

CHALLENGES FACED BY MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN THE STATES OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted challenges confronting marginalized groups across Nigeria's states. Drawing on recent scholarly research, policy analyses, and field studies from 2019 to 2025, the paper identifies key marginalized populations including indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, women, youth, Almajiri children, and homeless populations. The analysis reveals that these

groups face intersecting barriers including political exclusion and disenfranchisement, land dispossession and economic marginalization, socio-cultural discrimination and stigmatization, educational exclusion, and heightened vulnerability to violence and insecurity. The paper argues that these challenges are not isolated but mutually reinforcing, creating cycles of deprivation that transcend state boundaries. The findings underscore the urgent need for integrated, rights-based policy interventions that address root causes rather than symptoms of marginalization.

Keywords: Marginalization, Social Inequality,
Vulnerable groups, Human rights and Social
Justice.

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, is characterized by remarkable ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. With over 250 ethnic groups distributed across 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), the country's federal structure was designed to manage this diversity and ensure equitable development. However, decades of governance challenges, resource competition, and structural inequalities have produced persistent patterns of marginalization affecting specific groups across various states.

Marginalization in the Nigerian context refers to the systematic process by which certain groups are relegated to the periphery of social, economic, and political life, denied equal access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes. This phenomenon manifests differently across states, shaped by local histories, demographic configurations, governance structures, and economic conditions. From the indigenous peoples of the FCT who face land dispossession and political statelessness, to the Almajiri children of northern states trapped in cycles of poverty and exploitation, to the ethnic minorities in middle-belt states experiencing social exclusion and communal conflicts the challenges are diverse yet interconnected.

This paper synthesizes findings from recent empirical studies, policy analyses, and human rights reports to identify and analyze the common and distinct challenges faced by marginalized groups across Nigerian states. By examining the intersections of political exclusion, economic deprivation, socio-cultural discrimination, and security vulnerabilities, the paper aims to provide a holistic understanding of marginalization dynamics and inform evidence-based policy responses.

Conceptual Frameworks

Marginalization is understood in this paper as a multidimensional process of social exclusion that operates

at individual, community, and structural levels. Drawing on intersectionality theory, the analysis recognizes that individuals may experience overlapping and reinforcing forms of disadvantage based on their membership in multiple marginalized groups. For instance, a child with disabilities living in poverty in northern Nigeria faces compounded barriers that cannot be adequately understood by examining disability, poverty, or geography in isolation.

The concept of social exclusion, as articulated in the literature, encompasses the denial of rights and opportunities across multiple domains including political participation, economic livelihood, access to quality education and healthcare, cultural recognition, and personal security. Exclusion may be formal, embedded in laws and policies, or informal, manifested through discriminatory practices, social stigma, and cultural norms.

This study employs a framework that examines marginalization across four interconnected domains:

Political exclusion: Denial of voting rights, political representation, participation in governance, and access to justice

Economic marginalization: Limited access to land, productive resources, employment, credit, and economic opportunities

Socio-cultural discrimination: Stigmatization, negative stereotyping, cultural erasure, and denial of cultural rights

Structural vulnerability: Heightened exposure to violence, insecurity, environmental hazards, and inadequate protection from the state

Major Marginalized Groups and Their Geographic Distribution

Indigenous Peoples and Original Inhabitants

The well-documented case of indigenous marginalization concerns the Original Inhabitants (OIs) of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. This population comprises nine tribes and seventeen chiefdoms whose ancestral lands were appropriated under Military Decree No. 6 of 1976 for the creation of Nigeria's new capital. These communities-including the Gbagyi (Gwari), Gade, Koro, and other groups-were displaced to the peripheries of the territory without adequate compensation or resettlement.

Beyond the FCT, various communities across states identify as indigenous or "autochthonous" relative to their localities, often finding themselves in minority positions within state structures dominated by larger ethnic groups.

