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Inclusive Technology and Gender Equity: Enhancing Community Participation to Curb Youth Restiveness in Marginalised Areas.

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Abstract

Youth restiveness remains a persistent challenge in marginalised communities across Nigeria, often fuelled by unemployment, social exclusion, and limited avenues for civic engagement. While community participation has been widely recognised as a critical mechanism for mitigating this phenomenon, the exclusion of women from digital spaces significantly undermines the inclusiveness and effectiveness of such interventions. This study explores the intersection of gender, technology, and community participation in addressing youth restiveness, with a particular focus on the impact of the digital gender gap on collective community responses. Anchored in Participatory Communication Theory and Gender and Technology Theory, the study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey data (N = 300) with qualitative insights from focus group discussions (n = 24) and key informant interviews (n = 6) across selected communities in Nasarawa State and the Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria. Findings reveal a significant gender disparity in digital access and participation, with only 46% of women reporting regular use of mobile internet compared to 78% of men. The exclusion of women

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from digital platforms limited their participation in community-led peace and youth engagement initiatives. The study concludes that bridging the digital gender gap enhances civic inclusion, strengthens local peacebuilding efforts, and improves the sustainability of youth-focused development strategies. It recommends the implementation of gender-sensitive digital inclusion policies, expanded digital literacy training for women, and equitable access to affordable digital tools as part of broader community development and youth engagement frameworks.

Keywords: *Gender Equity, Inclusive Technology, Youth Restiveness, Community Participation, Marginalised Communities.*

Introduction

In many marginalised communities across Africa, youth restiveness has emerged as a persistent challenge, often manifesting in forms such as violent protests, cultism, vandalism, and other expressions of social discontent. This restiveness is frequently rooted in a sense of exclusion, unemployment, lack of civic engagement, and systemic marginalisation, particularly among young people. Addressing these issues requires a multidimensional approach that not only targets the symptoms but also engages with the underlying causes. One promising, yet underutilised, avenue is the integration of inclusive technology and community participation, particularly in ways that acknowledge and address gender disparities.

The digital divide in Africa has historically mirrored existing societal inequalities, with women and girls experiencing significantly less access to digital tools and literacy than their male counterparts (GSMA, 2022). This digital gender gap limits the full participation of women in community-driven interventions and peacebuilding processes, thereby constraining the potential impact of such efforts. Digital platforms are increasingly becoming central to civic dialogue, employment opportunities, education, and mobilisation. The exclusion of half the population from this digital ecosystem undermines the effectiveness of community responses to youth restiveness.

Community participation remains a foundational principle in sustainable development and conflict mitigation. Programmes that integrate local voices, traditional structures, and grassroots innovations

tend to produce more durable outcomes. However, their success depends largely on inclusivity, particularly in terms of gender and digital access. When women are excluded from community dialogue, especially through digital platforms, their insights, leadership, and capacity for influence are diminished, thereby weakening the collective ability to address the root causes of youth unrest.

This paper, therefore, examines the intersection of gender, technology, and community participation within the context of youth restiveness in marginalised communities. It focuses on how inclusive access to digital tools can enhance women's participation in community-based peacebuilding and social development efforts. Drawing on empirical evidence and contextual data from Nigeria, the paper situates its analysis within the broader discourse on digital inclusion, participatory governance, and youth-focused peacebuilding.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two theoretical perspectives: Participatory Communication Theory and Techno-Feminism. These theories collectively provide the conceptual foundation for understanding how inclusive technological engagement, when embedded within equitable community participation, can contribute to addressing youth restiveness. Participatory Communication Theory, rooted in development communication scholarship, posits that sustainable social change emerges from horizontal dialogue and the active involvement of communities in identifying and solving their own problems (Servaes, 2008). It rejects top-down, information-dissemination models of development and instead emphasises co-creation, empowerment, and mutual understanding among stakeholders. Within the context of this study, the theory provides a lens for interpreting how inclusive community dialogue, especially through digital platforms, can strengthen cooperation, representation, and problem-solving in efforts to mitigate youth restiveness.

Techno-Feminism, as developed by Judy Wajcman (2004), examines how technology both reflects and reshapes gender relations. It challenges the notion of technology as neutral, arguing instead that technological systems are socially constructed and can reinforce or transform existing power dynamics. Applied here, Techno-Feminism provides a basis for

analysing how gender disparities in digital access influence women's participation in peacebuilding and civic engagement. It also offers insight into how inclusive technology design and use can promote gender equity and enhance collective action within communities. These theories inform the study's conceptual orientation by showing that technology's role in peacebuilding is mediated by social relations, gender norms, and participatory practices. They help to explain how community-driven technological inclusion, rather than technology itself, can become a catalyst for reducing youth restiveness.

