

## **BREAKING BARRIERS AND SHAPING POSITIVE ATTITUDES FOR INCLUSIVE POLITICS IN NIGERIA**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Inclusive politics means that every person can engage on an equal footing, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, religion, economic status, or disability, in making choices about how to be governed. In Nigeria, the vision of inclusive politics is confronted by deep-rooted cultural, economic, institutional, and system-level barriers that exclude some groups, especially women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and minority ethnic communities. This paper discusses these challenges and offers ways of overcoming them and advancing constructive attitudes that support inclusive governance. Reforms in law, civic education, redefining political parties, and the media are offered as vehicles for inclusion. Using Nigerian and international examples, the paper brings out the inter-sectionality, representation, and participatory democracy necessary to reshape Nigeria's political scene.

## **Introduction**

Inclusive politics is a cornerstone of democratic governance and sustainable improvement. It refers to political surroundings in which all segments of society—regardless of gender, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, or disability—have equal access to political participation, illustration, and leadership. In principle, democracy is premised at the participation of the majority and the safety of minority rights. In practice, but, numerous agencies in Nigeria maintain to face systemic exclusion from political techniques. Since its return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has made vast development in building democratic establishments. Yet, its political area stays in large part dominated through elite interests, patriarchal norms, and ethno-non secular politics. These dynamics have caused the marginalization of ladies, youth, humans with disabilities (PWDs), and ethnic minorities from meaningful participation in political selection-making (Akinola, 2018). The 1999 Nigerian Constitution ensures equality and non-discrimination (Section forty two), but the implementation of those provisions has been inconsistent and often undermined by socio-cultural realities. For example, while women constitute nearly 1/2 of the population, they occupy much less than 6% of elective political offices nationally (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). The underrepresentation of kids—who make up over 60% of the population—and PWDs is also obvious. These disparities have serious implications for democratic consolidation, social fairness, and countrywide cohesion.

Exclusion from political processes often breeds disillusionment, apathy, and even political unrest, particularly among young people. As noted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021), political exclusion is both a cause and a consequence of inequality and underdevelopment. Therefore, breaking down the barriers to inclusive politics is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for national stability and development.

Furthermore, inclusive politics contributes to more effective policymaking, as diverse perspectives enrich governance and ensure that policies are more responsive to the needs of all citizens (UN Women, 2022). Societies that foster inclusive political participation are generally more peaceful, prosperous, and resilient.

This paper, therefore, aims to analyze the key obstacles to political inclusivity in Nigeria and propose practical strategies to dismantle these barriers. It also explores how reshaping societal attitudes—through education, civic engagement, and media representation—can create a culture of political inclusion. By drawing on both national contexts and global best practices, the paper provides a roadmap for building an inclusive political system in Nigeria that reflects the diversity and aspirations of its people.

### **Understanding Inclusive Politics**

Inclusive politics is more than a democratic ideal—it is a foundational principle of good governance, equitable development, and social justice. At its core, inclusive politics refers to the deliberate and meaningful

participation of all groups in a society—regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, religion, disability, or other status—in political processes and decision-making structures. This goes beyond tokenistic involvement to ensure that every citizen has a voice, a platform, and a stake in how they are governed (International IDEA, 2013).

### **Key Elements of Inclusive Politics**

Inclusive politics embodies several key elements:

- **Equal Access to Political Processes:** All individuals should be able to vote, run for office, participate in civic activities, and join political parties without fear or discrimination.
- **Diverse Representation:** Political institutions must reflect the diverse makeup of the population. This means active efforts to include underrepresented groups such as women, youth, PWDs, and ethnic minorities.
- **Enabling Legal and Institutional Frameworks:** Laws, electoral systems, and party structures must be designed to remove systemic barriers and create equal opportunities.
- **Respect for Human Rights and Civil Liberties:** Freedom of expression, association, and assembly are fundamental to ensuring that marginalized voices can speak and organize freely (UNDP, 2021).

