

## **Gender Inclusivity and Social Equality as Tools for Promoting National Integration In Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Nigeria, a nation marked by profound diversity in ethnicity, religion, and culture, faces significant challenges in achieving national integration. The complexity of these challenges is exacerbated by gender inequality and social disparities. This paper examines the vital role that gender inclusivity and social equality play in fostering a cohesive and integrated Nigerian society. By analysing the intersections between gender, social inequality, and national unity, this paper underscores how gender inclusivity and social equality can serve as mechanisms for bridging ethnic and regional divides. This study adopted the secondary or documentary sources of data collection which has to do with information gathered from textbooks, journals, articles, newspapers, online and official documents. The theoretical framework of Social Integration Theory was applied to explore these themes. The findings of this paper establish that promoting national integration in Nigeria through gender inclusivity and social equality involves breaking down socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers that limit the full participation of all citizens. This study concludes by providing a set of recommendations such as governments at all levels in Nigeria should strengthen and enforce policies that ensure women's participation in politics and leadership roles, and also campaigns aimed at educating the public on the benefits of gender inclusivity and social equality should be conducted at national and local levels.

**Keywords:** National integration, gender inclusivity, social equality, social integration theory, Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

Nigeria is a diverse nation with over 250 ethnic groups, often marked by deep-rooted ethnic and religious divisions. Since its independence in 1960, national integration has been a major focus for successive governments, particularly in the face of ethnic conflicts, religious tensions, and socio-economic disparities. Promoting unity and harmony in a country as diverse as Nigeria requires multi-dimensional strategies, and one of the most effective approaches is fostering gender inclusivity and social equality. These aspects, although interconnected, play a vital role in creating a cohesive society that can transcend its differences and work together toward national development (Okafor, 2017).

The unity of the country is often challenged by regional disparities and the unequal distribution of resources. (Ake,1996). In this context, the promotion of gender inclusivity and social equality becomes central to the nation's peacebuilding and development efforts. National integration has historically been complicated by Nigeria's diverse composition. Ethnic group rivalry, religious clashes, and regional imbalances have often led to violence and strife. Social cohesion can only be achieved when every individual, regardless of gender or social status, feels included and valued. This is where gender inclusivity and social equality come into play.

For instance, women in Nigeria constitute a significant portion of the population, yet their participation in politics, the economy, and leadership roles remains disproportionately low. According to the World Economic Forum (2021), Nigeria ranks poorly in gender parity, with women having limited access to political power, education, and employment opportunities. Gender inclusivity can serve as a bridge to reduce these disparities and promote unity across the country. By giving women equal opportunities and ensuring their active participation in governance and leadership, Nigeria can foster a more equitable and integrated society. Empowering women has been shown to have positive ripple effects on the overall development of nations. Research conducted by the World Bank (2019) underscores the importance of gender inclusivity in fostering economic growth, improving public health, and advancing education. In the Nigerian context, promoting gender equality will not only enhance the socio-economic development of women but also strengthen the fabric of the nation as a whole. In Nigeria, the deep-rooted inequality between the rich and the poor, as well as among different ethnic and religious groups, has been a source of division. Social inequality hampers national integration by perpetuating feelings of exclusion, resentment, and marginalization.

The disparity between the northern and southern regions, particularly in terms of economic development, educational access, and healthcare, illustrates the importance of promoting social equality in Nigeria. Addressing these inequalities will help bridge the gaps between different regions and foster unity. For instance, according to the United Nations Development Programme (2022), Nigeria's Human Development Index (HDI) is among the lowest in the world, largely due to unequal access to basic social services. To build a more integrated and harmonious society, the government must prioritize policies that promote social equity, such as equitable resource allocation, educational reforms, and healthcare improvements.

Gender inclusivity and social equality are not isolated concepts; rather, they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Promoting gender equality directly contributes to broader social equality, as women and men are given the same opportunities to participate in the economy, politics, and social life. In Nigeria, these two aspects are essential in addressing the challenges of national integration. For example, the 2019 Nigeria Gender Report by the United Nations indicated that increasing women's participation in the labour force could contribute significantly to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP). This would not only empower women but also enhance the nation's economic strength and foster greater national unity. Furthermore, reducing gender-based violence and discrimination would promote peace and stability, which are vital for national integration.