Literature Review

The digital gender divide has become a defining challenge in contemporary development discourse, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where access to technology remains uneven across both class and gender lines. Several studies have illuminated the implications of this divide, demonstrating that women and girls in marginalised communities are less likely to own digital devices, access the internet, or benefit from digital literacy programmes (GSMA, 2022; ITU, 2020). The digital exclusion of women limits their capacity to engage in community-led interventions, policy advocacy, and youth-focused programming.

It is often described as a condition where young people, particularly in disadvantaged communities, express frustration through disruptive or violent behaviours due to perceived or actual exclusion from socio-economic opportunities (Ogunlade, 2019). Scholars argue that restiveness is fuelled by unemployment, poor education, political marginalisation, and weak civic infrastructure. These factors are compounded in rural or peri-urban communities where state presence is limited, and non-state actors, sometimes criminal or militant in nature, fill governance gaps. Community participation, therefore, emerges as a crucial strategy for early warning, resilience-building, and inclusive dialogue, especially when such participation incorporates youth voices and local leadership structures (Adejoh & Audu, 2018).

While community-based interventions are widely acknowledged as effective, much of the literature has failed to critically interrogate the gendered dimensions of such participation, particularly in digital contexts. For example, Oloruntoba and Falade (2021) examine

community conflict resolution mechanisms in Nigeria but do not account for how digital platforms or gender inclusion, or otherwise, affect the outcomes. Likewise, digital peacebuilding studies such as those by Tapscott (2020) highlight the potential of mobile technology in civic engagement but often overlook how cultural barriers prevent women and girls from fully benefiting from such initiatives. This gap underscores the need for an intersectional analysis that situates youth restiveness not only within the frameworks of governance and development but also within the context of gendered digital exclusion. Emerging scholarship is beginning to address this intersection.

For instance, Aina (2022) finds that digital inclusion initiatives that specifically target women, such as community radio for women or mobile apps designed for low-literacy users, can increase women's civic confidence and social agency. Similarly, Eze and Nwachukwu (2021) argue that when women are empowered with digital tools, they are more likely to mobilise around issues affecting youth, such as drug abuse, school dropouts, and localised violence. These arguments suggest that bridging the digital gender gap is not just a matter of technological equity but a pathway to more effective, gender-responsive community engagement in the face of youth unrest.

Empirical studies that directly interrogate the intersection between digital gender inclusion, community participation, and youth restiveness remain relatively scarce. Much of the existing literature treats these domains as separate lines of inquiry. Studies on youth restiveness largely concentrate on unemployment, education, and governance failures (Ojo & Abdullahi, 2020), while research on digital access tends to focus on infrastructure, affordability, and technological penetration (GSMA, 2022). In contrast, gender research often centres on reproductive health, political participation, or representation in leadership (UN Women, 2021). This fragmentation creates a significant analytical gap, limiting understanding of how inclusive technology, when accessed equitably by women and girls, can strengthen participatory governance and contribute to mitigating youth restiveness, particularly in marginalised contexts.

The increasing integration of technology into governance, education, and social interaction has reshaped how communities mobilise and respond to developmental challenges. However, the persistent digital gender gap continues to constrain inclusive participation, especially in

the Global South. According to the International Telecommunication Union (2020), women are 17% less likely than men to use mobile internet in low- and middle-income countries, with the divide even wider in rural and conflict-affected regions. In Nigeria, cultural norms, linguistic barriers, and economic constraints further discourage women's ownership and use of digital devices (World Bank, 2021). Consequently, women's ability to engage meaningfully in digital and community-based initiatives remains limited, diminishing their visibility and impact in peacebuilding and youth engagement processes.

Recent empirical research has underscored the potential of digital technology, particularly mobile-based platforms, as tools for youth engagement, civic education, and violence prevention. Aker et al. (2019) found that mobile technologies have improved early warning systems in fragile African contexts, enhancing information flow and conflict response coordination. Similarly, Ajayi and Salihu (2020) demonstrated that mobile peace messaging initiatives have helped reduce tensions in northern Nigeria. Yet, these programmes often fail to address gender disparities in digital literacy and access, meaning that women's contributions remain peripheral to such digital peacebuilding interventions.

