

## **Empowering the Future: Girl-child Education in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This study is focused on empowering the future: girl-child education in Nigeria. Nigeria is widely recognized as a fundamentally patriarchal society, a conclusion rooted in the historical marginalization and subjugation experienced by Nigerian women and girls. Prior to the enactment of Section 42 of the Nigerian constitution and subsequent judicial rulings, customary laws and practices often prevented women from exercising certain rights, such as the right to inherit or own property. Despite advancements in formal education and increased global awareness, the rights of women and girls continue to be hotly contested in Nigeria, particularly concerning the girl-child's right to receive a formal education. The issue of girl-child education has garnered significant attention over the years, prompting national and international efforts to address the situation. While progress has undeniably been made, Nigeria still faces numerous challenges in achieving education for girls. These barriers encompass cultural practices, poverty, gender-based violence, and more. Alarming statistics from 2017 revealed that out of the global figure of 121 million out-of-school children, 65 million were girls, with over 80 percent of these girls residing in Sub-Saharan Africa. Within Nigeria itself, girls' access to basic education, especially in northern states, remains critically low. Empowering girls through education not only enhances their personal capabilities but also equips them to contribute significantly to the social, economic, and political development of the country. This study discusses some of the issues surrounding girls' education in Nigeria, the challenges hindering progress, and explore the initiatives that have been developed thus far to promote and facilitate girls' education. One crucial aspect to be explored is the nexus between girls' education and poverty reduction, as education plays a pivotal role in breaking the cycle of poverty and fostering inclusive development. By investing in girls' education, Nigeria can empower its young women to overcome socio-economic limitations, paving the way for a more prosperous and equitable society.

**Keyword:** Education, Girl-Child, Poverty reduction

The right to education is recognized as a fundamental human right and is understood to mean a universal entitlement for everyone existing. The right to education has been universally recognized since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (though referred to by the ILO as early as the 1920s) (Sambo, 2012, Ukeje, & Aisiku, 2022) and has since been enshrined in various international conventions, national constitutions and development plans. However, while the vast majority of countries have signed up to, and ratified, international conventions (such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) although anecdotal knowledge and observations has shown that many African nations have integrated these rights into their national constitutions or provided the legislative and administrative frameworks to ensure that these rights are realized in practice. In some cases, the right exists along with the assumption that the user should pay for or contest to ensure this right, undermining the very concept of a right. In others, the right exists in theory but there is no capacity to implement this right in practice. (Sambo, 2012, Ukeje, & Aisiku, 2022) Inevitably, a lack of government support for the right to education hits the poorest people in any nation the most. Today, the right to education is still denied to millions around the world, including the girl-child education in Nigeria. This study is based on the theory of education as a human right. (John Locke (1975) developed the theory that every human being has certain rights that derive from their own nature and not from their government or its laws. The legitimacy of government, in fact, rested on the respect that it afforded these natural rights.)

Education develops an individual's talents and helps them become more self-aware and enlightened on how to be useful to self, family, community and the global world at large. Education is also a social construct that is created to fulfill the unique demands of society at every given period. The society determines citizens education shape, content, approach, and the hallmark for the target population. Education is a socialization contrivance that gives all of its beneficiaries the information, skills, attitude, cultural values, language, knowledge, social, cognitive, personal and intellectual skills they need to adapt to the demands, expectations and aspirations of their immediate society and the global world at large.

“Education whether formal or informal, is the recognized method whereby a person male or female acquires most of his/her ideas, beliefs, attitude and adaptive culture for existence not only to combat the hazards and problem of life and to secure the means for meeting all human

needs but also to be a representative of transformation and bring about positive changes, to self, and others around him or her (Ukeje, & Aisiku, 2022).

### **Structure of Educational System in Nigerian**

The Nigerian educational system is divided into four organizational tiers. The formal education system consists of the first, which is informal, and the other three. They include:

1. **Pre-primary Education:** This is regarded as early child care and development education, although informal, this level of education is meant for children of the age range of 2 to 5 years. These schools were established under degree No.16 of 1985 (National minimum standards and establishment of institutions Private organizations and private people operate it as day care facilities and nursery/kindergarten schools. The primary goals are to raise and instill in the young kid a positive attitude toward learning and an awareness of it.

