Uganda Pentecostal University Journal of Sustainable Development
Journal DOI Prefix: 10.69612
Journal ISSN: 3078-2384
Issue 2

GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EASTERN NIGER DELTA OF NIGERIA, 1960-2024

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the dynamics of gender equality and social inclusion in the sustainable development of the Eastern Niger Delta region of Niger from 1960-2024. From 1960 when Nigeria got her independence, the Eastern Niger Delta has experienced significant socio-economic development driven by the oil exploration environmental changes, urbanisation, and social change. In spite of the numerous natural resources and economic opportunities in the region, women, boys, girls, those with disabilities and other marginalised groups have been excluded as major stakeholders in decision making process in the region. The study adopted a qualitative approach and analysed the political, socio-economic and environmental factors that helped in gender relations and inclusion practices over the years. The findings revealed that government policies, international organisations' frameworks and civil societies' interventions have shaped the awareness and participation of women and vulnerable groups even though significant disparities remain in accessing the region's resources, political representation, environmental justice, amenities distribution, poverty reduction and employment opportunities. The study argues that sustainable development cannot be achieved without addressing the systemic structure of gender inequalities and inclusive governance in the Eastern Niger Delta region. It also recommends strong institutions, gender responsive budgeting, participation, inclusion, development and community-based strategies to enhance equitable and tangible growth in the region.

Keywords: Gender equality, social inclusion, sustainable development, Eastern Niger Delta

Introduction

The study focused on the Eastern Niger Delta region of Nigeria, covering from 1960 to 2024. It is important to note that the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is located in the present day south-South geological zone of Nigeria and comprises of Cross River and Akwa-Ibom states. The population of the region consists of many diverse ethnic groups including Ibibio, Efik, Boki, Bakwara, Obudu and many others. Each of these ethnic groups has its own distinct cultural tradition and gender relations (Odeigah, 2018). But the Eastern Niger Delta is seated on Cross River and Akwa- Ibom states because of their geographical and socio-economic linkages. The region lies between the low Niger Delta basin along the Atlantic coast and is described as a region with heavy mangrove forest, creeks, swamps, rivers and coastal ecosystem (Acey, 2016). The Eastern Niger Delta is rich in natural resources such as crude oil and accounts for the numerous contributions it makes to the nation's economy (Abam, 1988). The region has been experiencing persistent developmental challenges, environmental degradation, abject poverty, marginalisation, unemployment, inadequate amenities and social inequality as a result of exploitation and decades of oil exploration, that has negatively affected the women, youths and vulnerable groups (Aaron, 2012).

The concept of sustainable development gained international prominence because of the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, which defines sustainable development as development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their needs (Uwen, 2024). The word sustainable development encompasses environmental protection, economic growth, social inclusion and gender equality, and all are recognised as vital drivers of sustainable development. Since Nigeria got her independence, various government agencies and other international organisations have been trying to address the issue of inequalities globally, but all to no avail (Folami, 2016). In 1985 during Mariam Babangida's time as the first lady in Nigeria and other recent initiatives have laid emphasy on Gender Equality and social inclusion as a crucial component of sustainable development. The study explored the historical trajectory, achievements and challenges and prospects of gender equality and social inclusion in the sustainable development of the Eastern Niger Delta region of Nigeria (Ajasin, 2013).

Aim of the Study: The study aimed to examine the role of gender equality and social inclusion in promoting sustainable development in the Eastern Niger Delta region, 1960 to 2024.

Objectives:

1. To examine the historical evolution of gender relations and social inclusion in the Eastern Niger Delta Region.
2. To analyse the impact of oil exploration and environmental degradation on women and marginalisation.
3. To assess government and non-governmental intervention aimed at promoting gender equality and social inclusion.
4. To identify serious challenges hindering inclusive sustainable development.

Research Gap: Many scholars have written extensively on environmental degradation, poverty and conflicts in the Niger Delta region. Some scholars focused on women participation in peace building, environmental

management, militancy, and developmental programmes. However, the comprehensive study that integrates gender equality, social inclusion and sustainable development within a historical framework covering the period of study has not been explored. Other scholars focused on women while neglecting broader social inclusion dimensions involving youth and the vulnerable in the Easter Niger Delta. But this study seeks to fill the gap by providing a holistic and historical analysis of gender equality and social inclusion in sustainable development in the Eastern Niger Delta.