In the middle-belt region, ethnic minorities in states like Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, and Taraba face challenges related to land rights, political representation, and cultural preservation.

Ethnic and Political Minorities

The colonial classification of ethnic groups into "majority" and "minority" categories has produced enduring political consequences. Groups designated as minorities-including the over 250 smaller ethnic groups face systematic political exclusion and marginalization in resource allocation. States where specific minorities are concentrated, such as the Igede people of Benue State, experience particular challenges related to poverty, labor exploitation, and underdevelopment.

Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)

Persons with disabilities across Nigerian states face compounded marginalization, particularly when poverty and geographic location intersect with disability. Research in Nasarawa State reveals that children with disabilities experience "triple marginalization" at the intersection of disability, poverty, and climate vulnerability. Similar patterns are documented across northern and southern states, where inadequate inclusive infrastructure, socio-cultural stigma, and limited access to education and healthcare perpetuate exclusion.

Women

Women across all Nigerian states face systematic gender-based discrimination and exclusion. As documented in political participation analyses, women experience exclusion through "sexist political culture, financial constraints, violence and intimidation, cultural and religious norms, limited access to education and economic opportunities, and media representation and misrepresentation". Despite constitutional guarantees of non-discrimination, women remain severely underrepresented in governance structures at federal, state, and local levels.

Almajiri Children

The Almajiri system in northern Nigeria represents a humanitarian crisis affecting millions of children. Originally a revered Islamic educational tradition, the system has degenerated into what researchers describe as "a cycle of poverty, insecurity, and systemic neglect. With an estimated 9 million Almajiri children across northern states-particularly in Sokoto, Kano, Katsina, Zamfara, and Borno-these children face extreme deprivation, lack formal education, and are vulnerable to exploitation and recruitment by armed groups.

Homeless Youth

Homeless youth populations in major urban centers face distinct challenges shaped by regional dynamics. Comparative research on homeless youth in Maiduguri (Borno State) and Lagos (Lagos State) reveals both commonalities and disparities, reflecting "the complex interplay of socio-economic factors and regional dynamics". These youth experience social discrimination, health challenges, and extreme economic vulnerability.

Ethno-Religious Minorities

In various states, religious minorities including Christians in some northern states and Muslims in some southern states, face discrimination, restrictions on worship, and periodic violence. Similarly, ethnic minorities in states dominated by larger groups experience cultural marginalization and political exclusion.

Major Categories of Challenges

Political marginalization manifests across states through multiple mechanisms:

Lack of Representation: Minority groups across states are systematically under-represented in elective and appointive positions. As one analysis notes, "the colonialist classificatory scheme of identifying cultural or

ethnic minorities and majorities has been excessively adhered to and politicized," producing "politics of exclusion and the concomitant denial of rights, especially to groups considered political minorities".

Denial of Democratic Rights: The most extreme case is the Original Inhabitants of the FCT, who "cannot elect a governor or state legislature, rendering them stateless in their homeland". Despite residing in Nigeria's capital territory for generations before its creation, these communities have no representation in the governance structure that controls their lands and lives.

Electoral Violence and Intimidation: Women and minority candidates face violence, intimidation, and financial barriers to political participation across states. Research indicates that "the absence of inclusivity...has had dismal consequences on the Nigerian state," with exclusionary practices generating grievances that threaten political stability.

Weak Policy Enforcement: Even where constitutional and legal frameworks guarantee rights, enforcement remains weak. "Skewed party practices and weak policy enforcement continue to marginalize critical voices, especially women and youth, in our governance structures".

Land Dispossession and Economic Marginalization

Land Appropriation without Compensation: The FCT Original Inhabitants exemplify this challenge, having "rendered their farmlands for the FCT, but...got nothing in return". As one advocate explains, "Land is life, and when you take it without proper compensation, you destroy a people's economic base". This pattern of land dispossession without adequate compensation extends to development projects across states, disproportionately affecting minority and indigenous communities.