2. **Primary Education:** This is the first level of the formal system of education. It provides a six-year course for children of age range of 6-12 years. This level is seen to be the foundation of formal education and is crucial to the whole system's success or failure. Preparing for a broad-based education is one of the objectives, with a focus on achieving functional and permanent reading, numeracy, and effective communication skills.

3. **Secondary Education:** This is the type of education that children receive after primary school. The secondary school has two stages covering six years duration. The first stage run classes from J.S.S 1 to J.S.S 3. At the end of J.S.S 3, the students are required to sit for and pass the junior secondary school certificate examination (JSSCE). Most of the students are within the age range of 12-15 years. It has been noted that the level of education and the caliber of women in a country determine how quickly its socioeconomic growth occurs. Women's involvement in education has been rising, and the federal, state, and municipal governments, as well as non-governmental organizations, use a variety of strategies to support this trend. Women are increasingly seen in a variety of prominent professions.

4. **Tertiary Education:** Here, a post-secondary education is given to successful students into either university, college of Education, polytechnics and other related institutions. According to Gbamanja (1997) objectives of higher education includes the development of intellectual capacity to understand and appropriate the environment, and the acquisition of appropriate. (Ukeje, O. & Aisiku, J. U. 2022).

Nigeria has made a commitment to education over the years, believing that eradicating ignorance and illiteracy will pave the way for faster national growth. (Chikuvadze,

2020). Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was ratified in 1948, education has been acknowledged as a fundamental human right. There is a positive relationship between life expectancy and the gross national product and the number of girls enrolled in elementary school. (Basiru, 2020) It has been noted that a country's capacity for rapid socioeconomic growth depends on the caliber of its female population and level of education. The number of women enrolled in school has increased, and non-governmental organizations, as well as municipal, state, and federal governments, use a variety of strategies to promote this trend. Nowadays, women are visible in a variety of prominent professions. (Kelly, 2020).

Different academics have provided multiple definitions of the girl-child within the Nigerian setting. A person under the age of 14 is considered a female child, according to the national Child Welfare Policy (1989). From birth to the age of eighteen (18), the girl-child is considered a biological female progeny. This age group precedes young adulthood. The crèche, nursery or early childhood (0–5 years), primary (6–12 years), and secondary school (12–18 years) are all included in this time frame. The small kid is entirely in the care of an adult at this time, who might be one of her parents, guardians, or older siblings. It consists of the developmental phases of early and late adolescence, childhood, and infancy. The girl-child is pliable throughout this time as she grows and develops her individuality and personality. Her close relationships are her primary sources of dependence, serving as role models for her behavior through observation, imitation, and repetition. Her growth in all areas—physical, mental, social, spiritual, and emotional—begins in the young adult period and peaks then. (Ahmed, & Yola, (2021).

Most people agree that education is a good thing that has a big influence on society and human growth. This energy is particularly special for the girl-child of today, who is viewed as a youngster yet eventually grows up to become a woman and a mother. Teaching the daughter entails teaching the family, and the ‘nation’ as a whole. Furthermore, what applies to families also applies to communities and, in the end, the entire country. It has been claimed that unless girls acquire the high-quality basic education, they require to occupy their proper role as equal participants in sustainable development goals, there will be no good, meaningful, or long-lasting improvement in society, much alone a reduction in poverty. However, it is important to remember that women need education to be able to contribute significantly to their society, education is key for the girl-child to adapt, grow, and broaden their horizons. It also fills in the gaps left by those who did not attend school or who dropped out, and it prepares young adults

and adolescents to deal with socially, economically, and politically with domestic work and family life (Ahmed, & Yola, 2021).

