

Paradox of Disability Cluster and the Unity of Persons with Special Needs in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis of Empowerment Discourses, Legal Frameworks, and Lived Experiences

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This paper examines the complex paradox of disability clustering and unity among persons with disabilities in Nigeria. While collective organizing through clusters has strengthened political advocacy and fostered solidarity, it has simultaneously reinforced segregation and created platforms for political exploitation. Drawing on empirical research conducted between 2014-2025, including interviews with persons with disabilities and analysis of recent policy implementations, this paper explores how disability clusters both empower and marginalize their members. The analysis reveals that despite progressive legislation such as the Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2018, significant barriers persist in implementation, particularly at state levels. This paper argues that the very clustering mechanisms designed to foster unity often become co-opted by power elites, perpetuating paternalistic attitudes and limiting genuine inclusion. The study concludes with practical recommendations for transforming disability clustering into more effective mechanisms for social justice, including policy reforms, institutional strengthening, and community-level initiatives that promote meaningful participation while respecting the diversity within the disability community.

Keywords: Disability Cluster, Persons With Special Needs, Empowerment Discourses, Legal Frameworks, And Lived Experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

Disability in Nigeria represents a significant demographic reality and a pressing socio-political concern, with approximately 23 million Nigerians living with various forms of disabilities (Global Disability Fund, 2025). The conceptualization and organization of persons with disabilities have evolved substantially over time, from charity-based models to rights-based approaches, culminating in the landmark *Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2018* (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019). This legislative framework established the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD) and prohibited discrimination in various spheres of life, representing a transformative moment in Nigeria's disability

rights landscape (Etieyibo, 2020b). Despite these advances, the tension between collective organizing and individual autonomy remains a central paradox in the disability community—a tension that this paper terms the "disability cluster paradox."

The disability cluster paradox refers to the contradictory reality wherein the very mechanisms designed to unify and empower persons with disabilities, through collective organizing, shared identity formation, and political mobilization, often simultaneously reinforce marginalization, perpetuate stereotypes, and create platforms for political exploitation (Nwokorie & Devlieger, 2019). This paradox manifests in what has been critically described as "worldmaking" in disability empowerment discourses, where local power elites

ironically "ride to fame on the backs of disabled [people] to extend their influence in society" (Nwokorie & Devlieger, 2019, p. 6). In Southeast Nigeria particularly, empowerment programs often frame disability predominantly in terms of deficit, concealing the personal stories and survival strategies of disabled people while reinforcing paternalistic relationships between donors and recipients (Ugwoegbu, 2016).

This paper employs a multi-dimensional analytical framework that integrates legal analysis, sociological theory, and empirical findings to deconstruct this paradox (Goldiner, 2022). Through examination of recent data (2018–2025), including the implementation challenges of the 2018 Disability Act and the role of organizations such as the Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWD), this study explores how disability clusters both facilitate and hinder genuine unity and empowerment. The temporal scope of 2018–2025 is particularly significant as it captures the period immediately preceding and following Nigeria's landmark disability legislation, allowing for analysis of both anticipatory advocacy and implementation challenges (Etieyibo, 2020a).

The structure of this paper progresses from an exploration of the formation and benefits of disability clusters to the inherent limitations and contradictions of such clustering mechanisms. Finally, the paper proposes recommendations for transcending the disability cluster paradox through innovative approaches that leverage collective advocacy while minimizing its potential for co-option and exploitation. This analysis contributes to ongoing scholarly and policy debates about effective disability inclusion in Nigeria and similar contexts (Azubuike, Onwujekwe, & Okeke, 2025), offering insights that may inform more nuanced approaches to disability rights, representation, and resource allocation.

Disability Cluster and the Unity of Persons with Disability

The conceptualization of disability clustering in Nigeria has undergone significant transformation over decades, reflecting broader global shifts in understanding disability (Van Loon et al., 2022). Historically, disability was predominantly viewed

through a medical model lens, which conceptualized disability as an individual deficit requiring correction or treatment (Goldiner, 2022). This perspective naturally led to the clustering of persons with disabilities in institutional settings, rehabilitation centers, and specialized programs that separated them from the broader society (Ugwoegbu, 2016). The more recent transition to a social model of disability, which frames disability as a result of societal barriers rather than individual impairments, has facilitated the emergence of disability clusters as platforms for collective advocacy and political mobilization (United Nations, 2006; Etieyibo, 2020a).