Poverty and Labor Exploitation: Research on the Igede people of Benue State identifies "illiteracy, marginalization, absence of social amenities, corruption, inferiority complex and unemployment" as causes of poverty, with effects including "migration, economic dependence, high death rate, depression and vulnerability". The study demonstrates how marginalization directly produces economic exploitation.

Unemployment and Livelihood Loss: Traditional livelihoods of marginalized groups-including farming, fishing, hunting, and craftsmanship-are endangered across states by "unchecked urban sprawl and ecological degradation". For the Almajiri, "with no formal skills or economic prospects, many turn to petty crime, drug abuse, and gang violence".

Inadequate Basic Amenities: Marginalized communities across states lack access to "functional

healthcare, quality education, clean water, sanitation, and infrastructure". This absence of basic services perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion.

Socio-Cultural Discrimination and Stigmatization

Negative Stereotyping and Prejudice: Qualitative research has established that "minority groups suffer discrimination" across Nigerian contexts, with some groups subjected to "discrimination and prejudicial treatments...referred to as socially-devalued". This discrimination manifests in interpersonal interactions, institutional practices, and media representations.

Cultural Erasure: Indigenous and minority groups face systematic erosion of their cultural heritage. The Original Inhabitants of the FCT report that "our cultural heritage is being diluted before our eyes," with their languages excluded from educational curricula despite the fact that "every area council has its own language that deserves to be preserved".

Stigma Against Persons with Disabilities: Children with disabilities face "entrenched marginalisation" intensified by "socio-cultural stigma" that excludes them from educational and social participation. This stigma is often compounded by poverty and geographic isolation.

Almajiri Stigmatization: Almajiri children are stereotyped as vagrants and potential security threats, a

characterization that obscures the structural violence they suffer. Research notes that "these children epitomize the intersection of economic deprivation, failed governance, and escalating violence-yet their stories are often reduced to statistics in policy debates".

Educational Exclusion

Barriers to Quality Education: Children with disabilities face "inadequate inclusive infrastructure" and lack of teacher training, resulting in exclusion from quality education across states. The intersection of disability, poverty, and geographic marginalization creates what researchers term "triple marginalization" in accessing education.

The Almajiri Education Crisis: The transformation of the traditional Quranic education system into a mechanism of exploitation represents one of Nigeria's most severe educational crises. Research reveals that "88% of Almajirai remain in unregulated Tsangayas, while 74% drop out of integrated schools due to poverty and cultural resistance". The failure of government integration programs stems from "poor funding, cultural resistance, and worsening insecurity."

Gender Disparities: Girls and young women across states face barriers to education including early marriage, cultural norms prioritizing male education, and inadequate school facilities (particularly sanitation).

Language Exclusion: The exclusion of indigenous languages from educational curricula marginalizes children who are not proficient in English or dominant regional languages, contributing to lower educational attainment and cultural alienation

Vulnerability to Violence and Insecurity

Recruitment by Armed Groups: Marginalized youth, particularly Almajiri children are vulnerable to exploitation by insurgent groups. Research documents that "Boko Haram and bandit groups exploit their desperation, offering food or money in exchange for loyalty," with "former Almajirai...among Boko Haram's foot soldiers, lured by promises of financial stability and ideological purpose".

Communal Conflicts: Ethnic minorities in middle-belt states face violence in communal conflicts often framed as "farmer-herder" clashes but rooted in land rights disputes and political marginalization. These conflicts disproportionately affect minority groups caught between larger contending forces.

Gender-Based Violence: Women across states face heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, which is both a consequence and reinforcer of marginalization. Political participation is constrained by "violence and intimidation" targeting women candidates and activists.

Statelessness and Lack of Protection: The Original Inhabitants of the FCT, lacking political representation, are vulnerable to arbitrary displacement and denial of services. Their lack of legal status as a recognized indigenous group within the FCT structure leaves them without recourse against violations.

