



Enhancing Gender Capacities for Equitable Development and Poverty Alleviation in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Gender capacity refers to the abilities, skills, opportunities and resources available to all genders particularly women and marginalized groups to participate fully in social, economic and political life. In the 21st century, the world continues to face challenges such as poverty, inequality, gender discrimination and unequal access to development opportunities and these issues hinder inclusive growth and sustainable development efforts across the globe.

This study aims to explore how strengthening gender capacities contributes to inclusive economic participation, improved decision-making and the reduction of poverty among vulnerable populations. It also examines the role of institutions which are governmental, religious, and community-based in supporting or restricting gender empowerment. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, drawing data from relevant academic literature, credible online sources and interviews with selected individuals across educational, religious and policy-making sectors.

Findings from the study will reveal that investing in gender capacity leads to broader social and economic benefits, including increased productivity, community resilience and more equitable access to resources. The research concludes that without intentional efforts to address gender disparities, poverty alleviation strategies remain incomplete and less effective. Strengthening gender capacity therefore emerges as a key pathway to realising sustainable and inclusive development goals in the 21st century.

Keywords: Gender capacity, Inclusive development, Poverty alleviation, Sustainable development

Introduction

The pursuit of equitable development and sustainable poverty reduction has emerged as a central objective in national and international development agendas. Although numerous strategies have been introduced to address socio economic disparities, inequalities in access to resources, decision making and opportunities remain widespread, particularly along gender lines. The unequal distribution of power and privileges between men and women continues to hinder efforts to build inclusive societies where all individuals can contribute meaningfully to national growth. Gender inequality presents not only a question of fairness but a fundamental challenge to social progress and economic stability. Imbalances in educational attainment, income levels, land ownership, political representation and access to health services create lasting disadvantages for women and girls, especially in rural and underserved communities. These patterns of marginalization are often supported by traditions, institutional practices and social expectations that limit women's autonomy and participation in public life.

Gender capacity building thus represents a practical and transformative approach to inclusive development. When women are supported through education, economic opportunities, legal protection and participation in leadership, they are better positioned to break cycles of poverty and drive positive change within their families and communities. As societies continue to face growing social and economic pressures including inflation, political uncertainty and shifting labour demands, investing in gender capacity offers a clear and effective pathway to resilience and shared prosperity.

Gender and Development: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Realities

The evolution of development discourse has been marked by a significant transformation in the way gender is understood and addressed within policy and practice. In the initial decades following decolonization, development strategies were primarily anchored in economic growth paradigms that largely overlooked gender as a meaningful analytical category. These strategies were often built on assumptions that treated the population as a homogeneous unit, thereby failing to account for the distinct needs, experiences and contributions of women. Such gender-blind approaches systematically marginalized women and concealed the underlying structural inequalities that restricted their access to education, economic resources and political participation.

By the 1970s and 1980s, feminist scholars, development practitioners and civil society actors began to critique these male-oriented models, arguing that they failed to reflect the diverse realities of women across different socio-economic contexts. This critique gave rise to the Women in Development perspective, which focused on the integration of women into existing development programmes through increased access to education, employment and training. While this marked a departure from earlier neglect, the approach was limited in its ability to confront the deeper power relations that underpinned gender inequality. Subsequently, a more analytical orientation emerged with the Gender and Development perspective, which broadened the scope from women-specific concerns to a comprehensive analysis of gender relations. This approach challenged the structural dynamics which are social, economic, political and cultural; that perpetuated inequality between men and women. It moved beyond the notion of integration and instead called for a transformation of development institutions and policies that had traditionally privileged male experiences. The shift represented a more holistic understanding of development, established in equity and justice rather than mere participation.

This conceptualisation was reflected in key international instruments, most notably the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted in 1995 by one hundred and eighty nine countries (United Nations, 1995). The document provided a detailed agenda for achieving gender equity across twelve critical areas, including health, education, violence and economic participation. It also called for the removal of legal and institutional barriers to women's advancement and encouraged governments to adopt proactive strategies for addressing gender-based disadvantages. The commitments made in Beijing have since influenced other global agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015.

Within this broader global context, gender is now recognised as a cross-cutting concern that intersects with every dimension of development, from poverty reduction and education to health systems and climate action. The Sustainable Development Goals reaffirm this by embedding gender-sensitive targets across various goals, with Goal Five dedicated explicitly to the elimination of discrimination, violence and inequality against women and girls. This global recognition reflects a shift from peripheral acknowledgement to central integration of gender in development planning.



