girls in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the quest for water can become a perilous endeavour.

This unfortunate event highlights a profound paradox facing coastal communities across Sub-Saharan Africa: the presence of water in abundance does not guarantee access to potable water. Despite the vast expanses of the Atlantic Ocean that border their homes, communities like Ilaje in Ondo State, Nigeria, struggle with an acute shortage of clean water. This shortage not only endangers health and livelihoods but also perpetuates a cycle of gender-based violence and systemic inequalities. This awakening spurred my transformation from a scientist into an advocate, dedicated to fighting for the rights of women and children in this region and championing human rights.

So today, I stand before you to discuss a matter of critical importance and urgency: the role of young lawyers in promoting gender justice, human rights, and sustainability in Nigeria.

**My discussion will encompass four key themes:**

- The Intersection of Law, Gender Justice, and Sustainability
- Leveraging Multidisciplinary Approaches for Greater Impact.
- Data-Driven Advocacy -
- Consistency, Mentorship, and the Path Forward

## **2. THE INTERSECTION OF LAW, GENDER JUSTICE, AND SUSTAINABILITY**

In every society, gender justice, human rights, and environmental sustainability are tightly interwoven. Their intersection presents both challenges and opportunities for legal professionals, especially in a diverse and dynamic context like Nigeria.

### **2.1 Gender Justice and Environmental Health**

In Nigeria, as in many parts of the world, women play a central role in the management of natural resources and the

sustenance of households.<sup>2</sup> Despite their pivotal role, women often face systemic barriers in accessing land, credit, and equal participation in decision-making processes. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), women comprise about 43% of the agricultural labour force globally,<sup>3</sup> yet they have less access than men to agricultural resources, which affects productivity and food security. Legal frameworks that promote gender equity in land ownership and resource access can significantly enhance agricultural productivity and environmental sustainability.

## **2.2 Human Rights and Environmental Degradation**

The Niger Delta region offers a stark illustration of the intersection between human rights and environmental degradation.<sup>4</sup> The exploitation of oil resources has led to severe environmental pollution, affecting the health, livelihoods, and access to clean water for local communities. Reports from Amnesty International highlight the dire consequences of oil spills in the Niger Delta, with local communities facing increased risks of health issues and loss of livelihood without

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<sup>2</sup> Martien Van Nieuwkoop, Patricia Van De Velde, Sophia Huyer and Katie Kennedy Freeman. 'Gender-smart agriculture: The only way forward for women and climate.' (2022). < <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/climatechange/gender-smart-agriculture-only-way-forward-women-and-climate> > Accessed on March 22, 2024

<sup>3</sup> Verhart, Noortje, Annoek Van Den Wijngaart, Mona Dhamankar, and Katrine Danielsen. "Bringing agriculture and nutrition together using a gender lens." Amsterdam, The Netherlands: SNV Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) and the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) (2016). <<https://www.kit.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Bringing-agriculture-and-nutrition-together-using-a-gender-lens.pdf>> Accessed on March 22, 2024

<sup>4</sup> Duru, Udoagdi Christian. 'Environmental degradation: Key challenge to sustainable economic development in the Niger Delta.' (2014) Diss. Walden University.< <https://doi.org/10.5897/JENE2018.0716>> Accessed March 22, 2024.

adequate legal recourse.<sup>5</sup> Legal interventions focused on enforcing environmental regulations and ensuring corporate accountability are crucial in protecting the rights and well-being of affected communities.

This echoes the insights of Professor Damilola Olawuyi during his appearance on the Green Room Episode concerning the Extractive Industry. Professor Olawuyi pointed out, "We need to revamp some of our laws. We have a lot of laws that are archaic and do not adequately address these problems. Because they are outdated, many companies manage to evade responsibility for human rights violations. Therefore, it is crucial that we strategically update our laws to effectively tackle issues related to gender, human rights, and pollution."<sup>6</sup>

By revisiting and revitalising our legal frameworks, we can pave the way for a more just and sustainable approach to natural resource management, ensuring that economic activities do not come at the expense of human rights and environmental integrity.

### **2.3 Sustainability Through Legal Innovation:**

The concept of "green patents," which refers to patents on innovative technologies that are environmentally friendly, showcases the potential for law to drive sustainability. Nigeria, with its burgeoning tech and innovation sector, has the opportunity to lead in the development and protection of green

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<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International. 'Negligence in the Niger Delta: Decoding shell and Eni's poor record on oil spills'. (2018) 6. < <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/AFR4479702018ENGLISH.pdf>> Accessed March 22, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> The Green Room 'Is Extractive Industry a Burden or an Opportunity for Sustainable Development' (2020). <<https://greeninstitute.ng/blog/2020/5/19/green-room-1>> Accessed March 22, 2024



technologies. Legal systems that support intellectual property rights in green technologies can encourage innovation and investment in sustainable solutions, contributing to environmental sustainability and economic growth.

#### **2.4 Case Study – Gender-Sensitive Climate Policies**

Research has shown that climate change does not affect all segments of the population equally.<sup>7</sup> A study published in *Nature Climate Change* revealed that climate-related disasters increase the risk of gender-based violence, a critical human rights issue.<sup>8</sup> Legal frameworks that incorporate gender perspectives in climate adaptation and mitigation strategies can help protect vulnerable populations and ensure more resilient communities. For example, the integration of gender considerations in Nigeria's National Climate Change Action Plan could enhance the effectiveness of climate responses by addressing the specific needs and strengths of women and men differently.