Theoretical framework: The study adopted a feminist political ecology theory which examines how gender influences access to natural resources, environmental management and development opportunities. The theory argues that the issues in the Eastern Niger Delta such as environmental degradation and exploitation of resources affect women and men differently, because of the role of women in the society. In the region of the Eastern Niger Delta, women depend on agriculture such as farming and fishing for livelihood. The oil exploration in the region has disproportionately affected women by negatively affecting their occupation and putting a heavy burden on them. The theory provided a very useful framework for understanding how equal power relation assists gender experience of environment, and its challenges.

Methodology: The research adopted qualitative historical approach using primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included oral interviews with women, youth elders and the men, while secondary sources included journal articles, books, reports, conference papers and internet sources.

Literature review: Several studies have been written on women in the Niger Delta region emphasising marginalisation in the communities, poor governance and resources management. Masajuwa & Ajisebiyawo, (2016) stated that patriarchal structures and poor implementation of gender policies have limited the women in decision-making, and inclusion because women are often excluded. Mai-Bornu (2023) stated that women in oil producing communities experience economic losses due to the contamination of rivers and farm lands. The study argues that sustainable development cannot be achieved with these challenges not properly addressed. Substantial body of literature have linked environmental degradation in the region as creating gender inequality. It is important to note that women suffer from oil spillage, gas flaring and pollution because of their agrarian occupation. Environmental destruction reduces food security, income and promotes poverty (Omobunde & Chen). Studies have shown that inclusive development policies encourage community participation, help in strengthening local ownership and reduce poverty. But numerous challenges such as weak institutions, cultural norms, and limited participation in political representation reduce effective inclusion. Some scholars such as Babatunde (2025) highlighted the relationship between gender violence and oil politics and social inclusion, and argues that unequal distribution of oil resources, socio-economic deprivation and geo-environmental issues have exposed women to gender-based violence, human trafficking and exploitation (Nworgu, & Amadi, 2024). All these issues undermine sustainable development and reduce women's ability to fully participate in political, social and community activities in the Eastern Niger Delta region. Some studies also showed that in post-conflict reintegration programmes, women were sometimes excluded from amnesty and rehabilitation initiatives (Oluwaniyi, 2014). This neglect reinforces gender inequalities and gives room for limited opportunity for sustainable development in the region. In recent years Millennium Development Goals, and Sustainable

Development Goals have increased the visibility and attention on gender equality and social inclusion. However, this study justifies the need for longitudinal research that examines how gender relations, inclusive policies and developmental outcomes have enhanced the gender inclusion and sustainable development in the Eastern Niger Delta (Innocent, & Ntamark, 2018).

Concept of Social Inclusion

Social inclusion means the process of improving participation in Society for individuals and communities who are vulnerable because of poverty, ethnicity, gender, age, disability or other vulnerable factors. However, inclusive development makes sure members of the communities benefit from the growth and development of the region economically, politically, socially and in their culture and wellbeing (Okeke-Ogbuafor, Gray, & Stead, 2017).

Discussions:

Gender Relations in the Eastern Niger Delta Region 1960-1980

Gender relation means the economic, political, cultural and social interactions between the men and the women. The relationship between the women and the men were shaped by customs, traditions modernisation, and Christianity especially during the Nigerian civil war and the discovery of oil economy (Frynas, 2001). The men sometimes occupy prominent positions in the society and these positions are domesticated in politics and communities. Women over the years have played significant roles in the society and the various communities in the Eastern Niger Delta region with focus on farming, fishing, community development and trade. In the area of tradition, since independence gender relations in the region reflected the long-established practices which started in the pre-colonial period (Johnson, 2024). In the Eastern Niger Delta, the men are seen as the head of the family, the custodians of families, land, leaders of political and traditional institutions. The majority of the chieftaincy positions were held by the men. The women were preoccupied with the domestic responsibility of cooking, child-bearing, child-rearing, trading and giving household support (Akinste, 2022).

The women in the Eastern Niger Delta have age group associations which provided opportunity for economic cooperation and social inclusion among them. The age groups indirectly allowed the women into governance and conflict resolution with some limitations. Major decisions are mostly taken by the men in most communities (Nkem, Devine, Ogaji & Topp, 2024).

