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Gender, Ethnicity and Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Gender and ethnicity are important social factors that influence the prospects for sustainable development in Nigeria. While gender norms are socially constructed and allot specific roles and rights to women and men, Nigeria's ethnic diversity likewise influences access to political power, socio-economic resources and sustainable development opportunities. These interconnected social dimensions complement each other in creating room for marginalisation that deepens citizens' vulnerability and limits their capacity to contribute to, or benefit from, sustainable development in Nigeria. This study is descriptive and explanatory. It adopts a qualitative approach, reviews existing literature and secondary data, and applies Crenshaw's intersectionality framework to examine how gender and ethnicity jointly influence the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria, focusing on the overlapping barriers to political participation, security, and economic resources experienced by women from ethnic minorities. The study shows that women and ethnic minorities (marginalised groups) are largely restricted in participating in policy-making, governance and the implementation of development programmes. This becomes dire where gender and ethnic identities intersect, resulting in deeper exclusion from State resources, economic opportunities, political representation and social services. The study further reveals that ethnic and gender-based discrimination perpetuates cycles of poverty, insecurity and inequality, thereby limiting sustainable development. The paper concludes that sustainable development cannot be effectively achieved in Nigeria amid the interaction of gender and ethnic marginalisation. The study therefore recommends adopting gender- and ethnicity-responsive policies, inclusive governance, stronger protection against gender- and ethnicity-based violence, and integrating equitable access to education and economic opportunities into Nigeria's sustainable development policies.

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Introduction

Nigeria is a country of diverse ethnic groups that exist side by side and struggle for survival, identity, and recognition. Suspicion of one ethnic group's domination over another thus becomes inevitable. The incessant agitation and struggle for control of the nation's resources remain a bone of contention and a threat to peaceful coexistence, national unity, and sustainable development. According to the World Bank (2026), Nigeria is a heterogeneous country with an estimated population of approximately 237.5 million, over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 indigenous languages (Eberhard et al., 2025; National Institute for Cultural Orientation [NICO], 2026). This ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity is confronted with complex sustainable development challenges, such as persistent

socioeconomic inequalities and gender-related disparities. By nature, Nigeria's gender norms are socially constructed, with specific roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women alike.

Federalism has thus been adopted as a system of government for ensuring peaceful coexistence in heterogeneous societies, and Nigeria is no exception. Being federal in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria implies institutional accommodation of cultural, ethnic and regional diversity to maintain peaceful coexistence and development within a common political framework (Demerew et al., 2025; Fenna & Schnabel, 2024; Gebeye, 2021; Kong, 2025). That is, federalism is a constitutional system of government in which authority is divided between the central government and regional governments, allowing component units a degree of self-rule while participating in shared national governance, with the aim of maintaining national unity amid territorial, ethnic, cultural, and other forms of diversity. Unfortunately, peaceful coexistence and the developmental agenda, which were among the fundamental reasons for adopting a federal system of government in Nigeria, have been confronted by many challenges since its inception, and most of these challenges are products of gender inequality, ethnic politics and sentiments (Arowosegbe, 2023; Nwaoburu, 2023). At independence in 1960, the dominance of the three major ethnic groups (Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo) in their respective regions led minority ethnic groups to agitate for the creation of more states. Nigeria, which had only three regions at independence, has since become thirty-six states and a separate Federal Capital Territory. Ethnic mobilisation has contributed to political instability and social crisis, and it threatens peaceful coexistence, unity and the sustainable development of Nigeria in the comity of nations.

On the other hand, gender inequality, ethnic politics, and regional sentiments create significant barriers to Nigeria's political development and democratic consolidation, with consequences for inclusive governance and sustainable development (Adesoye, 2026; Eghoikhunu et al., 2026; Madueke, 2026). This is evident in the International Monetary Fund's (IMF, 2025) assessment, which identifies ethno-religious fragmentation and regional divides as drivers of social exclusion and unrest. However, ethnic diversity can be a strength in achieving sustainable development, or a source of division. Achieving sustainable development requires addressing gender and ethnic inequalities, promoting social justice and ensuring equal opportunities for all, irrespective of gender, race and ethnic background. This paper therefore examines how gender roles affect sustainable development, with a focus on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. It also analyses ethnic disparities by exploring the relationship between ethnicity and sustainable development and, drawing on the framework of intersectionality, shows how the two dimensions combine to compound disadvantage for Nigerian women, particularly those from ethnic minority groups. This study is descriptive and explanatory. It uses a qualitative research approach based on existing literature and secondary data.

