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Gender, Youth, and Inclusive Regional Development in Nigeria and West Africa

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Abstract

Gender and youth inclusion are critical drivers of equitable regional development, yet both groups remain underrepresented in governance, policy, and economic participation across West Africa. This paper examines the intersection of gender, youth, and inclusive regional development, with a focus on Nigeria and its West African neighbours. It highlights how gender disparities and youth marginalization impede the realization of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Vision 2050 and the African Union's Agenda 2063. Using a mixed analytical approach that integrates empirical data from national development indicators, policy reviews, and regional reports, the study identifies structural, cultural, and institutional factors that perpetuate exclusion. It examines policy interventions that promote gender-responsive planning, youth empowerment, and local participation in development. Findings show that inclusive regional development requires deliberate investment in education, entrepreneurship, digital inclusion, and participatory governance that engages women and youth as key stakeholders. The paper argues that without mainstreaming these demographics into decision-making and economic systems, sustainable development in the region will remain uneven and fragile. Recommendations include gender-sensitive regional planning, cross-border youth innovation hubs, and policy harmonization to ensure inclusive growth.

Keywords: Gender, Youth, Inclusive Development, Regional Integration, Nigeria, West Africa, ECOWAS

1.1 Introduction

Inclusive regional development emphasizes the growth that benefits all social groups, transcending economic expansion to include equity, participation, and human welfare (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2023). In West Africa and Nigeria, inclusive, regional development has often been measured through macroeconomic performance indicators that obscure persistent inequalities between genders, age groups, and social classes. Nigeria, as the region's largest economy, plays a central role in shaping regional dynamics. Yet, both women and youth continue to face structural barriers to participation in governance, entrepreneurship, and regional policymaking (Akinwale & Dada, 2020).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975, has sought to promote regional integration through economic cooperation and political stability. However, despite numerous development frameworks, including the ECOWAS Gender Policy (2015) and Vision 2050, progress toward inclusivity remains uneven (ECOWAS Commission, 2021). The demographic composition of West Africa is remarkably youthful, with over 60% of the population under the age of 25 (UNFPA, 2022). Harnessing

this demographic dividend requires strategic inclusion in governance, labour markets, and innovation sectors.

1.2 Historical Review

The roots of gender and youth marginalization in West Africa can be historically traced to colonial legacies and post-independence governance systems that concentrated power in elite male-dominated circles. Despite the then-existing democratization and regional cooperation efforts, structural inequality persists. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union's Agenda 2063 both emphasize inclusivity, yet gender and youth remain disproportionately affected by unemployment, underrepresentation, and social exclusion.

Nigeria's Vision 2050 and Ghana's Medium-Term National Development Policy Framework identify inclusivity as a central pillar, underscoring that economic transformation cannot be achieved without the active participation of women and youth. Furthermore, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5, 8, and 10 directly link gender equality, decent work, and reduced inequality to inclusive growth. =This reduces the speed of progress that should have been recorded due to inconsistent policy enforcement, weak institutional coordination, and the persistence of patriarchal values that hinder equitable participation. Understanding how to integrate these marginalized groups into the development process is therefore essential not only for economic reasons but also for achieving social justice and regional stability.

1.3 Scope of the Research

This study examines the connections between gender, youth, and inclusive regional development, inquiring: How can West African nations, particularly Nigeria, advance regional development by incorporating the participation of women and youth? The analysis integrates policy reviews, empirical evidence, and theoretical perspectives on inclusion and regional growth.

2. Conceptual Review

The concept of inclusive regional development is grounded in the idea that economic progress should enhance the well-being of all citizens, not merely the privileged or urban elite. Inclusive development prioritizes social equity, participatory governance, and sustainable livelihoods as integral components of regional growth (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2023). It emphasizes that regional integration cannot succeed without the active participation of marginalized groups, especially women and youth, whose contributions are essential for economic stability and political legitimacy.