### **The Rationale for Political Inclusion**

Inclusive politics is not just an ethical imperative—it has practical and developmental benefits:

- **Democratic Legitimacy:** When people see themselves represented in governance, they are more likely to trust institutions and comply with laws (World Bank, 2020).
- **Better Policy Outcomes:** A diverse leadership pool brings a broader range of experiences and perspectives, leading to more inclusive, equitable, and responsive policies (Htun & Weldon, 2018).
- **Social Cohesion and Stability:** Inclusive governance reduces feelings of marginalization and discontent, which are often root causes of conflict and instability (OECD, 2021).

### **Global Norms and Commitments**

Globally, there is a growing consensus on the importance of political inclusion, as reflected in:

- **Sustainable Development Goal 16**, which emphasizes the need for "peaceful and inclusive societies" and "inclusive institutions at all levels."
- **The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)** and **UNCPRD** (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), both of which advocate for full and equal participation of marginalized groups in political and public life.

### **The Nigerian Context**

In Nigeria, however, inclusive politics remains more aspirational than actualized. Though, the country has ratified several international treaties and enacted

laws to promote equality, implementation gaps persist. Political leadership is largely homogeneous—male, elite, able-bodied, and drawn from dominant ethnic groups. Women, for instance, remain underrepresented in parliament, executive appointments, and local governance structures despite constitutional guarantees and electoral reforms (INEC, 2019).

Youths—often at the forefront of protests and civic movements like #EndSARS—remain sidelined when it comes to policy-making and formal leadership roles. Similarly, persons with disabilities encounter significant physical, attitudinal, and legal barriers to political participation.

### **Barriers to Inclusive Politics in Nigeria**

Despite the legal and constitutional guarantees of political participation for all citizens, the practice of inclusive politics in Nigeria faces numerous challenges. These barriers are structural, institutional, socio-cultural, and economic in nature, and they disproportionately affect women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and ethnic minorities. Understanding these barriers is crucial for designing effective interventions that promote genuine inclusivity in Nigeria's political landscape.

### **Socio-Cultural Norms and Patriarchal Attitudes**

One of the most pervasive barriers to inclusive politics in Nigeria is the dominance of patriarchal cultural values that limit the political participation of women and other marginalized groups. In many communities, leadership is traditionally perceived as the preserve of men, while women are expected to play

supporting roles within the private sphere. This has contributed to the widespread belief that politics is a “dirty game” unsuitable for women and the youth (Akinola, 2018). Such attitudes are reinforced by religious interpretations and customary laws that discourage the political ambitions of women and minority groups.

### **Economic Inequality and Financial Barriers**

Politics in Nigeria is highly monetized. The cost of running for office—from party nomination forms to campaign expenses—is prohibitively high. This economic barrier disproportionately affects underrepresented groups, who often lack access to the networks of wealth and influence that dominate the political system (Agbalajobi, 2010). Women, in particular, face significant financial constraints due to gender-based economic disparities, while young people, who constitute the majority of the unemployed population, are largely excluded from formal political contests.

### **Discriminatory Political Party Structures**

Political parties are critical vehicles for inclusion, yet many Nigerian political parties lack internal democracy and transparency. Candidate selection processes are often influenced by patronage, favoritism, and “godfatherism,” making it difficult for new entrants, especially from marginalized backgrounds, to emerge as candidates (Omotola, 2010). Women and youths are frequently relegated to non-decision-making roles within

party structures, such as “Women Leaders” or “Youth Wings,” without real influence over party decisions.

### **Inadequate Legal and Institutional Support**

Although Nigeria has laws and policies aimed at promoting inclusive participation—such as the National Gender Policy (2006) and the Not Too Young to Run Act (2018)—implementation remains weak. There is a lack of enforcement mechanisms and political will to operationalize these legal frameworks. For example, despite the passage of the Not Too Young to Run Act, political parties continue to favor older, wealthier candidates during elections (YIAGA Africa, 2019).

### **Insecurity and Political Violence**

The prevalence of violence in Nigerian politics serves as a major deterrent to inclusive participation. Electoral periods are often marked by intimidation, thuggery, and targeted attacks, particularly against women and vulnerable groups. According to the National Democratic Institute (2022), many women and youth candidates report threats to their safety, thereby discouraging them from running for office or actively participating in campaigns.