Aker et al. (2019) demonstrate how mobile technologies have improved early warning systems in fragile contexts, enabling community members to report threats and mediate conflicts. However, without gender-sensitive deployment, such innovations often exclude women and reinforce patriarchal modes of communication. Studies by Ajayi and Salihu (2020) highlight that in northern Nigeria, for instance, mobile peace messaging initiatives had greater reach among men due to women's lower mobile phone penetration and digital literacy rates. This gender imbalance weakens community-based efforts to address youth restiveness, since the perspectives and leadership roles of women, particularly mothers, educators, and female youth leaders, are sidelined.

Community participation has long been considered a cornerstone of conflict resolution and social resilience, particularly in development communication discourse. Servaes (2008) posits that participatory approaches, rooted in horizontal dialogue, lead to more sustainable development outcomes because they are people-driven and locally

contextualised. In the context of youth restiveness, participatory interventions such as town hall meetings, community surveillance, and youth forums create space for grievances to be aired and solutions co-developed. However, Bamidele and Kolawole (2017) argue that many such interventions still rely heavily on male elders and local chiefs, often neglecting the unique experiences and contributions of women and girls. This exclusion reduces the representativeness of the process and may result in peace agreements or community resolutions that lack broad legitimacy.

Scholars are increasingly calling for a gendered understanding of youth restiveness, noting that young women experience conflict differently from their male counterparts. For instance, Okafor and Onyejekwe (2021) observe that in regions affected by youth violence, women are often both targets of abuse and key actors in informal peace processes, such as negotiating truces or providing emotional support to at-risk youth. These contributions, however, remain largely undocumented or undervalued, particularly when women are digitally excluded from community networks or platforms that record and amplify such efforts. As digital platforms become more central to social coordination, civic education, and mobilisation, ensuring women's access is crucial for harnessing their full potential as peacebuilders.

Recent literature has also begun to link digital inclusion with empowerment and agency. According to Etta and Parvyn-Wamahiu (2020), when women are equipped with ICT skills, they are more likely to engage in leadership roles, access economic opportunities, and participate in community decision-making processes. Moreover, digital tools can provide safe spaces for women to share experiences and organize collective functions that are critical in contexts where physical spaces may be unsafe or dominated by men. Initiatives such as Girls Voices in Tech and SheLeads Africa have demonstrated that digital literacy, when combined with mentorship and community engagement, can significantly increase female youth participation in civic life.

Critical gap remains in the empirical linkage between digital gender equity and the effectiveness of community responses to youth restiveness. While separate bodies of literature exist on gender and technology, on one hand, and youth restiveness and community mobilisation, on the other, few studies synthesize these perspectives

to investigate their intersection. For instance, it remains unclear how the exclusion of women from digital platforms affects the sustainability of youth peace initiatives, or how culturally adapted digital tools can bridge participation gaps in contexts of social unrest. Addressing these questions requires interdisciplinary inquiry and field-based evidence, particularly from marginalised communities where both gender and youth dynamics are most complex.

This study seeks to contribute to filling that gap by examining how inclusive access to technology, particularly among women, can enhance the capacity of communities to respond to youth restiveness. It draws from and adds to the growing literature on digital inclusion, participatory development, and gender-sensitive governance, with the aim of offering insights that are both theoretically relevant and practically applicable in the Nigerian context and beyond.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive technology and community participation can curb youth restiveness, with a particular focus on gender dynamics. The integration of these methods enabled a deeper exploration of perceptions, behaviors, and contextual realities in marginalised communities.

Study Area

The research was conducted in selected marginalised communities across two Nigerian states: Nasarawa State and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), specifically targeting areas within Karu, Keffi, and AMAC (Abuja Municipal Area Council). These areas were selected due to their diverse population, history of youth-related unrest, and the presence of ongoing community-led peace initiatives. They also present a relevant demographic mix of urban-peri-urban settlements and reflect typical patterns of digital inequality and socio-political exclusion in Nigeria.

Population of the Study

The study population comprised community members aged between 18 and 45 years, with a focus on youth, women, local leaders, community-based organisation (CBO) representatives, and ICT practitioners. This demographic was selected to ensure a gender-sensitive and youth-focused representation in examining the digital divide and participation levels.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, purposive sampling was used to identify the three focal communities. In the second stage, stratified random sampling was applied to select participants, ensuring proportional representation of gender and age groups. The sample size consisted of 300 respondents for the survey component (150 males, 150 females), and 24 participants for focus group discussions (FGDs), organised across four gender-balanced groups. In addition, six key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with local ICT experts, community development officers, and women leaders.