Statement of the problem

The pursuit of sustainable development in Nigeria remains constrained by tenacious inequalities in access to political power, economic resources, social services and decision-making opportunities. Gender inequality and ethnic disparities, caused by significant institutional barriers and cultural norms, continue to limit the capacity of ethnic minorities and women (marginalised groups) to contribute to, or benefit from sustainable development processes. Nigeria with an estimated population of approximately 237.5 million (World Bank, 2023, 2026), faces complex sustainable development challenges that are rooted in gender inequalities and ethnic disparities, and Nigerian studies continue to document the underrepresentation and exclusion of women and some minority ethnic groups (marginalised groups) from political decision-making and governance structures (Diala & Sarumi, 2025; Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023). Evidence from Nigeria shows that women from ethnic minorities (marginalised ethnic groups) can encounter overlapping barriers to political participation, security and economic resources (Akindutire & Adebusuyi, 2025; Olubela, 2023). The problem, therefore, goes beyond gender inequality or ethnic disparity considered independently; it involves insecurity, political marginalisation and limited access to socioeconomic resources that arise from the intersection of these social dimensions and undermine inclusive and sustainable development. Limited attention has been given to how gender and ethnicity jointly shape sustainable development outcomes in Nigeria. This study therefore addresses this gap by examining how the intersection of gender and ethnicity compounds inequality and constrains sustainable development in Nigeria, with a view to identifying strategies that promote inclusive sustainable development, reduce poverty and enhance human well-being. The study highlights the interconnectedness of gender inequality and ethnicity and the challenges they pose to achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. It also focuses on the overlapping barriers to political participation, security and economic resources experienced by women from ethnic minorities. The review

covers political participation, education, employment and livelihoods, access to productive resources, health and security, with poverty and inclusion treated as cross-cutting concerns.

Conceptual Framework

Concept of Ethnic Groups

Cohen (1974) defines an ethnic group as a collection of people who share patterns of normative behaviour and form part of a larger population, interacting with people from other ethnic groups within a social system. In this view, one characteristic of the people Cohen describes as an ethnic group is the "sharing of normative behaviour". According to McClean (quoted in Adeleke & Charles, 2015), an ethnic group is the strongest expression of group feeling. From this simple definition, they argue that there are many groups to which individuals could belong, including social, political, economic, religious and professional groups, but that the ethnic group stimulates the greatest feelings, especially among those who are biologically related. In this respect, an ethnic group is any group defined or set apart by race, religion or a defined origin, or a combination of some of these categories. For instance, an ethnic group like the Yoruba is said to be descended from Oduduwa, with its ancestral home in Ile-Ife. An ethnic group comprises people who share a unique social and cultural heritage that is passed from one generation to the next.

An ethnic group is identified by distinctive patterns of family life, language, recreation, religion and other customs that differentiate it from others. Ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries and membership, especially language, culture or both, with language constituting the most crucial variable in Africa. An ethnic group is not necessarily linguistically or culturally homogeneous; it often subsumes sub-cultural, linguistic, dialectal, occupational and other differences, depending on the prevailing level of socio-economic development and cultural differentiation (Etang, 2004). Ethnicity is a continuum, as its characteristics persist across generations. An ethnic group consists of interacting members who belong to a named or labelled social group whose interests they identify with and which manifests certain aspects of a unique culture while constituting part of a wider society. An ethnic group is therefore seen as an organised communal society whose objectives are predominantly determined by the mutual or collective feelings of its members regarding the benefits of biological kinship, which they believe can be achieved only through the regular demonstration of marginalisation against a perceived dominant group.