The women also contributed to the economic growth and development of the region, through farming, fishing and the marketing of their products and their processed food. The women in the hinterland areas produce yam, cassava, plantain and coco yam among others (Ojakorot & Uzodike, 2006). The women also control the network of markets in the various communities, because they contributed significantly to the household income. The growth and development of some urban areas such as Calabar and Uyo created opportunities for more economic growth. Some women got white collar jobs such as teaching, some as nurses and civil servants in government ministries. This opportunity was limited to only those who were more educated compared to the men (Mai-Bornu, 2023). Education equips women with skills and the knowledge necessary to secure

employment and contribute meaningfully to the economy, improve the family's welfare and social life among others. The women who were educated increased the awareness of some issues of life, making them to fight for their rights through political participation, leadership and governance (Nworgu & Amachi, 2024). They could vote intelligently, contest for elective positions, and contribute to policy formulation and decision-making. More girls were enrolled in schools than the previous years although the males received more attention and were prioritised in many families. Most families value a male child than the female. Most families preferred training a male child than a girl in the Eastern Niger Delta as a result of the traditional stereotype (Matts, 2008). The few women who were educated began to challenge the traditional gender norms by exposing women to ideas about equality, employment and leadership. Education made them increasingly to seek careers beside the domestic sphere, and it led to the women being involved in professional careers (Oketch & Rolleston). Some factors hindering the women are stated below;

The Nigerian civil war also known as the Biafran war impacted gender significantly: During the Nigerian civil war gender relations in the Eastern Niger Delta region suffered significant effects. Psychological, economic and political effects on women were enormous because the conflict disrupted farming, and some women were displaced while some assumed responsibilities of taking care of their children because the men were taken to war (Wiltse & Hager,2021). This period devastated the local economy such as fishing, trade and farming to the detriment of the women and also altered traditional gender roles in the region (Ajayi & Otuye, 2006). Some men lost their income and this led to the struggle for survival among the families. During the Nigerian civil war, many men were killed, because many of them were serving in the military, and this factor made the women to shoulder the responsibilities culturally reserved for the men (Olaniyan & Ipinnaiye, 2026). Some women were forced to flee from their homes and live in temporary camps, some suffered from inadequate food supply, poor conditions of living, separation from families, emotional trauma, lack of health care and education disruption. The Nigerian civil war affected more proportionately the women and also transformed the women (Obi, 2010).

Oil Economy and Gender Inequality: The discovery and exploration of oil in the Niger Delta region transformed the economy from subsistence to one dominated by oil. It undermined the women's traditional livelihood limiting the women's opportunities. The exploration of oil has generated huge revenue for Nigeria, but it has not truly benefited the Eastern Niger Delta women (Ebeku, 2006). The women have often borne disproportionate share of economic and environmental effects of oil exploration resulting to gender inequality. Some women lost their primary occupation and became economically dependent on the men for support. It is important to note that even in terms of employment, men are highly favoured than the women. Women are often excluded for compensation and community development because the men are always dominant in almost all the sectors of life (Mai-Bornu, 2023). **Marginalisation:** Despite being affected by environmental degradation, women remain underrepresented, politically and even in leadership during elections. The laws protecting women's rights and some customary laws discriminate against women in matters of inheritance and property ownership. The marginalisation of women in the Eastern Niger Delta remains a challenge to national development and social justice.

Oil Exploration, Gender and Environmental Impact 1980-2000

Intensified oil exploration caused severe environmental degradation of the region following several oil spillage and gas flaring, as well as pipe line leakages and dredging activities that polluted the environment. Environmental pollution negatively affects the soil, and this disproportionately affects the women because of their major traditional occupation of farming, and fishing. The pollution of the environment and its consequences therefore has more gender dimension. The expansion of oil exploration activities provided the opportunity for frequent oil spillage causing contamination of the mangrove forest, pollution of water, and the creeks. Gas flaring has contributed to acid rain, air pollution, unproductive crops yields and health related issues. Gas flaring has caused reduced agricultural productivity, soil acidification, and increased respiratory and skin diseases in the region. This environmental degradation has therefore threatened the livelihood of rural communities that heavily depend on natural resources in the region (Ikelegbe, 2006).