Beyond its economic dimensions, inclusive development reflects a rights-based approach to growth that recognizes every individual's entitlement to opportunities and resources. It moves away from top-down models of development that concentrate wealth and decision-making power within a few hands, advocating instead for distributive justice and social participation (UNDP, 2022). Within the West African context, inclusive development entails bridging gaps between regions, genders, and generations by ensuring that all citizens, regardless of social status, age, or geography, have access to education, healthcare, employment, and representation.

2.1 Concepts of Gender and Youth Inclusion

Cornwall (2016) defines gender inclusion as the equitable participation of all genders in decision-making, resource access, and socioeconomic advancement. It challenges patriarchal structures that limit women's agency in both public and private spheres (Cornwall, 2016). On the other hand, ILO (2021) sees youth inclusion as encompassing policies and practices that enable young people to access education, employment, and

governance structures. Both concepts intersect at the core of human development, highlighting that exclusion is not only a social injustice but also an economic inefficiency (ILO, 2021).

In the West African context, gender and youth inclusion extend beyond representation to the actual redistribution of opportunities. Women and young people often face overlapping vulnerabilities, including unemployment, restricted land rights, and limited access to finance, that hinder their full contribution to national and regional development (World Bank, 2020). The transformative potential of inclusion lies in addressing these systemic disparities through targeted social and economic reforms.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Human Development Theory

According to the proposal of Amartya Sen (1999), which was later developed by Martha Nussbaum (2000), the Human Development Theory posits that development should be assessed not merely by economic growth but by the capabilities and freedoms individuals possess to lead fulfilling lives. This perspective shifts focus from income-based metrics to human well-being, emphasizing education, health, and participation as indicators of progress. Proponents argue that empowering women and youth expands societal capabilities, fostering innovation and resilience (UNDP, 2023). However, critics contend that the theory is overly normative and difficult to operationalize in regions where data scarcity and governance limitations impede measurement (Alkire, 2010). The implication of this theory for this paper work implies that policies must prioritize expanding access to education, healthcare, and social participation as the foundation for inclusive regional growth.

2.2.2 Dependency Theory

According to Andre Gunder Frank (1967), which was later expanded by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), Dependency Theory critiques global capitalism for perpetuating inequality between the “core” (developed) and “peripheral” (developing) regions. It argues that underdevelopment in the Global South results from exploitative economic relations that transfer wealth to industrialized nations. Proponents believe that breaking these external dependencies requires regional self-reliance, diversification, and equitable trade relations (Amin, 1976). However, Kay claims that the theory underestimates internal governance failures and the potential of globalization for development (Kay, 2011). For this research paper, this implies that West African nations must not only reform external trade structures but also address internal dependencies such as elite capture, gender exclusion, and youth marginalizationthat reinforce inequality.

2.2.3 Feminist Political Economy

Feminist Political Economy emerged from the works of scholars such as Diane Elson (1998) and Shirin Rai & Georgina Waylen (2014). The theory examines how gendered power relations and economic systems shape access to resources, labor, and decision-making. Proponents argue that unpaid care work, labor market segregation, and patriarchal institutions limit women’s agency and economic visibility (Elson, 1998). Feminist approaches focus too narrowly on women, neglecting the broader intersectionality of class, age, and ethnicity (Fraser, 2013). The implication for inclusive regional development is that economic and governance systems must be restructured to value and integrate women’s contributions, ensuring equitable resource allocation and representation across all levels of policymaking.

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2.3.4 Youth Empowerment Theory

Introduced by Zimmerman (2000), Youth Empowerment Theory views young people as active agents of social change capable of influencing political and economic systems. It emphasizes the development of competence, confidence, and community connection as dimensions of empowerment. Proponents argue that youth participation enhances innovation, civic responsibility, and democratic resilience (Jennings et al., 2006). Critics contend that empowerment models often overlook structural barriers such as unemployment, weak institutions, and generational hierarchies that limit youth agency (Checkoway, 2018). The implication for West Africa is that genuine empowerment requires systemic reform, creating enabling environments through education, entrepreneurship, and inclusive governance structures that translate potential into measurable outcomes.