The historical development of disability clustering in Nigeria cannot be understood without examining the evolution of disability terminology and its implications for identity formation. As noted in research from Southeast Nigeria, the system of "naming and re-naming the infirmity" has evolved from stigmatizing terms like "idiot" and "feeble-minded" to more acceptable terminology such as "person with intellectual disability" (Nwokorie & Devlieger, 2019). This linguistic evolution reflects deeper changes in social attitudes and has enabled the formation of collective identities around more positive self-conceptions (Etieyibo, 2020a). The professionalization of disability discourse has further facilitated this transition, with international frameworks like the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)* providing conceptual tools for reimagining disability clusters as vehicles for rights claiming rather than merely service provision (United Nations, 2006).

In contemporary Nigeria, the most prominent manifestation of disability clustering occurs through Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), with the Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWD) serving as the umbrella organization established in 1992 to represent the interests of Nigeria's disability community at local and international levels (Etieyibo, 2020b). JONAPWD's structure incorporates six primary disability clusters: the blind, physically disabled, deaf, intellectually impaired, those with spinal cord injuries, and leprosy victims. This organizational structure represents both the practical necessity of clustering to amplify marginalized voices and the inherent challenges of creating representative

structures that must navigate intersecting identities and impairment-specific needs (Global Disability Fund, 2025).

The Form and Function of Disability Clusters in Contemporary Nigeria

Structural Organization of Disability Clusters

The structural configuration of disability clusters in Nigeria follows both impairment-specific and cross-disability models, each serving distinct functions in the ecosystem of disability advocacy and service provision (Goldiner, 2022). JONAPWD, as the primary umbrella organization, operates through a federated structure that includes state-level chapters and local branches, attempting to balance national coordination with local responsiveness (Etieyibo, 2020b). This structure enables the organization to engage in national policy advocacy while addressing context-specific challenges faced by persons with disabilities in different geopolitical zones.

Beyond formal organizational structures, disability clustering manifests in various informal networks and community-based groups that provide mutual support and resource sharing (Ugwoegbu, 2016). These informal clusters often emerge in response to the limitations of formal structures, creating spaces where persons with disabilities can share survival strategies, navigate bureaucratic hurdles, and collectively respond to everyday forms of exclusion (Nwokorie & Devlieger, 2019). The interplay between formal organizational clusters and these informal networks represents a dynamic aspect of disability unity in Nigeria, with each form of clustering serving complementary but distinct functions.

Functional Roles of Disability Clusters

Disability clusters in Nigeria serve multiple functional roles that extend beyond basic advocacy to encompass service provision, awareness-raising, and community development (Etieyibo, 2020a). These clusters function as platforms for political participation, enabling collective engagement with governmental bodies at federal, state, and local levels. For instance, JONAPWD played a critical role in shaping Nigeria's commitments for the 2025

Global Disability Summit, ensuring that priorities such as accessible infrastructure, inclusive education, and inclusive health services remained central to government policy (Global Disability Fund, 2025).

Additionally, disability clusters serve as vehicles for resource mobilization and distribution, particularly through the organization of "empowerment programs" that provide material support, vocational training, and economic opportunities to members (Nwokorie & Devlieger, 2019). However, these programs often embody the central paradox of disability clustering: while providing needed resources, they frequently reinforce paternalistic relationships and frame disability primarily in terms of deficit and dependency (Ugwoegbu, 2016). Research participants in Southeast Nigeria described how empowerment discourses often conceal the personal stories and survival operations of disabled people, instead creating platforms for local elites to enhance their social standing through public displays of benevolence (Nwokorie & Devlieger, 2019). This performative aspect of disability clustering represents a significant challenge to genuine empowerment, highlighting the complex power dynamics that underlie seemingly benevolent interventions.

Benefits and Empowerment through Clustering

Political Advocacy and Legal Reform

The most significant achievement of disability clustering in Nigeria has been its impact on political advocacy and legal reform. The coordinated advocacy efforts of disability clusters were instrumental in the passage of the landmark *Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act* in 2018 after decades of activism (Etieyibo, 2020b). This legislative victory demonstrates the political potency of collective action, as disability clusters successfully mobilized across impairment categories, geopolitical zones, and socioeconomic divisions to demand legal protection against discrimination (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019).

Beyond national legislation, disability clusters have effectively engaged with international human rights mechanisms, particularly the *United Nations*

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to hold the Nigerian government accountable for its obligations (United Nations, 2006). JONAPWD, as a full-fledged member of Disabled People's International (DPI), serves as a crucial link between OPDs in Nigeria and the international community (Global Disability Fund, 2025). This transnational advocacy function enables local disability clusters to leverage global norms and resources to advance domestic disability rights, illustrating how strategic clustering at multiple levels can enhance advocacy effectiveness (Etieyibo, 2020a). The participation of Nigerian disability clusters in global forums like the Global Disability Summit further demonstrates this multi-scalar approach to advocacy (Azubuike et al., 2025).