The Nigerian government has demonstrated commitment to the ideals of gender and social inclusion gaps, protection of women's human rights, and harnessing women's human capital for national development through the implementation of the National Gender Policy (2021–2026). It underscores the importance of mainstreaming gender perspectives into all aspects of national planning and development, ensuring that policies, programs, and decision-making processes are inclusive and equitable. By addressing systemic barriers that hinder women's participation in governance, education, and the economy, the policy seeks to create an enabling environment where both men and women can contribute meaningfully to national growth. Furthermore, it advocates for legal and institutional reforms to eliminate gender-based discrimination and violence, promoting a more just and egalitarian society. Through this initiative, the government reaffirms its commitment to fostering gender equality as a fundamental pillar of sustainable development and social progress.

Despite the National Gender Policy, challenges persist. Socioeconomic disparities, unequal power relations, and exclusionary practices continue to limit the participation of women groups in Nigeria's social, political, and economic life. These issues are compounded by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequality.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted the secondary or documentary sources of data collection which has to do with information gathered from textbooks, journals, articles, newspapers, online and official documents. Report and data collected were analysed utilizing content analysis. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive examination of existing literature and policy documents, providing a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding gender policy implementation in Nigeria. By relying on credible and diverse sources, the study ensures a well-rounded perspective that captures historical trends, contemporary debates, and policy evaluations. Content analysis enables the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and gaps in the discourse.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For the purpose of this study, the Social Integration Theory would be adopted as its theoretical framework. Social integration refers to the process by which individuals from diverse social, ethnic, and gender backgrounds come together to form a cohesive society, while sharing common values, norms, and a sense of belonging within a larger society.

The Social Integration Theory is not attributed to a single theorist but is an overarching concept in sociology with contributions from multiple scholars. Key proponents include Émile Durkheim, who laid the foundation for the theory with his work on social cohesion and the importance of shared norms and values for societal stability (Durkheim, 1893). Talcott Parsons contributed by understanding the role of social institutions in integrating individuals and groups into society (Parsons, 1951). Robert Putnam, in his later work, focused on the role of social capital and how civic engagement can enhance social integration (Putnam, 2000).

The theory focuses on reducing social division and promoting unity by addressing inequalities and enhancing participation in social, political, and economic activities (Durkheim, 1893; Parsons, 1951; Putnam, 2000). This theoretical perspective supports the idea that promoting gender inclusivity and social equality is central to building a more integrated, cohesive, and harmonious society, contributing to national unity. Social Integration Theory developed over several decades through contributions from sociologists like Durkheim and Parsons in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It gained more focus in the 20th century with the rise of discussions on social cohesion and collective identity in the context of modernization and globalization (Durkheim, 1893; Parsons, 1951)

Social Integration Theory is highly relevant to promoting national integration through gender inclusivity and social equality in Nigeria. The theory supports the idea that a unified and cohesive society can only emerge when all groups, including women and marginalized communities, are included in social, economic, and political activities. Gender inclusivity and social equality contribute to reducing divisions, promoting mutual respect, and fostering a sense of belonging for all citizens. By empowering Nigeria women and addressing social inequalities, society becomes more integrated and cohesive, creating a stable national identity.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **National Integration**

National integration is the process of promoting unity and harmony within a nation, particularly in diverse societies with different ethnic, religious, or cultural groups. It involves fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity among citizens, reducing divisions, and promoting peaceful coexistence. In the Nigerian context, national integration is crucial to overcoming ethnic and regional tensions and building a cohesive nation where citizens from all backgrounds feel equally represented and valued. (Akinyemi, 1983).

In the Nigerian context, national integration is particularly significant due to the country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition. Nigeria has experienced periods of ethnic and regional tensions, which have sometimes resulted in political instability and conflicts. Therefore, fostering national integration requires continuous dialogue, inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and respect for diversity to build a nation where all citizens feel equally represented and valued (Akinyemi, 1983).

### **Gender Inclusivity**

Gender inclusivity refers to the active participation and equal opportunities for all genders in societal, political, and economic contexts. It involves dismantling gender-based barriers, promoting equal access to resources, decision-making processes, and ensuring that policies are sensitive to the needs and interests of all genders, including men, women, and non-binary individuals. Gender inclusivity aims to address systemic inequality and promote an inclusive environment where all genders can thrive equally. (United Nations Women, 2020).