Integrating these theories enables a multidimensional understanding of regional inclusivity. Human Development Theory emphasizes expanding freedoms and capabilities; Dependency Theory warns against external and internal structural constraints; Feminist Political Economy exposes the gendered nature of inequality; and Youth Empowerment Theory highlights the transformative potential of young people. Together, they reveal that sustainable regional development depends not only on macroeconomic stability but also on dismantling social and institutional barriers that perpetuate exclusion.

3. Gender and Youth in Nigeria and West Africa

Gender and youth constitute critical demographic segments in West Africa. Women represent nearly half of the population, while youth under 30 years account for over 60% (UNFPA, 2022). Yet, structural inequalities persist in education, employment, and leadership. Despite progress in gender-responsive policies and youth development strategies, the participation of women and young people in governance and economic decision-making remains disproportionately low. In Nigeria, women occupy less than 8% of parliamentary seats; while youth representation in elected positions is even lower (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2023). Similar trends are observed in Ghana and Sierra Leone, where young people often face systemic exclusion from policy spaces dominated by older elites. These disparities stem from entrenched patriarchal norms, limited access to education, and weak institutional mechanisms for inclusion (Akinyemi, 2021). The socio-cultural barriers that restrict women's mobility and participation, such as gender stereotypes, religious biases, and family expectations, further constrain their ability to engage in public life. This exclusion not only violates principles of equity but also undermines the region's developmental potential by sidelining the creativity and innovation of its largest demographic groups. However, economic inequalities between genders and generations continue to widen, driven by high youth unemployment and persistent gender wage gaps. According to the International Labour Organization (2023), youth unemployment in Nigeria rose from 13.7% in 2015 to over 33% in 2023, with women facing even greater barriers to formal employment. Limited access to land, capital, and digital technology has further restricted women's participation in productive sectors such as agriculture and technology (African Development Bank [AfDB], 2023). In Ghana and Senegal, targeted interventions such as microcredit programs and vocational training have shown promise; however, implementation challenges persist due to inadequate funding and weak policy continuity. Consequently, the exclusion of women and youth from sustainable livelihoods perpetuates poverty, reduces productivity, and threatens the social stability necessary for inclusive regional development.

3.1 Gender Dynamics in Regional Development

Despite progressive policies, women continue to be underrepresented in regional governance and economic decision-making. In Nigeria, women occupy less than 8% of

national legislative seats (INEC, 2023), whereas in Ghana and Senegal, their representation is approximately 14% and 23%, respectively (IPU, 2023) (Table 3.1). The gaps are mirrored in the private sector, where women-led enterprises face higher barriers to finance and market access (AfDB, 2021).

Beyond political representation, the economic marginalization of women in West Africa reflects deep structural inequities in access to education, land, and financial services. Women constitute nearly 60% of the agricultural labour force in countries such as Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Senegal, yet they own less than 20% of the land they cultivate (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2023). This lack of ownership limits their ability to secure loans or participate in agribusiness value chains. Similarly, cultural expectations often confine women to informal and low-income sectors, where wages are significantly lower and working conditions are precarious. Even in urban centres, women entrepreneurs face difficulties obtaining credit due to a lack of collateral and discriminatory lending practices (World Bank, 2022). These constraints not only restrict women's economic independence but also undermine regional productivity and competitiveness, since half of the labour force remains underutilized.

In recent years, various regional initiatives have sought to redress gender inequality, though progress remains uneven. The African Union's Maputo Protocol (2003) and the ECOWAS Gender Policy (2015) have both emphasized women's empowerment and equitable participation in governance. Countries like Senegal have demonstrated the potential of such frameworks through the Parity Law (2010), which mandates gender balance in political candidacy lists and has significantly increased women's representation at both national and local levels (UN Women, 2022). Similarly, Ghana's National Gender Policy (2015) has integrated gender perspectives into economic planning and social protection programs. However, implementation across the region remains inconsistent due to weak institutional enforcement, budgetary constraints, and resistance from patriarchal political elites (Adeleye & Olayiwola, 2020). Consequently, gender equality in regional development remains more rhetorical than practical, and as such requires deliberate reforms that address structural barriers, resource gaps, and the persistence of socio-cultural norms that perpetuate women's exclusion.