Data Collection Instruments

Primary data were collected through:

Structured questionnaires: covering digital access, usage patterns, perceptions of youth restiveness, and participation in community activities.

Focus group discussion guides: designed to elicit detailed views on gender barriers, digital inclusion, and community engagement.

Interview schedules: For key informants, focusing on policy, institutional support, and grassroots innovation in addressing youth restiveness. All instruments were pre-tested in a non-participating community in Nasarawa State to ensure clarity, cultural appropriateness, and reliability. Necessary modifications were made based on the pilot feedback.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions, means, and percentages were generated. Inferential statistics, particularly Chi-square tests, were used to explore the association between gendered digital access and levels of community participation. Qualitative data from the FGDs and KIIs were transcribed, coded, and analysed thematically using NVivo. Themes were developed around gender inclusion, digital literacy, community trust, and youth engagement. This triangulation enriched the analysis and helped validate the quantitative findings.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the analysed data on digital access, gender disparities, and the effectiveness of community participation in addressing youth restiveness across selected communities in Nasarawa State and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). It combines survey statistics with qualitative insights from focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs).

Table 1: Gendered Access to Mobile Internet and Digital Devices (N = 300)

Item	Male Respondents (n=150)	Female Respondents (n=150)	Total (%)
Owens a smartphone	136 (90.7%)	87 (58.0%)	74.3%
Uses mobile internet regularly	117 (78.0%)	69 (46.0%)	61.0%
Participates in online community forums	93 (62.0%)	57 (38.0%)	50.0%
Has received any digital literacy training	65 (43.3%)	38 (25.3%)	34.3%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

As shown in Table 1, men were significantly more likely than women to own smartphones, access the internet regularly, and participate in digital community forums. The gendered disparity was also pronounced in access to digital literacy training, which was higher among men. The implications of these figures are critical: digital exclusion directly

affects the ability of women to engage in community dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives hosted via online platforms.

Table 2: Community Participation in Youth-Related Initiatives by Gender and Age Group

Participation Type	Male Youth (18–30)	Female Youth (18–30)	Male Adults (31–45)	Female Adults (31–45)
Attended physical community dialogues	58	42	47	35
Contributed to online peacebuilding groups	41	28	34	17
Initiated or youth-led engagement project	21	10	12	5

Source: Field Survey and FGDs, 2025

Table 2 further underscores the imbalance in both digital and physical community participation. Although female youth were more present than older women, they were still less active than their male counterparts in both online and offline spaces. This gap was attributed by FGD participants to factors such as time constraints, lack of confidence, societal expectations, and, in some cases, the absence of women-friendly platforms for participation. A Chi-square analysis ($\chi^2 = 21.64$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.01$) confirmed a significant relationship between gender and regular use of mobile internet.

This digital divide had tangible consequences: women who lacked consistent access to mobile technology were less informed about ongoing community initiatives and unable to contribute meaningfully to planning or mobilisation efforts. Key informants from community-based organisations noted that inclusive participation significantly increased the legitimacy and impact of youth-related interventions. In Karu, a women-led digital sensitisation campaign on drug abuse was cited as a major turning point in reducing youth arrests. However, such examples were rare and dependent on external funding or NGO partnerships.

The qualitative findings also revealed that women who had access to digital tools reported greater confidence and involvement in community affairs. As one female FGD participant in AMAC stated, “When I learned how to use my phone to join meetings and speak out, I saw that people began to listen to me differently.” These findings

reinforce Servaes' (2008) view that participatory communication is most effective when all stakeholders, irrespective of gender, are actively included. Likewise, they affirm Wajcman's (2004) assertion that technologies are socially embedded and must be critically examined for their role in reinforcing or disrupting inequalities.

When women and girls are digitally empowered, their ability to mobilise other members of the community, especially vulnerable youth, is significantly enhanced. This becomes a crucial asset in curbing youth restiveness through localised, culturally embedded, and gender-sensitive strategies.