The concept of gender inclusivity is particularly relevant in addressing systemic inequalities that have historically marginalized certain groups, particularly women. In many societies, gender disparities in education, employment, and political representation hinder progress toward a more just and equitable world. Efforts such as gender-responsive policies, affirmative action, and educational empowerment programs have been introduced to close these gaps. (United Nations Women, 2020).

### **Social Equality**

Social equality refers to the idea that all individuals, regardless of their background (such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or socioeconomic status), should have equal access to rights, resources, and opportunities. It entails creating an equitable society where discrimination, exclusion, or inequality based on social differences is minimized. Social equality also emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and fairness in societal processes, especially in education, healthcare, employment, and political representation (Sen, 1999).

Achieving social equality requires proactive policies and reforms that address historical injustices and structural inequalities. This includes implementing anti-discrimination laws, promoting inclusive education, ensuring equal pay, and improving access to social services for marginalized groups. In many societies, deep-rooted biases and institutional barriers continue to hinder progress toward equality, necessitating continuous advocacy and policy adjustments. Beyond legal frameworks, fostering a culture of acceptance, respect, and equal opportunity is crucial in creating a more equitable society where everyone can thrive, contribute, and be treated with dignity (Sen, 1999).

### **Gender Inclusivity as a Tool for Promoting National Integration in Nigeria**

Despite its vast resources and potential, Nigeria continues to face significant challenges related to social cohesion, largely driven by deep-seated inequalities and historical grievances. The exclusion of women from political, economic, and social spheres has not only hindered individual development but has also impeded the nation's overall progress. Addressing gender disparities is, therefore, not just a matter of equity; it is fundamental to achieving a united and integrated Nigeria. Women in Nigeria face systemic obstacles such as limited access to education, underrepresentation in leadership positions, and economic marginalization, all of which contribute to the persistence of inequality. The failure to fully integrate women into these critical sectors weakens democratic governance, stifles economic growth, and exacerbates social divisions. Addressing these disparities is, therefore, not merely a matter of fairness or social justice; it is a strategic imperative for achieving a more cohesive and prosperous Nigeria (UNDP, 2022).

In the context of political representation, gender inclusivity is crucial for ensuring that women's voices are heard in decision-making processes. Women constitute nearly half of Nigeria's population, yet they are significantly underrepresented in political offices, holding fewer than 10% of seats in national and state assemblies (United Nations Women, 2022). This lack of representation limits the diversity of perspectives in governance, which is essential for addressing the multifaceted challenges facing the nation. For example, women's participation in politics has been shown to lead to the prioritization of issues such as healthcare, education, and social welfare, which are critical for national development (Nwankwo, 2020). When women are included in political processes, policies tend to be more inclusive and reflective of the population's needs, fostering a sense of belonging among all citizens. Initiatives aimed at increasing women's political representation, such as gender quotas and awareness campaigns, are crucial steps toward ensuring a more equitable political landscape that can effectively contribute to national integration.

The economic empowerment of women is another critical aspect of gender inclusivity that significantly impacts national integration. Historically, women in Nigeria have faced numerous barriers to economic participation, including limited access to education, financial resources, and land ownership (Akinyemi, 2018). These barriers not only perpetuate poverty but also reinforce gender stereotypes and social divisions. However, when women are given equal access to economic opportunities, they can contribute meaningfully to their households and communities, which in turn fosters economic growth and stability. Programs that promote women's entrepreneurship, skills development, and access to credit can enhance their economic standing and reduce gender disparities. The ripple effect of empowering women economically can lead to improved educational outcomes for their children, better health indicators, and increased overall community resilience (Oladipo, 2019). By addressing these economic inequalities, Nigeria can work toward creating a more integrated society where all individuals, regardless of gender, can contribute to and benefit from national development.

Education is another crucial domain where gender inclusivity plays a significant role in fostering national integration. Access to quality education is essential for personal development and societal progress. In Nigeria, disparities in educational attainment between boys and girls are still prevalent, particularly in certain regions where cultural norms prioritize boys' education over girls' (UNICEF, 2022). This educational gap not only limits women's opportunities but also has broader implications for national cohesion. In Nigeria, these challenges remain prevalent, particularly in rural areas and northern regions, where cultural norms and economic hardships often limit girls' access to quality education. Early marriage, driven by poverty and traditional practices, forces many young girls to drop out of school, depriving them of opportunities for personal and

professional growth. Similarly, gender-based violence, including harassment and discrimination in educational institutions, creates unsafe learning environments that discourage female students from continuing their education. Additionally, inadequate school facilities—such as the lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure, sanitary facilities, and learning resources—further hinder girls' participation in education. The cumulative effect of these barriers exacerbates gender inequality and restricts women's contributions to national development.

