

POWER OF INCLUSION: INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND YOUTH IN ENHANCING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL STABILITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Democratic governance in Nigeria has faced persistent challenges of exclusion, elite domination, and weak institutional legitimacy. Women and youth, who together constitute the majority of Nigeria's population, remain underrepresented in formal politics and governance. This paper examines the role of women and youth in strengthening Nigeria's democratic governance and political stability. Drawing on feminist and participatory democratic theories, it highlights how inclusion promotes legitimacy, responsiveness, and accountability in governance. Empirical evidence from Nigeria demonstrates that despite policies like the National Gender Policy (2006) and the Not-Too-Young-to-Run Act (2018), the political space remains dominated by male elites, with cultural, institutional, and economic barriers hindering women and youth participation. The paper argues that meaningful inclusion of women and youth is critical for addressing democratic deficits, reducing political violence, and promoting stability. It concludes with recommendations including stronger implementation of quotas, capacity-building initiatives, and political culture transformation.

Keywords: Nigeria, Women, youth, Inclusion, Democratic governance and Political stability

Introduction

Nigeria's democratic journey since 1999 has been marked by both progress and persistent challenges, including corruption, insecurity, and a trust deficit between citizens and the state. A recurring theme in diagnosing these ailments is the systematic exclusion of key demographic groups specifically, women and youth from the mainstream of political power and governance. Together, these groups constitute the majority of Nigeria's population, yet their representation in decision-making roles remains critically low. Nigeria is Africa's largest democracy and most populous country, with women and youth constituting nearly 70% of its population (National Population Commission, 2019). Despite this demographic reality, their voices remain marginal in political decision-making, leading to governance outcomes that often fail to reflect the needs of the majority.

The persistent exclusion of women and youth undermine Nigeria's democratic legitimacy and fuels instability, as evidenced by recurring electoral violence, youth restiveness, and gendered marginalisation. This paper investigates the role of women and youth inclusion in enhancing democratic governance and political stability in Nigeria. It situates the discussion within the broader democratic trajectory of the country, analyses existing institutional frameworks for inclusion, identifies barriers, and explores how greater participation could promote accountability, representation, and stability. The paper argues that the meaningful inclusion of women and youth is not merely a concession to equity but a strategic imperative for enhancing the quality of democratic governance and fostering long-term political stability in Nigeria. By leveraging their unique perspectives, technological savvy, and grassroots connectivity, these groups can drive accountability, innovation, and a more representative form of politics.

Conceptual Framework

Inclusion in democratic governance means the active participation of all societal groups especially marginalised populations in political decision-making (Young, 2002). Nigeria's democracy since 1999 has been characterised by limited inclusivity, where older male elites dominate political parties and institutions. Theories of participatory democracy argue that broader inclusion enhances legitimacy and stability by preventing alienation and grievances among excluded groups (Afolabi, 2019).

Women's Inclusion in Nigeria

Women's participation in Nigerian politics has been historically low. For instance, in the 2019 general elections, women accounted for less than 5.8% of elected officials nationwide (British Council, 2019). Despite Nigeria's adoption of the National Gender Policy (2006), which recommended a 35% affirmative action benchmark, implementation has been weak (Oloyede, 2016). Cultural norms, financial exclusion, and political violence discourage women from contesting or actively participating in politics. Yet, research shows that greater representation of women contributes to improved governance, accountability, and gender-sensitive policymaking (Afolabi, 2019).

Youth Inclusion in Nigeria

Youth in Nigeria, defined by the African Union as individuals between 15 and 35 years, constitute over 50% of the population. Yet their political inclusion has been minimal, often limited to being mobilised as electoral "foot soldiers" rather than decision-makers. The passage of the *Not-Too-Young-to-Run Act* in 2018 reduced age limits for political offices, opening opportunities for younger aspirants (Ibrahim & Ozoya, 2019). However, structural barriers such as high nomination fees, entrenched party patronage, and limited financial resources continue to hinder effective youth participation.

Nigeria's history of electoral violence, insurgency, and youth restiveness (e.g., Niger Delta militancy, Boko Haram insurgency, and the #EndSARS protests) illustrates the costs of exclusion. Studies show that when women and youth are marginalised, grievances fester, often translating into political instability (Ademola, 2019). Conversely, inclusive governance that recognises women and youth voices reduces alienation, promotes trust in institutions, and enhances stability.

Contributions of Women and Youth to Democratic Governance in Nigeria

Women and youth have demonstrated their capacity to strengthen Nigeria's democracy in various ways: Women's groups and youth movements such as #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS pressured government institutions to act, showing the oversight role of civic activism. Studies suggest a correlation between higher levels of female political representation and lower levels of corruption. Women's inclusion can disrupt established patronage networks that are often dominated by men. A study on Nigerian legislatures found that "although the numbers are small, female lawmakers demonstrated a higher propensity for constituency reporting and transparency in their legislative activities, fostering greater public trust" (Nwankwo, 2022). This enhanced accountability is a cornerstone of stable and legitimate governance.