Table 3.1: Female Representation and Economic Participation in Some Selected West African States (2023)

Country	% of Women in Parliament	Female Labour Force Participation (%)	Gender Inequality Index (0–1)
Nigeria	7.4	48.2	0.67
Ghana	14.5	53.1	0.59
Senegal	23.0	51.7	0.56
Sierra Leone	12.8	49.4	0.63

Source: IPU (2023); UNDP Human Development Report (2023)

The persistent gender gap in economic and political participation demonstrates that inclusive development cannot be achieved without gender-responsive policies. Patriarchal norms, cultural expectations, and inadequate implementation of gender laws remain key barriers (Adeleye & Olayiwola, 2020).

3.2 Youth Participation and Unemployment Challenges

Youth exclusion is a serious development challenge in West Africa. More than 20% of young people are unemployed, and many are underemployed in the informal sector (ILO, 2021). In

Nigeria, youth unemployment has grown from 13.7% in 2015 to nearly 33% in 2023, largely because of limited industrial opportunities, digital skills gaps, and issues with governance.

While initiatives such as ECOWAS Youth Policy (2016) and Nigeria's Youth Investment Fund (2020) have emerged, implementation is uneven. Many young people remain politically disengaged due to limited representation in party structures and governance processes. A major factor contributing to persistent youth unemployment in West Africa is the mismatch between education outcomes and labour market demands. According to UNESCO (2023), more than 60% of West African youth lack the technical and vocational skills required for modern industries, particularly in information technology, manufacturing, and agribusiness. As a result, many are forced into informal employment with low income and job insecurity. Moreover, weak economic diversification and overdependence on extractive industries such as oil and mining have limited the region's capacity to generate sustainable employment opportunities (African Development Bank, 2023). In Nigeria, for instance, many young graduates compete for limited white-collar jobs while overlooking potential opportunities in the creative and digital sectors due to inadequate infrastructure and funding. This has led to increased youth migration within and outside the region in search of better livelihoods, contributing to brain drain and social instability (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

In addition to economic constraints, political exclusion continues to marginalize youth voices in governance. Despite their demographic majority, young people under 35 years occupy less than 10% of decision-making positions across West Africa (ECOWAS Commission, 2024). Youth participation is often limited to symbolic consultation rather than substantive engagement in policymaking. Movements such as Nigeria's EndSARS protests and Senegal's Y'en a Marre have demonstrated the growing frustration among young citizens toward governance systems that fail to reflect their aspirations (Akinyemi, 2021). These mobilizations highlight that youth are not apathetic but rather disillusioned by systemic exclusion and governance inefficiency. Addressing this challenge requires integrating youth into national planning frameworks, expanding digital innovation programs, and institutionalizing youth quotas in leadership and policy platforms to ensure meaningful representation.

Table 3.2: Youth Development Indicators in Select West African Countries (2023)

Country	Youth (15–35) Unemployment Rate (%)	Youth Literacy Rate (%)	Youth Participation in Governance (%)
Nigeria	33.0	89.3	6.0
Ghana	18.4	93.1	10.2
Senegal	20.8	85.6	8.1
Sierra Leone	24.5	79.4	5.5

Source: ILO (2023); UNDP (2023); ECOWAS Statistical Digest (2023)

Overlapping inequalities shape the gender and youth landscape across West Africa. Rural women face compounded challenges in land ownership, agricultural credit, and technology adoption. For instance, less than 20% of rural women in Nigeria have access to formal land titles, limiting their ability to secure agricultural financing (FAO, 2022).

Intersectionality further reveals that gender and youth exclusion intersect with education and geography. Young women in rural northern Nigeria experience lower literacy rates and

higher unemployment compared to their southern counterparts. Conversely, urban youth in Ghana and Senegal enjoy greater access to vocational training and entrepreneurship programs, reflecting uneven policy impacts.