In Nigeria, these international developments have informed national policy directions, albeit with varying degrees of effectiveness. As a signatory to the Beijing Declaration, Nigeria has expressed formal commitment to promoting gender equity and has taken steps to align its national development strategies with international standards. The creation of the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, along with the introduction of the National Gender Policy in 2006, illustrates an institutional response to the imperative of gender mainstreaming. The policy prioritises women's empowerment and equitable participation in sectors such as health, education, agriculture and governance.

Nevertheless, the implementation of these commitments remains inconsistent. While measurable progress has been recorded in specific areas such as increasing school enrolment for girls and expanding access to microcredit for female entrepreneurs, significant structural challenges endure. Deep-seated cultural and religious norms, especially prevalent in northern regions, continue to restrict women's autonomy and participation in public life. Political underrepresentation remains a major concern, with women occupying less than ten percent of legislative positions in the National Assembly. Furthermore, issues such as gender-based violence, discriminatory inheritance laws and limited access to land and financial assets contribute to the persistence of inequality. The institutional mechanisms intended to support gender integration such as gender-responsive budgeting and planning are also unevenly applied across federal and state levels. These shortcomings often stem from inadequate technical capacity, insufficient funding and a lack of sustained political will. As a result, gender equity is frequently treated as an auxiliary issue rather than a fundamental pillar of national development. Civil society organisations and women's advocacy networks have played a central role in driving progress particularly through legal activism, policy advocacy and community-based interventions. Their efforts have been important in expanding public awareness and exerting pressure on government agencies to uphold commitments to gender equality. However, these gains are constrained by limited institutional support and the broader socio-political environment that still resists transformative change. The historical trajectory of gender in development illustrates a clear progression from neglect to partial integration and toward a more critical examination of power and exclusion; yet, the gap between normative commitments and practical outcomes remains substantial.

Overview of Gender Inequality in the 21st Century

Gender inequality remains a pressing global issue in the twenty first century, despite sustained efforts by international organisations, governments and civil society actors to promote inclusive development. In many parts of the world, women and girls continue to face pronounced disadvantages across multiple spheres of life, including politics, education, health and the economy. These disadvantages are not isolated occurrences but reflect structural barriers that inhibit full participation and equitable access to resources and opportunities. One of the most visible manifestations of gender inequality is the persistent underrepresentation of women in political leadership. In both democratic and non-democratic societies, women hold a smaller proportion of parliamentary seats, ministerial appointments and executive positions, often due to discriminatory political cultures, lack of institutional support, and unequal access to party structures. Economic disparities also remain evident, with women consistently earning lower wages than men for work of equal value and experiencing limited mobility within formal labour markets. These wage gaps are often amplified by the gendered division of unpaid care responsibilities and occupational segregation that confines women to lower paid sectors.

Poverty is another area where the gender gap is particularly stark. Women and girls are more likely to live in poverty, particularly in rural communities, informal settlements and post conflict societies. This vulnerability is often compounded by limited access to education, inadequate healthcare and exclusion from financial services. These conditions reduce women's chances of upward social mobility and reinforce generational cycles of deprivation. In conflict affected regions and conservative societies, such disparities are further intensified by cultural practices and social norms that restrict women's roles, limit their autonomy and legitimise systemic discrimination.

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2024) provides a comprehensive assessment of these ongoing challenges. According to the report, although some countries have made notable progress toward achieving gender parity, the overall pace remains slow and uneven. The report ranks countries based on four critical dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. The 2024 edition reveals that while educational gaps are closing in several regions, substantial disparities

persist in economic inclusion and political representation. It concludes that at the current rate of progress, full global gender parity will not be achieved for several decades.

Structural and cultural impediments continue to limit advancement. In countries where legal reforms have been enacted to promote equality, deep seated social attitudes and institutional inertia often hinder implementation. Gender equality is therefore not simply a legal or economic matter but one that requires sustained social transformation and targeted investments in institutional capacity. New and emerging global phenomena are creating further obstacles to gender equality like digital exclusion, for example, disproportionately affects women in developing regions where access to internet infrastructure, digital literacy and information technology remains limited.