Social Solidarity and Psychological Support

Disability clusters provide invaluable psychosocial benefits through fostering solidarity, reducing isolation, and creating spaces for mutual support among persons with disabilities (Ugwoegbu, 2016). In a context where cultural attitudes often stigmatize disability, these clusters function as counter-cultural communities that validate members' experiences and foster positive disability identities (Etieyibo, 2020a). Research participants in Southeast Nigeria described how disability clusters provided emotional sustenance and practical advice for navigating everyday challenges, from inaccessible infrastructure to discriminatory attitudes (Nwokorie & Devlieger, 2019).

The psychological empowerment derived from disability clustering should not be underestimated, as it enables individuals to reframe their understanding of disability from individual tragedy to collective experience of social exclusion (Etieyibo, 2020a). Through participation in disability clusters, individuals develop the critical consciousness necessary to recognize and challenge systemic barriers rather than internalizing disability-related challenges as personal failures (Freire cited in Etieyibo, 2020a). This process of conscientization represents a fundamental aspect of empowerment that precedes and enables effective political action.

While disability clusters promote unity among

persons with disabilities, they simultaneously reinforce categorical divides along impairment lines, potentially undermining broader solidarity (Goldiner, 2022). The very structure of representative organizations like JONAPWD, which organizes representation around six primary disability categories, institutionalizes these categorical distinctions in ways that may perpetuate fragmentation (Global Disability Fund, 2025).

This fragmentation intersects with other social cleavages including gender, ethnicity, class, and geographic location, creating complex dynamics within disability clusters. Women with disabilities, for instance, often face compounded marginalization within both disability clusters and broader gender advocacy spaces (Azubuike et al., 2025). Similarly, the rural-urban divide creates significant disparities in access to disability clusters and their benefits (Ugwoegbu, 2016). These intersectional exclusions reveal the limitations of disability clustering as a strategy for inclusive representation (Etieyibo, 2020a).

Co-option by Political and Economic Elites

Perhaps the most critical paradox of disability clustering in Nigeria concerns its vulnerability to co-option by political and economic elites who instrumentalize disability organizations for their own purposes (Nwokorie & Devlieger, 2019). Empowerment programs and events often become platforms for "local power elites to 'ride' to fame on the backs of disabled [people] to extend their influence in society" (Nwokorie & Devlieger, 2019, p. 6).

The temporal patterning of empowerment initiatives further reveals this co-option dynamic, with many programs clustered around "special events such as anniversaries, Christmas seasons, wealthy people's birthdays, investiture of new titles and campaigns before general elections" (Ugwoegbu, 2016, p. 88). This event-based approach to disability support prioritizes the ceremonial and political needs of donors over the ongoing needs of persons with disabilities, reducing disability inclusion to a seasonal concern rather than a matter of fundamental rights (Etieyibo, 2020a).

Implementation Challenges of the Legal Framework

Federal-State Implementation Gap

The discriminatory implementation of the *Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2018* represents a critical challenge that disability clusters have struggled to overcome. As of 2024, "26 of Nigeria's 36 states had yet to fully implement the Discrimination Act, creating disparities in protection and access across the country" (Global Disability Fund, 2025, p. 4). This federal-state implementation gap creates a patchwork of disability rights protection that undermines the universal application of legal guarantees, leaving persons with disabilities in non-compliant states without effective recourse (Etieyibo, 2020b).

The structural barriers to effective implementation include "lack of funding, poor awareness, inadequate enforcement, and entrenched cultural stigma" (Azubuike et al., 2025, p. 371). These challenges reflect broader governance deficits in Nigeria's federal system (Etieyibo, 2020a).

Health Care Access Barriers

Despite legal guarantees of non-discrimination in healthcare, persons with disabilities in Nigeria continue to face "physical inaccessibility, attitudinal discrimination, financial constraints, and a lack of disability-trained healthcare workers" (Azubuike et al., 2025, p. 371). Audits of healthcare facilities reveal exclusionary practices, with a 2021 assessment of Abuja primary healthcare facilities finding that "just 6% of them were fully wheelchair accessible and that none of them had sign language interpreters or braille signage" (Azubuike et al., 2025, p. 371).

Economic Dimensions of Disability Clustering

The *Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities Act* mandates that "public sector employers strive to have at least 5% of their workforce comprised of persons with disabilities" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019, p. 22). However, enforcement challenges persist (Etieyibo, 2020b).

Livelihood initiatives and vocational training programs often reproduce the empowerment

paradox, where "discourses of empowerment frame disability as loss and tend to conceal the personal stories and survival operations of disabled people" (Nwokorie & Devlieger, 2019, p. 4).