Although Ghana's Youth Employment Agency and Senegal's Parity Law have achieved modest improvements in inclusion, entrenched patriarchy and political gatekeeping still hinder transformative progress. Therefore, regional inclusion requires context-specific strategies that account for age, gender, and location as interconnected factors influencing participation.

3.3 Dimensions of Inclusive Regional Development

Inclusive regional development isn't just about numbers or policies; it's about making sure everyone feels they have a fair chance and a voice. It means balancing economic growth with fairness in access to opportunities, resources, and representation—values that resonate deeply with communities. For West Africa, embracing this approach isn't just strategic; it's vital for building a stable, equitable, and sustainable future where all voices are heard.

3.3.1 Economic Inclusion

Economic inclusion refers to the equitable participation of all groups, particularly women and youth in productive sectors. In Nigeria and its neighbours, barriers such as unequal access to credit, limited infrastructure, and gendered occupational segregation restrict inclusion. Women account for 41% of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in West Africa, yet they receive less than 20% of total commercial financing (AfDB, 2021). Similarly, youth entrepreneurs face constraints related to collateral requirements, high interest rates, and limited financial literacy (UNIDO, 2022).

Notably, several West African entrepreneurs exemplify how inclusive finance can transform livelihoods. Initiatives such as Nigeria's SheVentures and Ghana's Women in Trade Network have expanded microcredit and mentorship to women-owned SMEs. However, barriers remain in scaling these interventions regionally. ECOWAS could leverage the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) framework to promote intra-regional trade for women- and youth-led enterprises. This would strengthen market linkages, increase export competitiveness, and reduce dependency on foreign aid.

Inclusive growth requires investments in skills development, enterprise financing, and digital access. The World Bank (2022) stresses that digital inclusion can transform youth engagement in regional economies through e-commerce, remote work, and innovation clusters. For instance, Nigeria's "Digital Nigeria" initiative and Ghana's "Youth Employment Agency" demonstrate potential pathways to broaden participation. However, regional disparities remain pronounced between urban centres and rural communities, where digital infrastructure is weak.

3.3.2 Social and Human Development Inclusion

Human development inclusion focuses on education, health, and social protection. Gender and youth disparities in these domains remain visible across West Africa. According to UNESCO (2023), adult literacy rates for women are below 60% in countries like Sierra Leone and Mali, compared to nearly 80% for men. Maternal mortality rates also remain among the highest globally, reflecting persistent inequalities in healthcare access. Social inclusion policies that target education and health outcomes can enhance productivity and resilience. For instance, Nigeria's National Social Investment Program (NSIP) and Ghana's "Free Senior High School" policy have expanded access to education and contributed to poverty reduction. Nevertheless, many such interventions lack gender sensitivity and youth-specific monitoring indicators (UNICEF, 2022).

Moreover, insecurity and conflict have deepened gendered vulnerabilities. In northeastern Nigeria, insurgency has disrupted girls' education and youth employment, thereby reinforcing cycles of poverty. Integrating peacebuilding and social protection into inclusion policies is therefore essential for long-term human development.

3.3.3 Political and Institutional Inclusion

Political inclusion means ensuring everyone has a fair chance to participate in governance and policymaking. Sadly, women and young people in West Africa are still underrepresented in political institutions, even though there are policies that aim to change this. For example, the ECOWAS Gender Policy of 2015 and the African Union's Maputo Protocol of 2003 call for women to make up 30–50% of decision-making roles. However, turning these goals into reality remains a challenge. Structural exclusion persists through discriminatory nomination procedures, lack of campaign financing, and limited mentorship networks (Akinyemi, 2021).

Inclusive governance means more than just having a system in place; it's about actively involving the people it serves. This requires decentralization and participatory mechanisms that truly engage local communities in shaping their development. For instance, Senegal has taken steps by adopting local participatory budgeting, empowering women's cooperatives and youth councils to have a say in how municipal resources are allocated. Still, challenges remain—weak institutional support and a lack of political will often prevent these efforts from expanding across regions, making it harder for everyone to benefit from truly inclusive governance.