Concept of Ethnicity

Azeez (2009) sees ethnicity as a sense of peoplehood that has its foundation in the combined remembrance of past experience and common aspiration. Etang (2004) observes that ethnicity is a derivative of the ethnic group, which forms the basis of its articulation; that is, it is the existence of the group that makes ethnicity possible. Ethnicity is looked upon as unreal, an artificial basis of identification and collective organisation conjured up by outsiders seeking an efficient instrument of political and economic control (Enloe, 1978). It is therefore considered a strategic weapon chosen by a disadvantaged group as a new mode of seeking political redress, or by a privileged group in order to protect its advantages (Enloe, 1987, cited in Azeez, 2009). Cox (1970, cited in Adeleke & Charles, 2015) likewise sees an ethnic group as a socio-cultural entity whose members, "while inhabiting the same state, country or economic area, consider themselves biologically, culturally, linguistically or socially distinct from each other and most often view themselves or relate in actual or potentially antagonistic terms."

Nigeria has over 250 ethnic groups that speak more than 500 indigenous languages, which can create confusion, as one may equate each language with an ethnic group and thereby arrive at over 500 ethnic groups. Moreover, while language may be an important factor in defining an ethnic group, some ethnic groups in Nigeria may have lost their original linguistic roots while retaining their identity as a result of intense interaction with larger socio-ethnic groups. Similarly, many ethnic groups may use the same language to ease communication, as in the case of smaller ethnic groups in northern Nigeria, where Hausa has become, more or less, a lingua franca. The incessant political instability and civil unrest in Nigeria's Fourth Republic are precipitated by persistent feelings of marginalisation among various ethnic groups. As such, upon realisation by these smaller ethnic groups that the languages they speak do not reflect their ethnic identities in the larger society, the need to identify and gain recognition in the sharing (allocation and control) of the society's resources resulted in continuous agitation, which forms the basis of the current political instability and civil unrest in the South-East and the disintegration among varying interest groups in Nigeria.

Conceptualizing Sustainable Development and Gender Equality

According to Leach et al. (2010), sustainability and sustainable development are historically changing and much-debated concepts. Since the 1990s, mainstream views have generally defined sustainability in normative terms, referring to a broadly identifiable set of social, environmental and economic values. This definition broadly aligns with the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) view that sustainable development should "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This involves integrating three 'pillars' of sustainability: environmental, economic and social.

Sustainable development is development that ensures human well-being, ecological integrity, gender equality, and social justice now and in the future; upholds human rights principles; widens freedoms; and promotes peace, while respecting the environment. It requires redressing discrimination and disadvantage at household, local, national, regional and global levels (WCED, 1987). According to the WCED (1987), achieving sustainability, or sustainable development, requires redirecting interconnected environmental, economic, social, and political processes; challenging current unsustainable pathways of production, consumption, and distribution; and finding new ones. It also requires action and accountability from the state, civil society, the private sector, communities, and individuals, building alliances to transform institutions and power relations and democratise knowledge (WCED, 1987).

In this conceptualisation, gender equality is therefore integral to how sustainable development is defined and pursued. Leach et al. (2010) consider gender equality not only in relation to women and men but also in intersectional terms, attending to how gender intersects with class, race and ethnicity, sexuality, place, and other significant axes of difference (Allman et al., 2002). The concept of substantive gender equality emphasizes the importance of human rights, capabilities and the ways in which these intertwine and overlap (Apffel-Marglin & Simon, 1994). Building on this, Leach et al. (2010) conceptualise multiple dimensions of pursuing gender equality, which include the following:

(a) Redressing socio-economic disadvantage in the domains of work, well-being and access to resources. This includes ensuring equal access to decent work and secure livelihoods; the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work; equal access to quality education, health and other social services and public goods; and equal access to and control over resources and their benefits – including ecosystem-based resources.

(b) Enhancing recognition and dignity. This includes challenging stereotypes around masculinity and femininity; assuring freedom from violence and violations of dignity and security; assurance of bodily integrity and sexual and reproductive health and rights; and recognition and respect for diverse forms of knowledge production and application.

(c) Enhancing equal participation in decision-making at multiple levels. This includes supporting agency, power and voice in institutions and decision-making; building deliberative forms of democracy that can debate sustainability goals and values in inclusive ways; and assuring space for feminist collective action (Leach et al., 2010).