Nevertheless, there are still several obstacles standing in the way of gender equality in the Nigerian educational system. Research indicates that there is a notable prejudice towards women pursuing particular academic fields, since some teachers in schools tend to stereotype their students based on gender (Global citizen, 2020). No matter where in the globe they reside, all children, boys and girls, should have equal access to education since it is a fundamental human right. Global data, however, indicates that females are less likely than boys to receive access to school at all educational levels. This is because prejudice against females is pervasive in most areas of the world and affects female enrollment and academic performance. However, in recent years, things have changed in Europe. Research revealed that while gender differences that disadvantaged females in elementary and secondary education have vanished in industrialized nations, they still exist in developing nations of the world including Nigeria. (Dessy, Tiberti & Zoundi 2022). Additionally, it was shown that the majority of developing nations are vulnerable to unfavorable income shocks like pandemics, droughts, and floods; the ensuing volatility in income may force low-income households with little resources to make tough decisions. Social norms and their parent's inability to pay for school fees cause most girls from poor social economic background to withdraw from school or not be sent at all or are advised to give up their chances for the male children to have opportunity to advance. These females are introduced into the community to work in a variety of jobs, including cleaning, farming, retail, hotel, and even marriage. For any nation to be progressive all her citizens both male and female must be given fair and equal access to education. Furthermore, for a girl-child's learning to be successful, all cultural obstacles, bias, prejudices, discriminations and stereotypical mindsets must be removed, otherwise, this will progressively lead to poverty of ideas that could transform the nation as the popular parlance is "educate a son, you transform a family, educate the girl-child, you transform a nation". In many society, women's education has never been given much attention. Compared to their male counterparts, women and girls typically spend a lot more time taking care of others and doing home duties. Time set aside for study and other pursuits must unavoidably be forfeited in order to fulfill home duties. (Egberi, & Madubueze, 2023)

### **Status of women's education in Nigeria**

Because of intellectual poverty and a lack of educational possibilities, a great majority of women in Nigeria lack empowerment. This illiteracy might be the cause of women's extreme

poverty, discrimination, and marginalization in all areas of Nigerian development. Low enrollment rates, particularly in basic and secondary school, are shown by a critical examination of the pattern of women's engagement in education in Nigeria. For example, the percentage of illiterate women is still over 70%, while the percentage for males is 46%. In addition, females drop out of primary school at a rate of almost 17%, while boys drop out at a rate of 15.8%. This means that even when girls and boys enter school at the same time, the former are more likely to leave before finishing. (Akpakwu & Bua, (2024) Due to poverty and other obstacles, many Nigerian girls and women living in rural regions are still illiterate and uninformed. Studies have indicated that women and girls do not have easy access to formal education. In order to eventually reduce the poverty rate among Nigerian women, it is imperative that specific circumstances be made available to support women's education, particularly at the basic and secondary education levels. (Akpakwu & Bua, (2024)

### **Poverty and the girl-child education**

Poverty is a state of being impoverished. The majority of Nigerians—roughly two thirds are impoverished women. Research indicates that women experiencing poverty tend to be unemployed, excessively indebted, economically dependent, lack of independence, and unable to meet their own and their families' fundamental requirements. Nigerians, particularly women, have been falling farther into poverty as a result of various barriers and limited access to educational possibilities. Needs also notes that poor parents raise poor children and that the increasing prevalence and dynamics of poverty in Nigeria have polarized and stratified Nigerian society between the haves and have-nots, women and men, and educated and illiterate. The hardest affected are the women and girls of Nigeria. Therefore, the solution to poverty lies not only in economic reform to promote economic growth and development but also in empowering individuals, particularly women, via both qualitative and quantitative education, which is now recognized as a potent weapon for reducing poverty.

The biggest problem Nigeria has today is reducing gender-based poverty, which also stands in the way of the country's efforts to achieve sustainable economic progress, particularly for women. It's a common belief that the key to ending the cycle of poverty in most nations is educating women. Most poor women are uneducated and lack the information necessary to change their circumstances. Their contributions to the national economy are rarely acknowledged since they are hard to reach and frequently come from the unorganized sector. Research demonstrates that women are the primary growers of food crops for their families

and are in charge of overseeing the well-being of their households and the education of their offspring.

Due to a lack of sex education, advice, and counseling as well as the deterioration of conventional social and moral norms, school-age girls are becoming more and more pregnant, which in turn causes them to drop out of school. Many low-income parents reject their daughters' education because they believe that the men they marry will benefit from the investment, not the girls' immediate family. In addition to parents' disapproval of girls' education, many households have found the expense of education to be unaffordable. Boys, who are viewed as the future breadwinners, will be given precedence for education over girls if decisions must be made.