Intersectional Dynamics

A critical finding across the literature is that marginalization operates intersectionally, with multiple dimensions reinforcing one another. The research on children with disabilities in Nasarawa State demonstrates how "disability, poverty, and climate vulnerability as compounding barriers" produce unique and severe forms of exclusion that cannot be addressed by single-sector interventions.

Similarly, the Almajiri crisis reflects the intersection of religious tradition, poverty, state neglect, and insecurity. As one analysis explains, "... the Almajiri system's persistence is a symptom of deeper structural failures: chronic poverty pushes families to abandon children to Quranic teachers, while state neglect leaves them without protection or alternatives."

The study on social exclusion, corruption, and insecurity demonstrates how these three factors "... reinforce one another to perpetuate cycles of underdevelopment," with exclusionary practices, corruption networks, and insecurity forming an interconnected system of disadvantage.

For the Igede people of Benue State, poverty, labor exploitation, and marginalization are causally linked in a cycle where "... poverty significantly influences labour exploitation," and marginalization perpetuates both.

State-Level Variations and Common Patterns

While the challenges described have national scope, significant variations exist across states

Northern States: The Almajiri crisis is concentrated in the northwest and northeast, with Sokoto, Kano, Katsina, Zamfara, and Borno experiencing the highest concentrations. These states also face heightened insecurity challenges that compound marginalization.

Federal Capital Territory: The unique case of FCT Original Inhabitants represents a distinct form of marginalization rooted in the territory's special status and

the specific historical injustice of the 1976 land appropriation.

Middle-Belt States: Ethnic minorities in Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Taraba, and Kogi face particular challenges related to land rights, communal conflicts, and political marginalization within state structures.

South-South and South-East States: Minority groups within Niger Delta states face marginalization related to oil extraction, environmental degradation, and inequitable resource distribution.

South-West and Lagos: Homeless youth and urban poor populations in Lagos face distinct challenges related to urbanization, housing, and economic informality.

Despite these variations, common patterns emerge: political exclusion from governance structures, economic marginalization through denial of land and livelihood rights, socio-cultural stigmatization, educational exclusion, and heightened vulnerability to violence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has documented the extensive and systematic challenges faced by marginalized groups across Nigerian states. From the Original Inhabitants of the FCT who have been rendered stateless in their homeland, to the millions of Almajiri children trapped in cycles of poverty and

exploitation, to persons with disabilities facing triple marginalization, to women systematically excluded from political participation-the evidence demonstrates that marginalization is not incidental but structural to Nigerian governance.

The analysis reveals that these challenges are not isolated but mutually reinforcing, creating self-perpetuating cycles of deprivation. Political exclusion leads to economic marginalization, which intensifies vulnerability to violence and exploitation, which further entrenches exclusion. Breaking these cycles requires integrated, rights-based interventions.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations emerge:

Legal Recognition and Protection: States must formally recognize indigenous and minority groups, ensuring their rights to land, cultural preservation, and political participation. For the FCT Original Inhabitants, this requires implementation of Supreme Court judgments affirming their rights.

Inclusive Political Structures: States should adopt quota systems, reserved seats, and other affirmative action measures to ensure representation of women, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities in governance.

Educational Inclusion: States must invest in inclusive infrastructure, teacher training, and culturally appropriate curricula that accommodate children with disabilities, indigenous language speakers, and Almajiri students.

Economic Empowerment: Targeted programs including conditional cash transfers, skills training, and access to credit must address the economic marginalization of vulnerable groups.

Data Collection and Sovereignty: States must collect disaggregated data on marginalized populations to inform policy, while respecting community rights to control and benefit from data concerning them.

Security and Protection: States must strengthen protection for marginalized groups against violence, exploitation, and recruitment by armed groups, addressing root causes rather than symptoms.

The survival, dignity, and development of marginalized groups across Nigeria depend on urgent, coordinated, and sustained action. As one advocate powerfully stated, "Justice delayed is dignity denied".

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