According to Leach et al. (2010), gender equality ultimately requires the realization of all human rights (e.g., rights to food, water and sanitation and livelihoods, as well as to bodily integrity and security). Rights on their own are often not enough; making them real also requires recognition and respect, power and voice, and challenges to dominant institutions and forms of knowledge. It is here that Leach et al. (2010) see the critical role of collective action and women's mobilisation in challenging stereotypes, in making states accountable for the realization of rights and in providing alternatives.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on intersectionality as its feminist framework and on instrumentalism as its lens on ethnicity. Intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), holds that systems of disadvantage such as gender and ethnicity do not operate independently or merely add to one another; they interlock to produce distinct experiences of exclusion that neither a gender-only nor an ethnicity-only analysis can capture. Crenshaw (1991) distinguishes structural intersectionality (how the position of women from marginalised groups in economic and social structures differs from that of men and of women from dominant groups), political intersectionality (how policies and movements organised around a single axis can leave women at the intersection of two axes unprotected) and representational intersectionality (how cultural images shape the way such women are seen). Adopting this framework, the study treats gender

inequality and ethnic marginalisation in Nigeria as mutually reinforcing, and asks how the resulting layered exclusion constrains women's ability to contribute to, and benefit from, sustainable development. The framework maps closely onto the three dimensions of gender equality set out by Leach et al. (2010), namely redressing socio-economic disadvantage, enhancing recognition and dignity, and enhancing equal participation in decision-making, which correspond to the dimensions of redistribution, recognition and representation that Fraser (2013) places at the centre of a feminist theory of justice.

On ethnicity, the study adopts an instrumentalist lens. Instrumentalists treat ethnic identity not as a fixed or primordial given but as a resource that individuals and elites mobilise in competition for power, jobs and public goods (Cohen, 1974; Enloe, 1978; Nnoli, 1978). Ethnicity is a strategic weapon used by disadvantaged and privileged groups alike and a tool for mobilising people in the struggle for economic power. Combined with intersectionality, it directs attention to a crucial question: when ethnic groups compete for state resources, whose interests do the groups' claims represent, and what happens to women within the group, especially women from minority groups, whose claims are filtered through both male-dominated ethnic leadership and a state dominated by larger groups?

Ethnic Politics and Ethnicity in Africa beyond Nigeria

Today, nearly all political conflicts in Africa stem from ethnic groups competing for control of political power in their respective nations (Tarimo, 2008; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1999, cited in Adeleke & Charles, 2015). Nations such as Angola, Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Burundi and Burkina Faso, among others, are seriously enmeshed in the politics of ethnicity (Tarimo, 2008). In many African nations, the struggle for political power has at times brought different ethnic groups into conflict, as each group advances its interests in different ways to secure a place in political leadership and gain access to the nation's economy. Thus, ethnic groups could also be seen as interest groups whose members share some common economic and political interests. Similarly, Eifert et al. (2010) argued that ethnic identities in Africa are strengthened by exposure to political competition. Different reasons have been advanced for the flourishing of ethnicity in Africa. For instance, ethnicity is useful in the competition for political power; it is a powerful determinant of behaviour; it is a tool for mobilising people; and it is an instrument of coalition-building in the struggle for economic power in the nation (Nnoli, 1978). Ethnic politics in Africa is contagious. Considering the historical and cultural background of African nations, the tendency to emulate the behaviour of a neighbouring country, particularly the success of its conflict-based record, can influence others. In present-day Africa, ethnicity plays a vital role in shaping political systems. Ethnicity predates the independence of African nations; colonial leaders were not interested in stamping out ethnicity but in curbing the nationalism it produced, and European imperialists pitted Africans against one another by selecting loyalists without involving most of the African population (Nnoli, 1978). Thus, to a large extent, the colonisers planted and promoted ethnicity, which later germinated into the democratic and governance misadventures that cost most post-colonial African nations dearly (Olaiya, 2014). Chogugudza (2008) observes that some colonial officers planted ethnic rivalries among indigenous populations by employing a divide-and-rule strategy in various colonised places. The divide-and-rule strategy generated mutual suspicion among different ethnic groups in many African nations, a situation that persists even now. Many political leaders have used ethnicity to their advantage, using it to stay in power and to deal decisively with perceived political opponents. Ethnicity has also threatened the stability of South Africa: the unseating of President Thabo Mbeki as leader of the African National Congress (ANC), the country's strongest political party, by his former deputy Jacob Zuma is considered to have been influenced by ethnicity.