Financial Barriers and Social Protection

The Nigerian healthcare system remains "heavily based on out-of-pocket (OOP) payments, totaling over 70% of total health expenditure" (Azubuike et al., 2025, p. 371). Persons with disabilities, facing disproportionate unemployment, are particularly vulnerable to these costs (Etieyibo, 2020a). Disability clusters have advocated for more inclusive social protection mechanisms, with some success in the passage of the *National Health Insurance Authority (NHIA) Act of 2022* (Global Disability Fund, 2025). Yet, implementation remains weak (Azubuike et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive analysis of the paradox of disability clustering and unity among persons with special needs in Nigeria reveals a complex landscape of competing interests, contradictory outcomes, and persistent challenges. The examination of disability clusters from multiple angles, historical, political, social, and economic, demonstrates that these organizational structures simultaneously enable and constrain the advancement of disability rights and inclusion. The central paradox lies in the fact that the very mechanisms designed to foster unity and empowerment often reinforce fragmentation and create platforms for political co-option, particularly through performative empowerment programs that benefit local elites more than persons with disabilities themselves.

The legal framework established by the *Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2018* represents a significant achievement of disability clustering and advocacy, yet its implementation remains uneven across Nigeria's states, creating a patchwork of protection that undermines universal disability rights. Similarly, the healthcare access barriers documented in this paper reveal the limitations of legislative reform without concomitant investment in accessible infrastructure, trained personnel, and disability-inclusive health financing. These implementation challenges highlight the need for disability clusters

to transition from focusing primarily on policy development to engaging more deeply with implementation monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

The analysis of economic dimensions reveals how disability clusters have successfully advocated for employment quotas while struggling to address the structural economic exclusion that keeps many persons with disabilities in poverty. The financial barriers to healthcare, education, and participation in community life require more comprehensive approaches that combine rights-based advocacy with practical support for daily survival. Furthermore, the intersectional exclusions within disability clusters, particularly for women, youth, and rural persons with disabilities, suggest the need for more inclusive representative structures that acknowledge and address multiple dimensions of marginalization.

Ultimately, this paper argues that transcending the disability cluster paradox requires reimagining disability unity beyond organizational structures and toward solidarity based on shared commitment to justice and inclusion. This reimagined unity would acknowledge the diversity of impairment experiences while building power around common agendas, would celebrate advocacy achievements while remaining critical of co-option and tokenism, and would leverage collective strength while respecting individual autonomy. The recommendations that follow aim to provide practical pathways toward this transformed approach to disability clustering and unity in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen Legal and Institutional Implementation: State governments should be incentivized to domesticate and enforce the *Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities Act* through targeted technical and financial support. The federal government must establish clear monitoring frameworks with specific timelines for compliance, supported by independent reporting and accountability mechanisms. Disability organizations such as JONAPWD require stronger institutional capacity, leadership development, and inter cluster collaboration to engage effectively in monitoring and enforcement at national, state, and local levels.

2. Mainstream Disability across Development Sectors: Disability should be integrated across all sectoral policies including health, education, housing, and transportation rather than treated as a standalone issue. Ministries and agencies must embed disability inclusive planning and budgeting with active participation of persons with disabilities in decision making. Social protection mechanisms, including the National Health Insurance Authority, should provide targeted support such as premium subsidies, coverage for assistive devices, and recognition of additional disability related costs to reduce economic vulnerability.

3. Expand Knowledge, Research, and Data Systems: Evidence based policymaking requires robust data and research. Nigerian statistical agencies should regularly collect and disaggregate disability data using international best practices such as the Washington Group questions. Academic institutions should partner with disability clusters to co-develop research agendas that document implementation challenges, intersectional exclusions, and innovative practices from other low- and middle-income contexts. These knowledge resources should directly inform programming, advocacy, and resource allocation.

4. Promote Social Inclusion and Positive Narratives: Public understanding of disability must shift from a deficit based, charity driven perspective to one rooted in rights, diversity, and capability. Disability clusters should lead awareness campaigns highlighting success stories and contributions of persons with disabilities, working closely with media to reduce stigma and stereotypes. Efforts must also focus on rural inclusion through mobile outreach, digital access, and decentralized structures to ensure equitable participation for marginalized and hard to reach populations.

5. Build Strategic Alliances and Cross Movement Solidarity: Disability movements should strengthen alliances with broader social justice platforms including gender equality, child rights, and poverty reduction initiatives. Such cross-movement solidarity enhances political leverage, resource mobilization, and visibility of disability issues within the wider justice agenda. Disability clusters must also foster regular inter cluster collaboration, ensuring impairment specific needs are addressed

while advancing shared advocacy agendas at the national and international levels.

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