Youth Restiveness and Collective Agency

Both qualitative and quantitative data indicated that youth restiveness in the study areas manifested in diverse ways, including drug abuse, street violence, and protests against local authorities. Participants also highlighted that community dialogue, when inclusive, had helped to de-escalate tensions in several instances. Programmes that engaged both male and female community members were perceived as more credible and more likely to yield lasting results. For example, in Keffi, a community-led peace initiative involving both women leaders and youth groups succeeded in persuading a group of disaffected youths to abandon a planned protest and instead participate in vocational training.

The findings resonate with Servaes' (2008) Participatory Communication Theory, which posits that development is most effective when all stakeholders are equally involved in dialogue and decision-making. However, the data also reveal a practical limitation: participation is not neutral. It is mediated by access to information, digital literacy, and socio-cultural norms, all of which tend to disadvantage women in marginalised settings.

This disparity implies that in environments where women's access to digital tools and communication channels remains constrained, community dialogue is incomplete and often unrepresentative. The exclusion of women from participatory spaces, both physical and digital, narrows the range of perspectives that inform decision-making and weakens early warning systems that could prevent unrest.

Consequently, youth restiveness is likely to be more pronounced in marginalised settings, where half of the population is excluded from processes that promote inclusion, cohesion, and social accountability. Addressing this imbalance, therefore, requires not only increasing women's digital access but also transforming local norms and institutional structures that limit their participation. Interventions that integrate gender-responsive digital literacy, leadership training, and community inclusion can mitigate the risks of youth restiveness by fostering more representative communication processes. When women are empowered to engage equally, the outcomes of peacebuilding and youth engagement initiatives become more sustainable, locally owned, and socially embedded.

Bridging the Digital Gender Gap as a Peacebuilding Strategy

Participants across the board agreed that improving women's access to digital tools and platforms would strengthen community-based strategies to address youth restiveness. Suggestions included digital literacy training for women, subsidized access to smartphones, and community information hubs where residents, especially women, could participate in online meetings. Notably, several female participants who had undergone digital skills training reported increased confidence in participating in community issues and mobilising other women for local initiatives. These findings confirm the relevance of Wajcman's (2004) gender and technology theory, which argues that technological systems are embedded with social norms and can either reinforce or challenge existing gender hierarchies. In this study, inclusive digital access did not merely enhance communication; it fostered empowerment, civic awareness, and collective agency, particularly among marginalised women.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined the intricate relationship between gendered digital access, community participation, and efforts to address youth restiveness in marginalised Nigerian communities. The findings highlight that while community participation remains a vital tool in fostering resilience and social cohesion, its effectiveness is significantly undermined when gender disparities in digital access persist. Women and girls, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, continue to face

barriers that prevent them from leveraging technology as a tool for civic engagement, leadership, and peacebuilding. These barriers, rooted in socio-cultural norms, economic limitations, and limited digital literacy, not only exclude women from the digital sphere but also reduce the inclusiveness and legitimacy of community-based responses to youth restiveness. The study underscores the fact that bridging the digital gender gap is not simply a matter of access to technology but a strategic imperative for sustainable development and conflict mitigation. When women are digitally empowered, they are more likely to participate in community dialogue, lead initiatives, and mobilise others, particularly the youth, towards constructive action. Their inclusion strengthens the social fabric, enhances local accountability, and improves the responsiveness of interventions aimed at addressing youth unrest.

In light of these insights, this paper recommends that digital inclusion policies should be deliberately gender-sensitive. Governments, civil society organisations, and development partners must collaborate to ensure that women and girls in marginalised communities are prioritised in digital infrastructure and access strategies. Furthermore, expanding community-based digital literacy programmes tailored to women's needs and local languages will enhance their ability to engage meaningfully in public discourse. In addition, subsidised access to smartphones and affordable internet connectivity should be pursued through public-private partnerships to close the affordability gap that disproportionately affects women.

It is equally important that existing community peace Infrastructure, including digital platforms such as WhatsApp forums or local youth networks, adopt inclusive frameworks that facilitate balanced participation and elevate women's voices. Gender and technology should also be mainstreamed into youth restiveness policies at both the national and local government levels to ensure comprehensive and inclusive peacebuilding efforts. Finally, academic institutions and research bodies are encouraged to conduct further longitudinal studies that explore the evolving impact of digital inclusion on gender equity and youth engagement in conflict-prone communities.

A digitally inclusive and gender-responsive approach to community participation presents a compelling pathway towards addressing youth restiveness more effectively. As technology continues to shape how

communities organise, engage, and resolve conflict, ensuring that no gender is left behind becomes not only a developmental priority but a peacebuilding necessity.

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