The various gendered impacts on women's livelihood in the Eastern Niger Delta region; In the Eastern Niger Delta, women are the pillars of families and the principal cultivators of food crops such as cassava, yam, maize, vegetables and melon (Uduji, Okolo-Obasi, 2023). The negative effects of oil spills have affected and contaminated the farmlands, thereby reducing soil fertility. This has resulted to the women experiencing decline of agricultural yields and reduced income, causing more poverty in the communities (Okeke-Ogbuafo, & Uzodike, 2006). The women over the years have been affected by environmental pollution and have to travel far distances in search of firewood, clean water and food. Women spend more time in domestic unpaid labour in their families and communities. (Adekola, et al, 2017]

The gas flaring and pollution exposes the women and children to various health issues and especially the pregnant women who are more vulnerable to environmental pollution causing maternal and child health issues. Social inclusion; women over the years are excluded from decision making, compensation schemes, employment opportunities within the oil industries. Most compensation are given to the men and community leaders who are mostly male.

Women and Community Resistance Movement

The women of the Eastern Niger Delta have organised resistance movements and associations, and historically their struggles were against colonial domination, economic marginalisation and environmental degradation, through protests, demonstrations, traditional forms of resistance and boycotts. Along the line the women appeared as agents of economic, political and social change in the region (Ikelegbe, 2005). In the Eastern Niger Delta, women protests predated the colonial period. Traditionally, women organised platforms where they defended their economic and social interests. This opportunity gave the women the room to challenge oppressive traditions and norms. During the colonial period the women rejected colonial rule because of oppression and domination. One of the major organisations that showcased the women of the Eastern Niger Delta region was the Women's war also called Aba women's Riot of 1929. Aba riot forced the colonial government to review its administration policies. The riot demonstrated the political strength of women and became a major landmark for Nigerian history. It is pertinent to note that the significance of the action was to

demonstrate that the women have the ability for mass political organisation and resistance against oppressive governments (Matera, et al, 2012). The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region and the poverty in the region facilitated women protests against the multinational oil companies. The protesters mentioned their grievances such as gender inequality and environmental justice. Women have many ways of protesting because of their nature. They held peaceful protests and demonstrations, traditional sanctions, occupying oil facilities, boycotts and civil disobedience and advocacy through age groups or women associations (Raimi, Odubo, & Omidiji, 2022).

Gender Equality and development politics, 2000-2015

Since 2000, gender equality has become a critical factor in political development, governance and sustainable development. Historically, women participation in politics was low among women with some barriers limiting the women (Agbalajobi, 2021). Some of these barriers are cultural norms, institutional barriers and family barriers (Franceschet, 2019). The emergence of feminist movements and advocacy groups gave an opportunity for political reforms to favour the women. Women had an opportunity in 1975 to 85 due to increasing global awareness of gender inequality in governance, and this assisted international organisations in the promotion of affirmative action and gender-inclusion policies. (Nwankwo, 1996). They gradually increased their participation in political parties although progress varied across communities. The adoption of the Beijing Declaration and platform for Action in 1995 was a major turning point in global efforts on gender equality (Okoye et al, 2022). The institutional reforms caused many countries to introduce quotas and affirmative action policies which increased women participation in Nigeria and some other countries. In the Eastern Niger Delta, the quotas for women were also increased in the parliament and leadership positions in governance (Paxton, et al, 2020). The Niger Delta Development Commission has implemented some programmes aimed at addressing these issues and increasing women participation. Some of these activities include vocational training, skills acquisition programmes, such as tailoring, catering, fashion designing and hair dressing. The commission has also organised capacity building workshops, and business support system. Although the NDDC has introduced several women empowerment activities since 2000, its intervention has not significantly impacted the women across the Eastern Niger Delta region. The unequal distribution of empowerment activities and workshops has also limited the women. Many women are unable to establish or sustain their businesses because of the inefficiency of the commission. Corruption, fraudulent activities have weakened the commission's impact leading to reduction of the public confidence in the commission (Akinyoade, 2025)

Social Inclusion and Sustainable communities, 2015-2025

Social inclusion played a crucial role in the development of sustainable communities in the region by ensuring that members of the society have opportunity to participate in economic, social, political and cultural activities (Agyeman, et al 2004). The important thing is that a community becomes sustainable when the development benefits the people and when vulnerable people have opportunity to contribute in the communities. One of the benefits of social inclusion is when there is reduction in poverty and inequality. When people are educated or have access to education, jobs, healthcare, employment, without discrimination. All these will add value to the

living conditions of the women. It will aid in social stability and reduce conflicts as a result of exclusion and deprivation (Reider, & Haastrup, 2013).