Social cohesion is a vital component of national integration, and gender inclusivity can strengthen this aspect of society. In Nigeria, social tensions often arise from ethnic and religious differences, but gender-based inequalities can exacerbate these divisions. Women have historically been marginalized in peacebuilding efforts, despite their potential to contribute significantly to conflict resolution and community reconciliation (Ojo, 2017). When women in Nigeria are included in peace processes, they bring unique perspectives and experiences that can lead to more sustainable peace agreements. Furthermore, Nigerian women's involvement in community organizations and grassroots movements can enhance social cohesion, as these platforms provide opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and mutual understanding among different groups.

In addition to peacebuilding, gender inclusivity is critical in addressing social issues such as health and family welfare. Women are often the primary caregivers in households, and their health and well-being directly impact the health of their families and communities. Ensuring that women have access to quality healthcare services, reproductive rights, and education about health issues is essential for improving overall community health (Nnadi, 2021). Additionally, gender inclusivity in health policies in Nigeria can lead to better health outcomes for all citizens, as it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse health needs within the population.

The promotion of gender inclusivity also intersects with cultural and traditional practices in Nigeria. While many cultural norms may reinforce gender inequalities, there is also an opportunity to leverage positive cultural practices that promote inclusivity. Engaging traditional leaders and community influencers in advocating for gender equality can create a cultural shift toward more inclusive norms and practices. For example, campaigns that celebrate the contributions of women in various sectors, such as agriculture, education, and healthcare, can challenge stereotypes and inspire future generations to embrace gender inclusivity as a societal value (Adewale, 2020).

The success stories of prominent Nigerian women such as Amina Mohammed in global diplomacy, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala in economic, Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Margret Ekpo in activism are example that can motivate societal change.

By addressing the barriers that prevent women and marginalized genders from participating fully in political, economic, and social spheres, Nigeria can work toward creating a more equitable and united nation. Empowering women to take an active role in governance, economic development, education, and peacebuilding can enhance social cohesion and foster a shared sense of purpose among all citizens. As Nigeria continues to navigate its complex landscape, prioritizing gender inclusivity will be essential for achieving lasting national integration and realizing the country's full potential.

## **Social Equality as a Tool for Promoting National Integration in Nigeria**

One of the primary ways social equality contributes to national integration is through fostering inclusivity in governance and political representation. Political marginalization of certain groups—often along ethnic or religious lines—has historically led to feelings of disenfranchisement and division among Nigeria's diverse populace. By ensuring that all groups, including women and minorities, are represented in political processes, the nation can work towards creating a sense of belonging for everyone. For instance, policies that encourage inclusive political participation, such as affirmative action and gender quotas, can help increase the representation of marginalized groups in governance. Studies have shown that increased representation leads to more equitable policies that benefit broader segments of the population, thereby fostering national unity (Nwankwo, 2020). When all citizens see their interests represented, it enhances their commitment to the nation and reduces the likelihood of conflict.

Economic equality is another critical aspect of social equality that plays a significant role in promoting national integration in Nigeria. The country faces significant economic disparities, with wealth often concentrated among a small elite, while a substantial portion of the population lives in poverty. This economic inequality can exacerbate social divisions, leading to tensions between different ethnic and religious groups. Promoting economic equality through equitable access to resources, education, and employment opportunities can reduce these disparities. For example, initiatives that provide vocational training and microfinancing to women and youth in marginalized communities can empower these groups economically, enhancing their participation in national development (Akinyemi, 2018). Economic empowerment not only improves individual livelihoods but also contributes to overall national growth, creating a sense of shared prosperity and fostering national integration.