3.3.4 Spatial and Environmental Dimensions

Regional inequality is often reinforced by spatial disparities between coastal and inland zones, urban and rural areas. Environmental vulnerability further compounds exclusion. Youth and women in rural communities are disproportionately affected by climate-induced shocks such as flooding and desertification (Nkiaka et al., 2021). ECOWAS' Climate Strategy (2022–2030) emphasizes the need for inclusive environmental governance, yet financing remains limited.

Climate-smart agriculture and renewable energy projects present new pathways for youth engagement. Programs that support women in solar entrepreneurship and youth in agro-innovation can foster both environmental resilience and inclusive growth. Regional funding mechanisms, such as ECOWAS Green Fund, could prioritize these dual-benefit initiatives.

Spatial inclusion entails investing in rural infrastructure, green jobs, and sustainable agriculture. Programs like Nigeria's Anchor Borrowers' Scheme and Ghana's "Planting for Food and Jobs" initiative have improved agricultural participation, but their gendered impacts remain understudied. Integrating climate adaptation into inclusive regional planning would align socioeconomic development with environmental sustainability.

4. Empirical Review

Empirical studies across West Africa show that gender and youth inclusion are closely linked to regional growth, social stability, and innovation (UNDP, 2023; ECOWAS, 2022). However, gaps between policy and practice still remain.

4.1 Nigeria: Youth and Gender in Development Planning

Nigeria's Vision 2050 framework identifies youth and gender inclusion as cross-cutting priorities, but implementation has been inconsistent. For example, the N-Power program (2016–2023) aimed to provide digital and vocational skills to over 500,000 youths; however, limited follow-up mechanisms reduced the long-term impact on employability (NBS, 2023). Similarly, the National Gender Policy (2006, revised 2021) outlines a 35%

affirmative action plan that remains largely unfulfilled, with female representation in governance structures at less than 10%.

Table 4.1: Nigeria's Inclusion Indicators (2015–2023)

Indicator	2015	2023	Change (%)
Female Labour Force Participation (%)	46.1	48.2	+2.1
Youth Unemployment (%)	13.7	33.0	+19.3
Women in National Parliament (%)	6.4	7.4	+1.0
Youth Access to Vocational Training (%)	28.5	41.0	+12.5

Source: NBS (2023); UNDP (2023)

These figures suggest that progress in inclusion has been uneven, with modest improvements in women's employment contrasting with rising youth unemployment.

4.2 Ghana: A Model of Incremental Inclusion

Ghana demonstrates gradual improvements in gender and youth integration through deliberate policy design. The "Youth Employment Agency" (YEA) and "National Gender Policy" (2015) promote inclusive labour markets. Women now occupy 14.5% of parliamentary seats and over 25% of senior civil service positions (GSS, 2023). Ghana's success stems from institutional coordination between ministries and local governments. However, rural youth remain underrepresented in policy dialogues.

4.3 Senegal and Sierra Leone: Emerging Inclusive Governance Practices

Senegal's implementation of the "Parity Law" (2010) stands out, mandating equal representation of men and women in elective positions. Consequently, women now constitute 23% of parliamentarians (IPU, 2023). Sierra Leone recently introduced a Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (2023), stipulating a 30% quota for women in public offices, a landmark for inclusion. However, despite some progress, both countries continue to struggle with engaging their youth. According to ECOWAS (2022), less than 9% of local government representatives in these nations are under 35 years old. This indicates that, while gender inclusion has improved, young people's voices still play a limited role in decision-making processes.

Beyond national examples, regional programs offer lessons for scaling inclusion. The ECOWAS Youth and Sports Development Centre (EYSDC) in Ouagadougou, for example, promotes youth leadership and cross-border exchange. Similarly, the AfDB's Jobs for Youth in Africa Strategy (2016–2025) targets 25 million jobs, emphasizing gender equity and digital entrepreneurship.