### **Primary school education**

There are several ways that education can lower women's poverty. The extremely poor typically have low levels of formal education or are illiterate, have large families with high newborn mortality rates, poor nutrition, and a short life expectancy. The majority of the variations in life expectancy and child mortality rates may be attributed to mothers' educational attainment rather than health care and money. Many years of education reduces the number of children a woman has, allows her to support the family financially, improves her family's nutrition and health, and encourages her daughters to go to school. When it comes to the education of women, the basic level may be the most crucial. This is because it's the time when the right groundwork is established for women's and girls' empowerment for long-term, sustainable development via education. The amount of extreme poverty among women and girls in Nigeria, however, is a result of the unfavorable image of women and girls' education at the elementary level. The majority of the girls just complete their basic schooling. The majority of them, who are between the ages of 11 and 13 years old, graduate from elementary school each year with little to no knowledge of the social and economic circumstances in the nation in which they reside. Girls drop out of primary school at a rate of about 17%, while males drop out at a rate of 15.8%. Even when girls and boys enter school at the same time, they are more likely to leave before finishing. By the end of this century, enrollment growth rates for boys and girls must surpass current levels in order to attain parity in enrollment. Girls and women can achieve the level of education required to lead meaningful lives free from poverty by attending elementary schools properly and consistently.

### **Secondary school education**

Compared to women who have not had a secondary education, those who have are less likely to live in poverty. Even though it is acknowledged that secondary school is crucial for females' social and economic development, girls in Nigeria still face more disadvantages than boys. The school atmosphere and conditions have an impact on girls' success in secondary education. It has been discovered that females do better in single-sex schools than in coeducational ones in some African nations, including Malawi and Kenya. If given comparable learning resources, brilliant ladies in Kenya performed on par with bright guys. It has been demonstrated in the identical cases that girls performed better than boys in a number of external examinations. These imply that when Nigeria's educational system is fair and attentive to gender, females would do just as well as boys.

Governments at the federal and state levels urgently need to boost the quality and quantity of educational resources offered in secondary schools for girls and women, especially in rural areas, if education is to be used as a potent tool for reducing poverty among Nigerian women. This may be accomplished by implementing creative initiatives like the female secondary school support project, which is being implemented in Bangladesh to help girls attend school despite strong cultural and economic obstacles. Many parents are unable to pay for their daughters' education. Despite having the money, the parents would rather educate their boys. A large portion of the expenses associated with girls attending secondary school, including full tuition and examination costs, as well as the majority of the fees for textbooks, stationery, uniforms, transportation, and other services, should be covered by the various governments and spirited international and national associations. (Akpakwu & Bua, (2024)

### **Poverty reduction**

In order to combat poverty in Nigeria, it is not only necessary to restructure the economy to spur growth but also to empower women via education. In order to do this, elementary and secondary education must be of high quality and effective and must simultaneously address all aspects of women's poverty. (Akpakwu Bua, (2024)

With a focus on enhancing the lives of women and girls, Nigeria and the UN have long collaborated to advance sustainable development and the fight against poverty. Notwithstanding these initiatives, gender inequity and educational inequalities still exist in Nigeria, where girls face substantial obstacles to completing their education and realizing their full potential. The UN-Nigeria partnership has to be reconsidered in order to address these issues, with an emphasis on gender equality initiatives and the education of female children.



This calls for a multipronged strategy that includes expanding girls' access to top-notch education, tackling societal and cultural norms that support gender inequality, and promoting women's leadership and empowerment. Improving females' access to education requires developing and renovating schools in outlying and underdeveloped areas. This might entail hiring and preparing educators who are dedicated to advancing diversity and gender equality in the classroom, as well as providing necessities like electricity, water, and sanitary facilities. Another critical step is to address cultural and societal practices that contribute to gender disparity, such as early marriage, gender-based violence, and discrimination against women and girls. This can be accomplished through community participation and awareness-raising efforts that highlight the importance of girls' education while challenging harmful gender stereotypes. Furthermore, encouraging women's empowerment and leadership is critical to achieving gender equality and improving girls' educational outcomes. This can include promoting women's participation in decision-making.

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