In Sudan, the political crises, including that of Darfur, are traceable to ethnicity. Northern Sudan has, over the years, dominated the political activities of the country and severely maltreated the ethnic groups of southern Sudan, who continued to groan under the rule of groups of northern extraction (Chogugudza, 2008). Ethnic identity has been one of the challenges tearing Kenya apart, and Kenyans' inability to integrate ethnic identities into their national structure has worsened the situation (Chogugudza, 2008). It is understandable that Kenya, like many other African nations, is a multi-ethnic society that lived peacefully for many years. However, recent happenings in Kenya have shown that dominant ethnic groups constitute a major political problem within the nation. According to Tarimo (2008, p.), the role and activities of ethnic groups were captured as follows:

In recent years, however, the dominant ethnic groups have been on the forefront in fighting for political power. This situation has resulted into fighting to control the state. The relatively less dominant communities have been playing the card of opportunism... the situation has fomented anger, resentment, lust for revenge, aggressive competitiveness that has overlooked the common good of the entire country.

Frustration among the poor, both in urban and rural areas, has created a growing tendency to use violence as a viable means of correcting the situation (Tarimo, 2008). The above statements resonate with the recent situation in Nigeria, where pro-Biafra agitations have been interpreted as expressions of resentment and competition over resources and political power. This further supports the assertion that ethnic politics in Africa is contagious. It is arguable that the protests persistently carried out in Nigeria have been fomented by similar protests in other African nations, such as Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, South Africa, Sudan and Burkina Faso.

Ethno-political competition, which started at Kenya's independence, continued unabated and degenerated into discrimination and violence. After the December 2007 election, for example, ethnic rivalry resulted in violence in which hundreds of people were killed and many properties were destroyed (Tarimo, 2008). Loss of lives and destruction of property in ethno-political violence has become a major phenomenon in many African nations in recent times. Ethno-political crisis is one of the major problems confronting the development of African countries. Ethnic politics has been identified as a major factor responsible for political instability in many parts of Africa (Nnoli, 1978). For instance, after a long period of political unrest between northern Sudan (the majority ethnic groups) and southern Sudan (the minority ethnic groups), southern Sudan became independent on 9 July 2011 following a referendum. Kenya has been engulfed by a serious political crisis since the 2007 general elections. In Burkina Faso, a prolonged political crisis said to have resulted from ethnic violence degenerated into a coup that destabilised the country's political and democratic activities in 2014. Similarly, Burundi experienced a failed coup d'état in 2015, precipitated by agitation against the late President Pierre Nkurunziza. Thus, comparative evidence from Sudan, Kenya, Burkina Faso, and Burundi underlines a point central which shows that ethnic politics in Africa is conducted largely through male-dominated elite competition for State resources.

Intersectionality and the Compounding of Disadvantage for Ethnic-Minority Women in Nigeria

Gender and ethnicity constitute interconnected dimensions of social inequality whose interaction produces forms of marginalisation that cannot be adequately explained by examining either category independently. This relationship is theoretically explained by Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) concept of intersectionality, which challenges approaches to discrimination that treat social identities as separate and independent categories. In her critique of single-axis frameworks, Crenshaw (1989) argues that individuals situated at the intersection of multiple disadvantaged identities experience distinctive forms of discrimination that are inadequately captured when gender and ethnicity are considered separately. Crenshaw (1991) subsequently identifies three dimensions of intersectionality: structural intersectionality, which examines how overlapping systems of power shape people's material circumstances; political intersectionality, which explains how movements and political agendas organised around single identities marginalise those situated across multiple categories; and representational intersectionality, which concerns the invisibility and misrepresentation of marginalised groups in dominant social and cultural discourses. These dimensions provide a useful analytical framework for understanding the experiences of ethnic-minority women in Nigeria and the structural barriers that constrain their participation in sustainable development.