#### **2.5 The Role of Young Lawyers**

Young lawyers in Nigeria are uniquely positioned to advocate for laws and policies that bridge the gap between gender justice, human rights, and sustainability. By championing gender-sensitive legal reforms, enforcing environmental regulations, and supporting innovations in green technology, young legal professionals can contribute to a more equitable, healthy, and sustainable future for all Nigerians.

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<sup>7</sup> Berberian, Alique G., David JX Gonzalez, and Lara J. Cushing. 'Racial disparities in climate change-related health effects in the United States.' (2022) 9(3), 451-464 *Current Environmental Health Reports*. < <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40572-022-00360-w>> Accessed March 22, 2024

<sup>8</sup> Rodrigues, Meghie. 'How climate change could drive an increase in gender-based violence.' (2022), *Nature* < <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-01903-9>> Accessed March 22, 2024

### 3. LEVERAGING MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES FOR GREATER IMPACT

The challenges we face require innovative solutions that transcend traditional boundaries. As an environmental scientist, I've seen first-hand the power of interdisciplinary collaboration. Your legal expertise, combined with insights from science, technology, and social sciences, can lead to ground-breaking policies and practices that address the root causes of inequality and environmental degradation.

A prime example of this interdisciplinary approach in action is my role as a Vanguard Fellow at the University of Birmingham's College of Law. Despite my primary focus on science, I engaged in legal research, specifically on "Advancing Just and Inclusive Net-Zero Energy Transitions: Legal and Governance Framework for Gender-aware Planning and Decision Making." This project transcended the traditional boundaries of environmental science, embodying a collaborative effort that combined diverse academic perspectives, from law to chemical engineering and earth sciences. The fellowship emphasised the importance of bringing together different fields of study to tackle complex issues like gender justice in the context of sustainable energy transitions. It showed how legal frameworks can benefit from scientific research and technological advancements, fostering more equitable and effective solutions.

During this fellowship, I also had the privilege of co-authoring a chapter titled Gender Justice and Net Zero Energy Transition: Perspectives from the United Kingdom and Sub-Saharan Africa in the significant book "Net Zero and Natural Resources Law: Sovereignty, Security, and Solidarity in the

Clean Energy Transition." Published by Oxford University Press, this book is a seminal work meticulously edited by Professor Damilola S. Olawuyi, Professor José Juan González, Professor Hanri Mostert, Dr. Milton Fernando Montoya, and Professor Catherine Banet. It offers a comprehensive examination of the principles of natural resources law and policy amidst global efforts to achieve net zero emissions. The volume explores case studies worldwide, providing insights into how legal and regulatory systems are currently responding—and could improve responses—to the varied challenges and risks of the clean energy transition.<sup>9</sup>

Our chapter explores the intricate relationship between gender justice and the energy transition, emphasising that these twin imperatives must progress in tandem to ensure a fair and equitable shift to sustainable energy sources. We provide a comparative analysis of how these transitions are manifesting in the United Kingdom and Sub-Saharan Africa, shedding light on both unique challenges and universal strategies.

To truly make an impact, seek mentors who embody this multidisciplinary approach, like Professor Olawuyi, who has demonstrated excellence in integrating environmental law with social justice. Embrace opportunities to learn beyond the confines of the law and consider how you can use your skills to contribute to broader societal goals.

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<sup>9</sup> Akinsemolu A. Adenike & Nsoh Walter. 'Gender Justice and Net Zero Energy Transition: Perspectives from the United Kingdom and Sub-Saharan Africa. In Olawuyi, D.S., Márquez, J. J. G., Mostert H., Montoya M. F. & Banet C.(Eds.), *Net Zero and Natural Resources Law Sovereignty, Security and Solidarity Dimensions in the Clean Energy Transition.*' Oxford University Press.<  
<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/net-zero-and-natural-resources-law-9780198925002?q=damilola&lang=en&cc=gb#>>

#### 4. DATA-DRIVEN ADVOCACY

In our quest for change, data is one of our most powerful tools. In fact, data is the new currency. Evidence-based advocacy can elucidate the realities of gender injustice and environmental challenges, compelling decision-makers to act. As young lawyers, you have the capacity to gather, analyse, and present data in ways that persuade and mobilise.

For instance, consider the gender disparities in access to natural resources or the disproportionate impact of climate change on rural women. By presenting compelling data on these issues, you can advocate for legal reforms that ensure equitable access and protection for all.

#### 5. CONSISTENCY, MENTORSHIP, AND THE PATH FORWARD

Change is a marathon, not a sprint. The pursuit of gender justice, human rights, and sustainability demands persistence and resilience. Find mentors who can guide you, share their wisdom, and inspire you to persevere even in the face of adversity.

I recall a period following the birth of my son when I stepped back to focus on motherhood. During this time, I questioned my ability to balance my career with the profound new responsibility of being someone's mother. At the 1st Annual International Law Association Conference in Lagos, Professor Olawuyi noticed my withdrawal. "Adenike, what's going on? You've been rather quiet," he remarked. I confessed my uncertainties, to which he replied, "You are one of the most talented individuals I've encountered, and I refuse to let you

waste your potential. I will support you. You can do this." Returning home from that conversation, I felt reinvigorated and ready to persevere. Thank you, Professor Olawuyi.

Remember, your role as lawyers extends beyond the courtroom. You are not just practitioners of the law; you are advocates for justice, champions of equality, and stewards of the Earth. This role demands passion, dedication, and an unwavering commitment to effecting change. Embrace this calling with the entirety of your being, drawing inspiration from those who guide and believe in you, just as Professor Olawuyi has for me, and move forward with the confidence that you, too, can make a significant impact.

In closing, I urge you to envision a Nigeria where law serves as a beacon of hope, a tool for empowerment, and a catalyst for sustainable development.