Climate change also poses a gendered threat because women mostly bear the brunt of environmental degradation because of their roles in agriculture, water collection and household energy. When climate related disasters occur, women are often more vulnerable to displacement, loss of livelihood and health crises. Similarly, patterns of migration, whether driven by conflict, environmental stress, or economic need, often place women at higher risk of exploitation, trafficking, abuse and social marginalisation in host communities. Gender inequality in the twenty first century remains a global concern that transcends geographical, economic and political boundaries. While progress has been made, it has been neither fast nor far reaching enough to dismantle the complex systems that sustain inequality.

Conceptualising Gender Capacity and Its Relevance

Eger *et al.* (2018) observe that gender capacity refers to the knowledge, competencies, access and power that individuals possess or are able to acquire in order to influence decisions and benefit from development processes. Empowerment is a multidimensional concept that entails the active and equitable involvement of all genders in the political, social and economic structures of society and it encompasses the capacity of individuals to influence the decisions that affect their lives and to participate meaningfully in societal development. This understanding implies that empowerment goes beyond surface-level involvement, it requires the removal of barriers that inhibit the full inclusion of individuals based on gender. The authors argue that gender empowerment is particularly significant in contexts where patriarchal systems have

historically marginalised women and other gender minorities, limiting their access to resources, decision-making platforms and leadership opportunities.

Enhancing gender capacity involves creating enabling environments where marginalised groups can thrive, access opportunities and exercise their rights fully. According to Cornwall and Rivas (2015), societies can unlock a wider pool of human resources and build resilience against poverty and underdevelopment by enabling gender capacity. Gendered power imbalances often manifest in unequal access to education, employment, healthcare and political representation. Addressing these imbalances requires deliberate and sustained efforts to promote inclusive participation. Inclusive development, as argued by Kabeer (1999), is unattainable without the deliberate integration of gender perspectives into policy and practice. Kabeer posits that empowerment involves the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied. In particular, gender empowerment demands a critical examination of societal structures that reinforce dependency and exclusion. This involves facilitating access to resources, strengthening voices in decision-making processes and encouraging self-determination among all genders. The World Bank (2012) emphasises that gender empowerment is integral to poverty reduction and economic development. Empowering women and other underrepresented groups has been shown to improve health outcomes, increase household incomes and foster more inclusive governance systems.

Barriers to Enhancing Gender Capacity

Despite substantial global and national efforts to promote gender equity, numerous structural, cultural and institutional barriers continue to impede the development of gender capacity. These constraints are particularly evident in countries like Nigeria, where gender roles remain strongly defined by patriarchal norms and socio-religious expectations. One of the most enduring challenges is the cultural construction of women primarily as homemakers. This perception reinforces the belief that women's primary responsibility lies in managing the domestic sphere regardless of their qualifications or career aspirations. As a result, women often face implicit pressure to resign from formal employment or forego career progression in order to meet domestic obligations. Men, by contrast, are socially encouraged to pursue professional advancement without such limitations. This unequal expectation significantly contributes to the

underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, high-income professions, and decision-making positions.

Cultural and religious beliefs play a central role in shaping these dynamics. In many Nigerian communities, gender roles are highly influenced by traditional norms that assign public and productive roles to men while confining women to private and reproductive roles. In conservative Islamic settings such as among some northern Nigerian communities, women in niqab who observe strict veiling practices may be restricted from working in environments that require public visibility thereby reducing their access to diverse career opportunities. Societal norms in Nigeria continue to impose constraints on the types of jobs deemed acceptable for women.

Occupations perceived as physically demanding, high-risk or male-dominated such as mechanical engineering, commercial driving, law enforcement or political campaigning are often seen as inappropriate for women. Such perceptions not only discourage women from entering these fields but also influence employers' hiring practices, further entrenching occupational segregation. Azubuike, Eziaghighala and Umeh (2022), note that even within professional sectors like academia, politics and corporate leadership, women often encounter invisible ceilings that prevent upward mobility. Political commitment to gender equity, while expressed in policy documents is frequently undermined by weak implementation, insufficient funding and a lack of accountability mechanisms. Many gender-related policies remain under-resourced or symbolic in nature, failing to generate meaningful transformation in the lives of ordinary women.

Strategies for Strengthening Gender Capacity for Poverty Alleviation in the 21st Century

The imperative to strengthen gender capacity in the 21st century arises from the broader goal of achieving inclusive and sustainable poverty alleviation. The need to integrate gender-specific strategies into national and local policies has become more urgent as global development discourse increasingly acknowledges the multidimensional nature of poverty. In this context, a range of targeted approaches spanning education, economic inclusion, legal reform, leadership development and institutional transformation are imperative to advancing gender equity and economic inclusion.