Education is a fundamental avenue through which social equality can be achieved, playing a vital role in promoting national integration in Nigeria. Disparities in educational access and quality, particularly along ethnic and gender lines, have long been obstacles to social equality (Okafor & Bode-Okuade). For instance, in many northern states, cultural practices and poverty have led to lower enrollment rates for girls, limiting their opportunities for personal and professional development. To promote national integration, it is essential to ensure that all children, regardless of their background, have access to quality education. Policies that address barriers to education, such as child marriage and economic hardship, are critical for fostering a more educated populace. An educated society is better equipped to participate in governance, contribute to economic development, and engage in constructive dialogue across cultural and ethnic divides, thus strengthening national unity.

Social equality also plays a vital role in fostering social cohesion, which is essential for national integration. In Nigeria, historical grievances and injustices have often led to inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. Promoting social equality helps address these grievances by ensuring that all groups have equal access to justice and opportunities for redress. Initiatives that promote reconciliation and inclusivity can help bridge divides and foster mutual understanding among different groups. For example, community-based programs that encourage dialogue and collaboration among diverse groups can enhance social cohesion, as they create spaces for individuals to share their experiences and work together towards common goals (Ojo, 2017). Such collaborative efforts can contribute to healing historical wounds, promoting a shared identity that transcends ethnic and religious affiliations.

The role of civil society organizations in promoting social equality cannot be overstated. These organizations often advocate for marginalized groups, raising awareness about issues related to

inequality and injustice. By mobilizing communities and pushing for policy reforms, civil society plays a crucial role in fostering social equality and, consequently, national integration. For instance, organizations that focus on women's rights or youth empowerment work to address systemic barriers that prevent these groups from fully participating in society. Their efforts contribute to creating an environment where social equality is recognized as a fundamental right, promoting a more integrated nation (Nnadi, 2021). Civil society's engagement in policy advocacy and community mobilization enhances accountability and ensures that the voices of marginalized groups are heard in national discourse.

Furthermore, social equality contributes to peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria, an essential component of national integration. The historical marginalization of certain groups has often fueled conflicts and violence, undermining social cohesion. By promoting social equality, the nation can address the root causes of these conflicts and work towards sustainable peace. Initiatives that involve women and youth in peacebuilding processes have shown promising results, as these groups often advocate for non-violent conflict resolution and community stability (Adewale, 2020). Inclusive peacebuilding efforts that consider the perspectives of diverse groups can lead to more sustainable outcomes, fostering a culture of tolerance and understanding that is essential for national integration.

Social equality is vital for initiatives that promote social equality not only enhance individual well-being but also contribute to the overall stability and prosperity of the nation. As Nigeria navigates its diverse landscape, prioritizing social equality will be essential for achieving lasting national integration and fostering a sense of belonging among all citizens. Social Integration Theory is highly relevant to promoting national integration through gender inclusivity and social equality in Nigeria. The theory supports the idea that a unified and cohesive society can only emerge when all groups, including women and marginalized communities, are included in social, economic, and political activities.

## **Conclusion**

Promoting national integration in Nigeria through gender inclusivity and social equality is a critical pathway toward a unified and peaceful society. Gender inclusivity ensures that women contribute their knowledge, skills, and resources to nation-building, while social equality addresses the imbalances that cause division and conflict among different groups. The government, civil society organizations, and international bodies must collaborate to implement policies that address gender inequality and promote social justice.

The challenges are significant, but with concerted efforts to create a more inclusive and equal society, Nigeria can achieve greater unity, stability, and progress: A gender-inclusive and socially equal. Nigeria will not only benefit its citizens but will also set an example for other nations striving for national cohesion and sustainable development.

## **Recommendations**

The Nigerian government should as a matter of priority

- i. review and strengthen existing laws that promote both gender equality and broader social justice. This includes enforcing laws against gender-based violence, discrimination, and inequalities based on ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status, this will enhance a level of equality for the Nigerian women.



- ii. adopt gender quotas that ensure women's participation in political and leadership positions. Additionally, policies should promote the representation of marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities and people with disabilities, in decision-making processes. Such inclusive practices will help create policies that address the diverse needs of all citizens.
- iii. promote economic empowerment for both women and marginalized communities. This includes increasing access to education, vocational training, and financial resources. Initiatives like microfinance, entrepreneurship training, and equal access to job opportunities can help reduce socioeconomic disparities and foster inclusivity in economic development
- iv. Civil society organizations and community leaders in Nigeria should collaborate to run awareness campaigns that promote gender equality and social justice. These programs can challenge stereotypes, educate communities on the importance of inclusivity, and foster dialogue among diverse groups in Nigeria.

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