From the perspective of structural intersectionality, women belonging to ethnic-minority communities experience overlapping forms of exclusion arising from gender relations, ethnic hierarchies, and institutional arrangements. One significant manifestation of this situation in Nigeria is the constitutional and administrative framework of indigeneity. Access to political appointments, public-sector employment under the federal character principle, state-sponsored scholarships, and land-related entitlements is frequently influenced by an individual's recognition as an indigene of a particular state or local government area. However, women who marry outside their ethnic communities may encounter difficulties in establishing or retaining indigene status, as they may be regarded as non-indigenes in their marital communities while facing restrictions in maintaining recognition within their natal communities. Such circumstances can leave them disadvantaged in accessing rights and opportunities associated with indigeneity. Although these difficulties do not affect all women uniformly, their implications may be particularly pronounced for women from numerically smaller ethnic communities, whose limited political and institutional influence further restricts their ability to negotiate recognition and inclusion. This situation represents more than the cumulative experience of gender-based and ethnic discrimination. It constitutes a distinct form of institutional exclusion generated through the interaction of gender and ethnic identity, reflecting the intersectional disadvantage identified by Crenshaw (1989).

Intersectionality also shapes women's political participation and representation. Nigeria continues to record comparatively low levels of female representation in legislative institutions, with women occupying only a small proportion of seats in the National Assembly (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023; Olubela, 2023). Nevertheless, aggregate statistics on women's political representation do not adequately capture women's differentiated experiences across ethnic groups. Political arrangements involving party nominations, zoning, and the distribution of elective positions frequently prioritise the accommodation of competing ethnic and regional interests. Within such arrangements, men are often the principal beneficiaries of ethnic representation, while opportunities for female participation remain limited. Where women gain access to political positions, those from larger and more politically influential ethnic communities may possess comparatively greater access to the financial resources, institutional networks, and political structures required for effective participation. Ethnic-minority women consequently experience marginalisation within both gender-based political mobilisation and their respective ethnic constituencies. This reflects Crenshaw's (1991) notion of political intersectionality, whereby political movements organised around a single identity, whether gender equality or ethnic minority rights, may inadequately address the experiences of individuals situated at the intersection of both categories. This exclusion is particularly consequential because women directly affected by development policies often have limited opportunities to participate in the institutions that formulate and implement those policies (Diala & Sarumi, 2025; Eghoikhunu et al., 2026; Madueke, 2026).

The unequal distribution of productive resources further demonstrates the material consequences of intersecting gender and ethnic disadvantages. Within several customary land-tenure systems in Nigeria, inheritance practices have historically privileged male descendants, thereby restricting women's access to land ownership and control. Although judicial interventions, including the Supreme Court's (*Ukeje v. Ukeje*, 2014) rejection of discriminatory inheritance practices, have challenged such customs, their influence remains evident in prevailing social and institutional practices. For women in ethnic-minority farming and fishing communities, gender-based restrictions on land ownership are compounded by the comparatively weak bargaining power of their communities in matters concerning communal land, state-controlled resources, and the distribution of revenues derived from them. The consequences extend beyond land ownership itself. Since access to formal credit frequently depends on the availability of acceptable collateral, particularly titled property, women's limited control over land also restricts their capacity to obtain financial resources for productive economic activities. The barriers to women's economic participation documented in the Women, Business and the Law assessments further demonstrate the persistence of institutional and legal constraints affecting women's access to economic opportunities (World Bank, 2023, 2026). Consequently, the intersection of gender-based resource exclusion and ethnic marginalisation reinforces economic vulnerability, restricts livelihood opportunities, and limits the capacity of ethnic-minority women to participate meaningfully in sustainable development.