Quantitatively, a 2023 UNDP study revealed that countries with higher female labour force participation, such as Ghana and Senegal, recorded stronger GDP per capita growth between 2015 and 2022. This indicates a positive correlation between inclusion and economic performance. However, weak data collection frameworks limit the ability to accurately measure progress.

Therefore, strengthening data systems and monitoring tools across ECOWAS states is crucial for evidence-based policymaking and accountability.

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5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The analysis of gender and youth inclusion across Nigeria and West Africa underscores a consistent gap between policy intent and implementation outcomes. Although national and regional frameworks emphasize inclusivity, limited institutional coordination and resource allocation undermine their impact. For inclusive regional development to become a lived reality, several policy directions must be prioritized.

Gender and youth inclusion represent both moral imperatives and pragmatic strategies for sustainable regional development. In Nigeria and West Africa, persistent inequality constrains human potential and undermines the foundations of economic integration. While the region has made notable progress, such as Ghana's gender-responsive governance, Senegal's parity law, and Sierra Leone's empowerment legislation, systemic exclusion continues to limit regional competitiveness. Thus, this study demonstrates that inclusive regional development requires transforming structural norms and institutional frameworks. Economic participation, education, digital access, and political voice must be treated as interconnected priorities. The inclusion of women and youth is not a peripheral issue but a core developmental strategy that determines the success of regional integration and stability.

Sustainable progress will depend on the collective political will of national governments, ECOWAS, and civil society actors. Implementing gender-responsive budgeting, establishing regional innovation hubs, and enforcing representation quotas would bridge long-standing equity gaps. Ultimately, empowering women and youth is not just about fairness, but about unlocking West Africa's demographic dividend and ensuring that regional development becomes truly inclusive, resilient, and future-ready.

The pathway to inclusive regional development in West Africa must be both transformative and adaptive. Emerging technologies, green industries, and digital economies present opportunities for meaningful engagement of youth and gender. By aligning national policies with ECOWAS and AU frameworks, the region can create synergies that sustain progress beyond rhetoric. Thus, future research should explore longitudinal data on inclusion metrics, with a focus on the intersection between gender, youth, and innovation. Strengthening regional cooperation will be essential to transform West Africa's demographic potential into sustainable prosperity.

5.2 Recommendations

A major barrier to inclusion is fragmented policymaking. Ministries and agencies responsible for gender and youth affairs often work in isolation, causing duplication and inefficiency. ECOWAS, through its Gender Policy (2015) and Vision 2050, should promote an integrated monitoring framework connecting national gender and youth ministries across member states. This could be implemented via a Regional Inclusivity Observatory, responsible for data collection, evaluation, and knowledge sharing.

Financial inclusion remains central to empowerment. Governments and development partners should increase support for women- and youth-focused financing instruments, such as Nigeria's Youth Investment Fund, the African Development Bank's Affirmative Finance Action for Women in Africa (AFAWA), and Ghana's "YouStart" initiative. Focus should be on reducing collateral requirements, enhancing financial literacy, and broadening microcredit programs to rural communities. Moreover, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) must align with private-sector demand to avoid skill mismatches.

On the other hand, the digital economy presents a wonderful chance to promote inclusive development for everyone. By establishing cross-border youth innovation hubs in the ECOWAS region—modelled after successful examples such as Nigeria's "Tech4Dev" and Ghana's "Innovation Hub Accra"—we can encourage young people to develop their digital skills, explore entrepreneurship, and collaborate across borders. It's also important to create policies that ensure everyone, especially women in rural areas, has equal access to broadband, digital literacy, and online safety. Together, these efforts can help build a more connected and inclusive future.

Furthermore, gender-sensitive governance requires embedding equality principles in electoral systems, budgetary processes, and institutional leadership pipelines. Countries should domesticate the African Union's Maputo Protocol (2003) and the ECOWAS Supplementary Act on Gender Equality (2015) with measurable benchmarks. Implementing mandatory quotas for women and youth in political parties, cabinet appointments, and local councils would ensure equitable representation.

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