Education remains the most fundamental strategy for enhancing gender capacity. Equal access to quality education for both girls and boys fosters the acquisition of skills, knowledge and

confidence necessary for leadership, innovation and civic participation. Evidence consistently shows that women possess the intellectual capacity to thrive academically and professionally. When given the opportunity, they often excel in both formal education and vocational training. The human brain, irrespective of gender, has the ability to process, analyse and innovate. Therefore, investing in the education of girls is not only a matter of rights but a recognition of their God-given intellectual potential. When society harnesses this potential, it cultivates a generation of women who can contribute meaningfully to national growth and social transformation.

In addition to basic and tertiary education, vocational training and adult learning programmes are essential for women who may have been excluded from schooling due to socio-cultural or economic barriers. These interventions equip women with practical skills that enhance employability, income generation and household stability. Moreover, expanding girl-child education reduces early marriage and fosters intergenerational benefits in health, education and economic wellbeing.

Economic empowerment is another essential pillar of gender capacity development. As economic pressures intensify in Nigeria with rising inflation, unstable income and high living costs, households increasingly rely on multiple streams of income to survive. Salaried workers often pursue side businesses while entrepreneurs seek formal employment to stabilise earnings. In such a context, limiting women's participation in the labour force places an undue burden on men and undermines household resilience. When women are allowed to explore their careers, engage in entrepreneurship or combine both, families benefit from a dual-income model that eases financial strain and fosters long-term economic security. A financially empowered woman is more likely to invest in the education, health and nutrition of her children, thereby strengthening community development.

Access to land, credit and entrepreneurial support services enables women to participate more meaningfully in productive economic sectors. As Adebayo and Dada (2020) highlight, women's exclusion from asset ownership and formal financial systems perpetuates poverty and dependency. Legal reforms guaranteeing women's property and inheritance rights, anti-discrimination laws and financial inclusion initiatives are essential to closing this gap. Leadership development and political participation also remain essential to gender

empowerment. Mentorship schemes, leadership training and affirmative action policies, such as gender quotas, create pathways for women to participate in decision-making across sectors. High-profile Nigerian women such as Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Dr. Dora Akunyili, Justice Ayotunde Phillips and Dr. Oby Ezekwesili have demonstrated that women can lead with competence, integrity and vision. Their successes underscore the need for intentional strategies that promote inclusive leadership.

At the institutional level, gender-responsive policies can be integrated across national and subnational development plans. The National Gender Policy (2006) provides a foundational legal and strategic document for this process. However, as Aina (2012) observes, institutional resistance and patriarchal structures often hinder the practical implementation of such policies. Religious and cultural institutions may reinforce traditional gender roles that limit women's participation in public life. Reorienting these institutions through sensitisation, stakeholder engagement and partnerships with civil society organisations is key to creating enabling environments for gender empowerment.

Transformational leadership traits such as empathy, inclusiveness and participatory decision-making are increasingly associated with women in governance. Gaytan and Hyde suggest that female leaders often bring collaborative approaches that are well-suited to the complexities of development in the 21st century. This further reinforces the rationale for institutional mechanisms that promote women's advancement into leadership roles across all levels of society. The Women for Health (W4H) programme in northern Nigeria expanded female access to healthcare training and employment which improve service delivery and increase women's economic agency (Health Partners International, 2021). Similarly, the Better Life Programme for Rural Women facilitated agricultural training and cooperative development and also enhances rural women's livelihoods and community welfare (Okeke, 2018).

Enhancing gender capacity is not simply a policy aspiration but a practical and necessary response to contemporary economic and social challenges. Women have the intellectual capacity, emotional intelligence, and resilience to excel across all domains of life. When given equal opportunity, they not only alleviate household poverty but also contribute to building a financially stable and prosperous society.

Conclusion

Enhancing gender capacities is not merely a development option but a necessity for achieving inclusive growth and sustainable poverty alleviation in the 21st century. As this paper has shown, gender disparities reflect in social, economic and institutional structures. Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate and coordinated effort to build the capacities of all genders, particularly those who have been historically marginalised. By investing in education, economic empowerment, institutional reform and cultural change, societies can unlock the full potential of their populations and create a more just and equitable world. Enhancing gender capacities is not just a social imperative but an economic necessity. It directly influences productivity, stability and intergenerational prosperity. Nigeria and other nations must commit to dismantling structural barriers and investing in gender equity to achieve inclusive growth and sustainable development.

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