Social inclusion helps community participation in governance and the women have the privilege of decision making. Sustainable development strengthens and gives room for women to participate in planning projects and monitoring implementation; it also ensures the interests and rights of the women with vulnerability and other minority groups are protected. Social inclusion enhances social cohesion and collective responsibility (Oluwaniyi, 2014). Communities that embrace diversity can experience strong social bonds to the benefit of the women. Economic sustainability also promotes social inclusion by giving equal opportunities to all sectors and also access to resources. Togetherness promotes productivity, community empowerment programmes, innovation and creates resilience in the local economy. Social inclusion can create environmental stability and sustainability. When everybody is involved in the management of the resources, there will be peace and stability. It is difficult to achieve sustainable communities without social inclusion and the participation of the people strengthens social cohesion (Abah, 2012).

Challenges of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, gender equality and social inclusion has remained a significant issue despite the constitutional guarantees and various policies formed to promote gender equality (Ebeku, 2006). The challenges over the years have affected women's participation in both economic and cultural spheres. Educational, political and social non-inclusion can limit sustainable development. There is a combination of factors affecting gender equality and we will mention a few of them (Chinweze, Abiola-Oloke, &Jideani, 2007).

1. **Educational inequality:** Educational inequality has remained a major challenge facing development. Women have no equal access to education like the men, and this is because of factors such as gender bias, socio-economic status, cultural norms, vulnerability, location and ethnicity. Significant disparities persist across the ethnic groups in the Eastern Niger Delta region. Even as significant progress has been made to enrol the girl child in schools, there are still obstacles hindering the girl child such as early marriage, insecurity, poverty, cultural norms and traditions. In some community's parents prioritise the boy child education over the girl child, hindering opportunities for the women in the society. Children with disability and most especially the girl child with disability faces educational disadvantages (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). Some schools have no facilities for special learning and also lack trained personnel in special education, and as a result disabled children are excluded from school and do not receive educational support from the government. Urban and rural education; rural schools often lack infrastructure, shortage of teachers, poor electricity supply, bad roads and limited educational materials. But the urban schools have good infrastructure such as electricity, good roads, libraries, trained teachers, and access to the internet and good road network (Akinyoade, 2015). Economic inequality also affects the vulnerable group of people. Children from rich homes have more opportunities especially in attending private schools that have qualified teachers. In contrast children from poor homes attend public schools that are very poorly funded and supported.

2. **Cultural and traditional practices:** In the Eastern Niger Delta, traditional practices have affected the women from participating in some practices and vocations. In Boki local government area of Cross-River State, women are not allowed membership of *nfam* organisation, because this organisation is only meant for the men. Cultural practices are highly rooted in the norms and patriarchal traditions give the women a subordinate role, making them less significant and important in the society. This tradition excludes the women from making decisions, unable to hold positions in the communities and cannot inherit traditional rights. (Udoh, 2024).
3. **Limitation of political positions:** over the years despite all the efforts of the global world, women have remained underrepresented in several leadership positions both at the federal, state and local government level in Nigeria. Even with all the politics about affirmative action, women representation in governance is still very low. (Odeigah, 2018).
4. **Economic marginalisation:** This has imposed a serious barrier to the women in accessing family land, loans, entrepreneurial training and even employment. An amnesty programme was introduced by the administration of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in 2009 as a way to address insecurity, militancy, disruption of oil exploration and kidnapping in the region. The programme was mostly designed to address youth restiveness and protect the oil pipe lines, but in the process of the execution of the programme only the boys were considered (Ibaba, 2011). The presidential amnesty and Peace-building in the Niger Delta was therefore not a balanced programme because the underlying issues affecting the women were not addressed. There were allegations of mismanagement of funds and weak monitoring of projects and programmes(Okonofua, 2016).
5. **Gender-based violence:** This remains a significant issue globally. Some of the issues are domestic violence, family violence, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, child marriage and child abuse among others. Some of these cases affect the women more than the men. Despite some legal frameworks such as Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, cases of gender-based violence still remain unreported because of stigma, cultural norms, fear, family shame and lack of confidence in the criminal justice system (Akinyoade, 2015).
6. **Religious Barriers:** There are religious practices restricting the women from participating in leadership even in religious sphere. Nigeria has adopted different policies and international conventions aimed at promoting gender equality and social inclusion, but because of weak implementation, poor monitoring and insufficient funding, the women of the Eastern Niger Delta are yet to get the relief they seek (UN Women, 2023).
7. **Insecurity & Digital gender divide:** Insecurity has had a profound social, political, and psychological trauma on the women, especially in a region that is prone to violence. The women are the most vulnerable group during periods of conflicts, kidnapping, banditry and the communal crises. Most women face high risk of sexual exploitation, domestic violence, rape, and human trafficking during such periods of crises. When the men are killed during such crises situations, the women often become the providers for their homes and this further worsens their burden (Franceschet et al, 2018).