Security constitutes another important dimension of the intersectional disadvantage experienced by ethnic-minority women in Nigeria. In areas affected by armed conflict and communal violence, including the insurgency in the North-East, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, and recurring unrest in the Niger Delta, women from smaller and politically marginalised communities may experience particularly severe consequences. These include displacement, sexual violence, the disruption of economic activities, and the erosion of established livelihood structures. Their vulnerability is further intensified by limited access to effective state protection, institutional representation, and mechanisms for obtaining justice and redress (IMF, 2025; Akindutire & Adebusuyi, 2025). The interaction of gender and ethnic marginalisation therefore shapes not only women's exposure to insecurity but also their capacity to respond to its consequences. Security challenges should consequently not be treated as isolated development concerns; they also reflect the broader institutional and political inequalities through which certain categories of women are rendered particularly vulnerable.

Thus, representational intersectionality provides an important explanation for the limited visibility of ethnic-minority women in development discourse, policy formulation, and empirical research. National statistical assessments in Nigeria often classify social and economic experiences by gender or geographical location without sufficiently examining how these categories interact with ethnic identity. Consequently, the distinctive circumstances of ethnic-minority women may remain obscured within broader categories of female or regional disadvantage (Fraser, 2013). This statistical and analytical invisibility has significant policy implications because development interventions cannot adequately address inequalities that remain insufficiently identified or measured. When women are treated as a homogeneous social category, the particular constraints confronting those from marginalised ethnic communities risk being overlooked in the

design and implementation of development programmes. Recognising ethnic-minority women as a distinct analytical category is therefore essential to developing more inclusive approaches to gender equality, political representation, resource distribution, and social protection. Ultimately, achieving sustainable development in Nigeria requires an intersectional understanding of inequality that acknowledges how gender and ethnicity interact to produce distinctive forms of disadvantage and ensures that women situated at these intersections are meaningfully incorporated into development processes.

Towards Gender-Equal Sustainable Development

To achieve sustainable development, gender equality and human rights need to be brought far more fully into policy frameworks addressing environment, development, and sustainability questions. Arguably, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework, signed by governments in 2015, provides the opportunity to do this (United Nations, 2015). According to Leach et al. (2010), achieving gender-equal sustainable development pathways will require action at many levels by a diversity of actors. States and intergovernmental processes must be central. However, they argue that key opportunities for transformation also lie in the ideas and actions of civil society and social movements, businesses and the private sector, and communities and individuals, as well as in building gender-progressive sustainable development alliances among them (Leach et al., 2010). The 2000 Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) committed to both environmental sustainability (MDG 7) and gender equality (MDG 3), but goals, targets, and implementation remained separate. The 17 SDGs commit the world to sustainability far more fully. They include a stand-alone goal on gender equality, Goal 5, which was hard but successfully fought for by the Women's Major Group during the extensive, inclusive consultations that produced the framework (United Nations, 2015). Yet the challenge now is to foster integrated thinking and action so that gendered concerns are not siloed into SDG 5. Rather, they need to be addressed in the implementation of other relevant goals, as they relate to water, climate, food, innovation and so on, so that unfortunate trade-offs that marginalise women can be avoided, and synergies between gendered rights and capabilities and the development of sustainable pathways in these other areas can be fostered (United Nations, 2015).

The United Nations (2015) observed that growing evidence and analysis show that sustainable development requires governance and action that extend from the global through the national to the local level. If well coordinated, such 'nested' or 'polycentric' approaches are best placed to address environmental and economic challenges. This suggests that questions of gender equality, and the representation of women's interests, should be included from local to global institutions. Scholars in gender and sustainability (Adeyemo & Ogunleye, 2018; Ogunyankin, 2022; Olawoye, 2005) have argued that formal policies and rights frameworks are insufficient unless policies are implemented and rights are made real (Wichterich, 2012). Wichterich (2012) further stressed that, despite the progress made since the 1990s, the high-level processes around Rio+20 in 2012 were disappointing from a gender equality perspective. As Wichterich (2012) argued, gender and sustainability issues have often disappeared from public view, in part because this 'double mainstreaming' is even more difficult than gender mainstreaming. Moreover, even women's movements and feminists have failed to make these linkages and have instead focused on issues such as reproductive rights and HIV. It is also telling that the Platform for Action, the landmark document of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, placed women and the environment almost at the bottom of the list of critical areas of concern (Wichterich, 2012). These global concerns acquire concrete meaning in the Nigerian context.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that gender equality must be integral to sustainable development. We have demonstrated many reasons why: apart from the moral and ethical imperatives involved, attention to gender differences and relations is vital to avoid the costs of economic and environmental change undermining gendered rights and capabilities and further compromising the sustainability of households, communities and societies. It is also crucial in order to recognise and build on the agency and knowledge of diverse women and men towards sustainable paths. Applying an intersectional lens to Nigerian evidence, the paper has further shown that gender and ethnic disadvantage reinforce each other. Women's marginal presence in political office, their lower educational attainment, narrower access to finance and land, poorer health outcomes and greater exposure to insecurity are all most pronounced where ethnic-regional marginalisation, poverty and conflict coincide, and women from ethnic minorities are the most exposed to this layered exclusion. It has also been argued that Nigeria's pluralistic nature has made it susceptible to conflicts arising from the pursuit of divergent interests. The unabated struggle by the various ethnic groups for political