### **Poor Civic Education and Political Literacy**

Another major barrier is the lack of widespread civic education, especially in rural and underserved communities. Many citizens are unaware of their political rights or the processes involved in political engagement. This lack of awareness disproportionately affects marginalized groups who may already be socially

and economically disadvantaged, further excluding them from political processes (INEC, 2019).

### **Media Bias and Limited Representation**

The media plays a crucial role in shaping political narratives. However, in Nigeria, media coverage often reinforces stereotypes and marginalizes non-traditional candidates. Women and youth are either underrepresented or portrayed in ways that trivialize their political ambitions. Persons with disabilities also receive minimal media attention, reinforcing their invisibility in public discourse.

### **Strategies for Breaking Barriers**

Achieving inclusive politics in Nigeria requires a multi-dimensional and sustained approach. The barriers are deeply rooted in structural inequalities, institutional limitations, and socio-cultural norms. Therefore, efforts to dismantle these obstacles must be comprehensive, involving government institutions, political parties, civil society, development partners, and the general public. Below are key strategies that can help break these barriers and create a more inclusive political environment in Nigeria:

### **Legislative and Policy Reforms**

Legal frameworks must be strengthened and enforced to institutionalize inclusion. Existing laws such as the *Not Too Young to Run Act* and the *Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018* should be fully implemented, and new affirmative action policies introduced where necessary.

- **Gender Quotas:** Nigeria can consider adopting statutory gender quotas, similar to those used in countries like Rwanda and Senegal, which have significantly improved women's representation in politics (Ballington & Matland, 2004).
- **Reserved Seats for PWDs and Youths:** Legal provisions can be made to reserve specific seats in parliament and local councils for persons with disabilities and youth to ensure their representation.

### **Political Party Reforms**

Political parties play a gate keeping role in political participation. Reforms within party structures can open up the political space:

- **Mandatory Inclusion Policies:** Parties should be mandated by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to include a minimum percentage of women, youths, and PWDs in both leadership positions and candidate nominations.
- **Reduced Nomination Fees:** Financial barriers can be addressed by reducing or waiving nomination and expression of interest fees for underrepresented groups.
- **Internal Democracy:** Strengthening internal democracy within parties ensures fair primaries and reduces the influence of political godfathers.

### **Civic Education and Political Awareness**

Enhancing the political consciousness of citizens—especially those in rural areas and among

marginalized groups—is vital to building an inclusive democracy.

- **Community-Based Civic Education Campaigns:** NGOs, CSOs, and the National Orientation Agency should collaborate to conduct targeted awareness campaigns on political rights and responsibilities.
- **School Curricula Reform:** Political literacy should be introduced and strengthened within school systems to build a foundation of democratic values among young people (INEC, 2019).

### **Economic Empowerment and Capacity Building**

Empowering marginalized groups economically and technically increases their capacity to participate meaningfully in politics.

- **Training and Mentorship Programs:** Capacity-building initiatives that equip women, youth, and PWDs with political leadership skills, campaign management techniques, and advocacy strategies are essential.
- **Access to Campaign Funding:** Special funds or grants can be created at national and party levels to support candidates from underrepresented backgrounds.

### **Promoting Gender and Social Inclusion in Media**

The media must play a proactive role in promoting inclusion and changing public perceptions.

- **Positive Representation:** Media houses should deliberately spotlight women, youth, and PWDs

in leadership roles and provide equal coverage to their political campaigns.

- **Sensitization Campaigns:** Media outlets can help challenge harmful stereotypes and promote narratives that highlight the competence and contributions of marginalized groups in governance.

### **Tackling Political Violence and Insecurity**

Addressing the pervasive insecurity and political violence that discourages participation is crucial.

- **Security for Candidates:** INEC and security agencies must provide adequate protection, especially during elections, for women and vulnerable candidates.
- **Electoral Offences Commission:** Establishing a functional and independent Electoral Offences Commission to investigate and prosecute cases of electoral violence and intimidation will act as a deterrent.

### **Strengthening Civil Society and Advocacy Coalitions**

Civil society organizations play a vital role in mobilizing communities, monitoring electoral processes, and advocating for reforms.

- **Coalition-Building:** Advocacy groups representing different constituencies—women, youth, PWDs—should form coalitions to amplify their voices and press for political inclusion.
- **Monitoring and Accountability:** CSOs can hold political actors accountable for inclusive

commitments and push for transparency in party candidate selections and public appointments.