8. **Unproductive soil and food security:** the unproductive soil in the Eastern Niger Delta because of oil exploration activities and recurrent oil spillage has serious consequences for the women, because they depend on farming, fishing and petty trading. But with recent increase in insecurity and environmental degradation their source of income have been seriously threatened and thus putting them under more hardship. This eventually exposes them to more vulnerability to human and drug trafficking and other social vices. Since women have limited access to alternative sources of income, the government should implement laws to empower the women (Abrahamsen, R. & Williams, 2011).

Conclusion

In the Eastern Niger Delta region since 1960, gender equality and social inclusion have played a significant role in its sustainable development. It is important to note that in the Eastern Niger Delta, effort has been made to improve access to education, healthcare, political participation and even employment among the women. Some advocates, non-governmental, government agencies and international organisations have always mobilised awareness for equal rights and opportunities among various communities. Significant transformation on the economic, political, and social aspects have shaped and improved opportunities for the women, the vulnerable, the youths, and the ethnic minorities.

In spite of these achievements, the women still have challenges that have hindered their empowerment, such as political underrepresentation, unequal access to resources, poverty, lack of opportunities for leadership, gender-based discrimination and violence. Over the years, social and cultural norms limited the women's access to education, and political leadership and these have resulted to their underrepresentation in the decision-making process, as well as lack of access to land and credit. The adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in year 2000 and Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 marked a turning point because it emphasised achieving gender equality to empower the women and girls, while the SDGs promote social inclusion and the principle of ''leaving no one behind''. Women continue to face barriers, such as insecurity, poor livelihood, and even climate change has limited their sustainable development outcomes. Government policies and civil societies' advocacy and initiatives have not achieved much in their campaigns because the local communities have not domesticated the vision and passion necessary for the change that is desired. In the Eastern Niger Delta region sustainable development depends on strengthening inclusion policies, ensuring all citizens have equal rights, promoting equal opportunities, fighting ethnicity, and accommodating people with disabilities.

Recommendations

1. Government should promote access to quality education and developmental partners to expand educational opportunity for the women. The government should opportunities such as adult literacy, scholarships, digital literacy, vocational skills, and trainings. Education is one of the major tolls for empowering the women which helps in reducing gender inequalities.
2. The women should not be marginalised but included in planning and in the management of the natural resources. The involvement of women will improve environmental sustainability and promote equitable distribution of resources.

 DOI: https://doi.org/10.69612/upujsd-2026-11-021

3. The government should implement policies that guarantee equal right and opportunities for women in the Eastern Niger Delta. Collaboration between government agencies, civil society organisations and international development partners should be encourage
4. Government should improve access to medical care, clean water and social protection programmes that will be beneficial to the women.
5. It is important for government to strengthen capacity building and developmental leadership. This will enhanced women's leadership, conflict resolution. And majorly political participation in all ramifications.
6. Government should create awareness in promoting social inclusion among the vulnerable. Developmental programmes should be designed to include the disabilities, women, youths and the widows. The inclusion of vulnerable is important for achieving growth, sustainable and equitable development.

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