Nigeria has a massive youth population, with over 60% of its people under the age of 25. The passage of the "Not Too Young To Run" Act in 2018 was a landmark legislative victory largely driven by youth advocacy. The law reduced the age qualification for various political offices, symbolically affirming the right of youth to participate. While its practical impact on the number of elected young officials has been modest due to persistent financial and political gate keeping, it has inspired a new generation to engage with the political process, both as candidates and as informed voters (YIAGA Africa, 2023). Their involvement is crucial for refreshing the political class and reducing the gerontocratic dominance that often resists change.

Historically, this "youth bulge" has been viewed as a potential source of instability, given high unemployment rates and susceptibility to manipulation by political entrepreneurs. However, this perspective overlooks the transformative potential of an engaged youth citizenry. Young political aspirants under the Not-Too-Young-to-Run platform have introduced new governance ideas, particularly around digital governance and social accountability. Nigerian youth have harnessed digital technology to reshape civic engagement. Movements like #EndSARS in 2020 demonstrated their capacity for decentralized, tech-driven mobilization to demand police reform and good governance. This represents a new form of political participation that operates outside traditional, often compromised, institutions. According to Adebayo (2021), "the #EndSARS movement was a

watershed moment, illustrating that Nigerian youth are not apathetic but have developed alternative platforms for demanding accountability and asserting their citizenship". This active monitoring of government actions serves as a check on power and promotes stability by providing a non-violent outlet for grievance articulation.

Synergies and Challenges to Inclusion

The potential of women and youth is most potent when their efforts are synergistic. Young women, in particular, face a "double jeopardy" of gender and age-based discrimination, yet they are often at the forefront of advocacy. Collaborative movements that bring together women's rights groups and youth-led organizations can create a powerful, cross-cutting force for democratic renewal.

When women are included in governance, they often bring distinct priorities to the fore. Research indicates that female legislators are more likely to sponsor and advocate for bills related to health, education, child welfare, and social protection all critical areas for human development and stability. For instance, the advocacy by women's groups was instrumental in the passage of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in 2015. Their continued inclusion is vital for implementing and strengthening such legislation. As noted by Olanrewaju et al. (2023), "the systematic exclusion of women from political spaces in Nigeria has resulted in a governance deficit, where policies lack the transformative potential to address deep-seated socio-economic inequalities". Women have historically played mediating roles in communal and electoral conflicts, contributing to peace building, Youth and women often serve as the link between communities and the state, facilitating civic engagement and voter mobilisation.

Barriers to Inclusion

Despite these contributions, major barriers persist:

- **Cultural patriarchy:** Societal norms continue to privilege male leadership, discouraging women's political engagement.
- **Economic exclusion:** High cost of electioneering campaigns and nomination fees marginalise women and youth.
- **Violence and insecurity:** Electoral violence and online harassment deter women and youth from active politics (British Council, 2019).
- **Tokenistic inclusion:** While youth and women are visible in campaign rallies, their substantive influence in decision-making is limited.

The exclusion of women and youth undermines democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Legitimacy of institutions is weakened when majority demographics are sidelined. Furthermore, instability arising from youth restiveness and gender inequality underscores the urgent need for inclusive governance. Conversely, evidence suggests that when women and youth are meaningfully engaged, governance outcomes improve—leading to broader legitimacy, accountability, and resilience (Afolabi, 2019; Ibrahim & Ozoya, 2019).

Conclusion

The exclusion of women and youth from Nigeria's political landscape is a critical democratic deficit that undermines governance and stability. Conversely, their inclusion represents a powerful, underutilized resource. Women bring essential perspectives to policy-making and can help rebuild public trust through greater accountability. Youth inject innovation, technological prowess, and a vibrant energy into civic life, holding the government accountable through new forms of engagement. For Nigeria to achieve its potential as a stable and prosperous democracy, it must move beyond tokenistic inclusion and create an enabling environment—through legal reforms, party internal democracy, and the protection of political rights—that allows these groups to fully participate and lead. The power of their inclusion is the power to build a more resilient, representative, and legitimate Nigerian state.

Suggestions

1. **Reform Political Financing:** Reduce nomination fees and provide state funding mechanisms for young and female candidates.
2. **Cultural Reorientation:** Launch civic education and advocacy to challenge patriarchal and gerontocratic norms.
3. **Create Safe Political Spaces:** Protect women and youth from political violence and harassment through legal and institutional frameworks.
4. **Leverage Digital Platforms:** Encourage youth participation through e-governance, social media engagement, and civic technology tools.

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