### **Leveraging Technology and Innovation**

Digital tools can be powerful enablers of political participation, especially for young people and PWDs.

- **E-Voting and Online Engagement:** Introducing accessible e-voting mechanisms and using social media platforms for civic engagement can bridge the gap for those unable to participate physically.
- **Digital Campaign Platforms:** Providing digital tools for marginalized candidates to engage with voters can level the playing field.

### **Shaping Positive Attitudes for Inclusive Politics in Nigeria**

While institutional reforms and policy frameworks are vital, fostering inclusive politics in Nigeria also requires a deliberate transformation of public attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Positive attitudes are the social glue that binds laws and reforms to real, lasting change. Without widespread societal acceptance and value for inclusion, legal provisions and political opportunities may remain underutilized or actively resisted. Therefore, creating a political culture that values diversity, equity, and participation is essential for sustaining inclusive governance.

### ***Promoting Value Reorientation and National Consciousness***

A critical starting point is the reorientation of societal values through national education and media

campaigns. Many Nigerians still hold entrenched biases against women in leadership, youth participation, and the visibility of persons with disabilities in politics.

- **Nationwide Sensitization Programs:** Government and civil society should develop and implement continuous public enlightenment campaigns that challenge gender stereotypes, promote youth agency, and humanize persons with disabilities in political contexts.
- **Inclusive Civic Education:** Embedding inclusive political values in formal and informal education systems can help nurture a new generation that values diversity in leadership (UNESCO, 2021).

### *Engaging Religious and Traditional Institutions*

In many Nigerian communities, religious and traditional leaders are influential gatekeepers of cultural norms and attitudes. Their active support can significantly reshape public opinion and promote inclusive political participation.

- **Capacity Building for Faith and Traditional Leaders:** Training these leaders on the importance of inclusive governance and equipping them with advocacy tools can enable them to become champions of change.
- **Use of Pulpits and Community Platforms:** Encouraging leaders to preach inclusion and equity in their sermons, public statements, and community forums can gradually shift attitudes at the grassroots level.

### ***Leveraging Role Models and Success Stories***

Highlighting success stories of marginalized groups in leadership positions helps to break myths and offer aspirational examples to society.

- **Media Promotion of Diverse Leaders:** Documentaries, interviews, and social media campaigns that showcase successful women, youth, and persons with disabilities in governance can inspire others and build public trust in their capabilities.
- **Mentorship and Ambassadorship Programs:** Engaging inclusive political leaders as mentors or ambassadors in schools, communities, and party settings can directly influence younger or hesitant individuals.

### ***Youth Engagement and Peer Education***

Young people are both the most excluded and the most promising group for transforming Nigeria's political future. Engaging them early and consistently is critical.

- **Youth-Led Civic Platforms:** Creating and supporting youth-led forums and political literacy platforms allows young Nigerians to shape the narrative on inclusiveness from within their generation.
- **Peer Education and Volunteer Networks:** Young influencers and trained peer educators can spread inclusive political messages using popular platforms such as music, sports, comedy, and digital media.

### ***Promoting Political Tolerance and Dialogue***

Attitudes of political exclusion are often reinforced by a win-at-all-costs mentality and the demonization of political opponents. To shape positive attitudes, Nigeria must nurture a culture of tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect.

- **Peace building and Dialogue Initiatives:** Inter-party dialogues, cross-community engagements, and issue-based political discourse can reduce tensions and encourage collaboration across diverse groups.
- **Nonviolent Communication Training:** Political actors, supporters, and media personnel can be trained in nonviolent communication and conflict resolution to promote civil political engagement.

### ***Encouraging Inclusive Political Leadership***

When political leaders model inclusive attitudes, it can influence their supporters and the broader society.

- **Public Commitments to Inclusion:** Leaders should be encouraged to make and fulfill commitments to inclusion in their appointments, campaign teams, and decision-making structures.
- **Accountability and Recognition Mechanisms:** Leaders and institutions that uphold inclusive values should be publicly recognized and rewarded, while those who practice exclusion should face civil society pressure and media scrutiny.