positions, with a view to controlling economic wealth and other resources of the nation, is invariably a threat to the sustenance of peaceful coexistence, political development and the democratic process, which, if not checked, may not allow sustainable development in its totality (Ostien, 2009).

Recommendations

To achieve sustainable development in a Nigeria where gender imbalance and ethnic marginalisation are prevalent and intersect, the following are recommended:

(a) Complete the constitutional reforms for women's representation, with an intersectional design: The National Assembly and the State Houses of Assembly should complete the constitutional amendment process for the Reserved Seats for Women (Special Seats) Bill, and political parties and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should adopt nomination practices that ensure that women from minority ethnic groups and under-represented states are among the candidates for any reserved seats.

(b) Make federal character gender-responsive: The Federal Character Commission should publish appointment and recruitment data disaggregated by sex as well as by state and ethnic group, and should monitor gender balance within each state's quota, so that ethnic balancing does not mask the exclusion of women.

(c) Close the girl-child education gap in the regions where disadvantage is concentrated: Federal and state governments, working through the Universal Basic Education Commission and state basic education boards, should prioritise the North West and North East with targeted measures, such as conditional cash transfers for girls' school retention, safe and accessible schools, and the full domestication and enforcement of the Child Rights Act by states that have yet to do so.

(d) Secure women's access to land and finance: State governments should reform the administrative and customary practices through which land is allocated and certified under the Land Use Act so that women are not excluded, and the Central Bank of Nigeria, banks and financial-inclusion agencies should extend gender-targeted and agent-banking products to rural women in the North West and North East, where financial exclusion is most severe.

(e) Improve intersectional data and accountability: The National Bureau of Statistics, the National Population Commission and survey partners should disaggregate key indicators jointly by sex, ethnic group, zone and state, and should develop safe methods of collecting data in insecure communities, so that policy can be targeted at women at the intersection of ethnic and gender disadvantage.

(f) Protect women in conflict-affected communities and include them in peacebuilding: Federal and state governments should strengthen enforcement of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 and its state equivalents, and should ensure that women from affected ethnic and local communities participate in conflict-resolution and peacebuilding structures.

In addition, because ethnic politics and ethnicity have been major obstacles to sustainable development since Nigeria's inception as a nation, the following recommendations are pertinent.

(g) First, in a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria, a credible and responsible national centre is imperative, where different ethnic groups across the nation would have their representatives for dialogue and where a sense of belonging would be accorded to each group regardless of its population. If this is done, sustainable development is more likely to be achieved in a diverse country like Nigeria.

(h) Second, there should be an institution that responds promptly to the demands of diverse groups, to ensure adequate integration among ethnic groups in the country. Moreover, Nigeria needs to imbibe the spirit of fairness and equity. Where there is equity, fairness and transparency in governance, nations experience and enjoy national unity, integration, peace and sustainable development. For Nigeria to enjoy this and forestall potential disintegration, these essential ingredients of national development, stability and growth must be strategically pursued. Both institutions should also reserve space for women, particularly women from minority ethnic groups, so that dialogue and integration processes do not reproduce the exclusion identified in this paper.

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