In summary, shaping positive attitudes for inclusive politics in Nigeria goes beyond policy—it demands a national cultural shift. From homes to

schools, churches to mosques, media to political parties, every institution has a role in normalizing diversity and participation. When the mindset of exclusion gives way to openness and equity, Nigeria will be on a stronger path toward a more vibrant and representative democracy.

### **Case Studies and Lessons**

Analyzing successful efforts toward political inclusion in Nigeria and other comparable democracies provide critical insights into what works and why. Case studies help uncover practical strategies, institutional mechanisms, and social interventions that can be adapted and scaled within the Nigerian context.

### **The Not Too Young to Run Movement – Nigeria**

One of the most prominent recent examples of a successful inclusion campaign in Nigeria is the **Not Too Young to Run** movement. Initiated by YIAGA Africa and driven by a coalition of civil society organizations, this campaign successfully advocated for a constitutional amendment in 2018 that lowered the age limit for running for elective offices.

- **Key Success Factors:** Strong youth mobilization, strategic use of media, bipartisan political engagement, and international support.
- **Impact:** Over 400 young candidates contested in the 2019 general elections, with several winning seats in the National and State Assemblies.
- **Lesson:** Youth-led, issue-based movements can shape public discourse, influence policy, and

drive meaningful reforms when strategically organized (YIAGA Africa, 2020).

### **Rwanda's Gender Quota System**

Rwanda offers a powerful lesson in institutional mechanisms for inclusive governance, particularly regarding gender.

- **Mechanism:** The country's constitution mandates that at least 30% of decision-making positions in government be reserved for women.
- **Impact:** As of 2023, women hold over 60% of the seats in Rwanda's parliament—the highest globally.
- **Lesson:** Institutionalized quotas, when enforced and supported by political will, can rapidly accelerate inclusion and challenge patriarchal norms (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023).

### **Lagos State Office for Disability Affairs (LASODA)**

In Nigeria, Lagos State has made notable progress in mainstreaming persons with disabilities (PWDs) into governance structures.

- **Initiative:** Establishment of LASODA, a government agency responsible for implementing disability rights, ensuring accessibility, and advocating for inclusion.
- **Outcomes:** Increased visibility and participation of PWDs in policy dialogues and limited but growing representation in political platforms.
- **Lesson:** Dedicated institutional frameworks can promote and sustain inclusive policies when

backed by adequate funding and public engagement (LASODA, 2022).

### **Kenya's Electoral Reforms and Women's Participation**

Kenya has taken steps to enhance the representation of women through constitutional provisions and electoral reforms.

- **Provision:** Article 81(b) of the 2010 Kenyan Constitution mandates that not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender.
- **Challenges and Lessons:** Despite legal backing, enforcement remains weak. However, public litigation and advocacy groups have kept pressure on government agencies, emphasizing the importance of sustained civic vigilance and judicial activism (FIDA Kenya, 2021).

### **Youth Political Mobilization in Ghana**

Ghana has witnessed increasing youth participation due to deliberate efforts by political parties and civil society.

- **Strategy:** Inclusion of youth wings in party structures, policy dialogues, and electoral processes.
- **Lesson:** Political parties are crucial platforms for inclusion and must be reformed from within to foster sustainable participation (Gyampo, 2020).

## Comparative Insights for Nigeria

These case studies highlight several key lessons:

1. **Legislative Measures Work Best When Coupled with Public Engagement:** Legal reforms must be complemented by mass education and community support to ensure enforcement and sustainability.
2. **Quotas and Reserved Seats Can Be Transformational:** Though, sometimes controversial, well-designed quota systems provide a practical route for leveling the political playing field.
3. **Civil Society and Media Are Powerful Enablers:** Advocacy, civic education, and digital mobilization remain essential tools for challenging exclusion and building inclusive cultures.
4. **Institutional Support Is Non-Negotiable:** Dedicated agencies and political will are critical for ensuring that inclusion goes beyond rhetoric and becomes a reality.

## Conclusion

Breaking barriers to inclusive politics in Nigeria requires a multi-pronged approach that tackles structural inequalities, reforms political institutions, and reshapes societal mindsets. A truly inclusive Nigeria is possible when every citizen, regardless of background, is given a fair chance to contribute to national decision-making processes.

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