

‘MUST THEY GO TO SCHOOL?’ NORTHERN NIGERIA AND THE CHALLENGES OF GIRL CHILD EDUCATION, 1999-2015

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.54414/ZXUJ8630>

Abstract. In 1999, the Nigerian government launched its Universal Basic Education (UBE) program to provide free and compulsory education for every Nigerian child. Despite this effort, girls' enrollment and school retention are still at their lowest ebb. This problem is even more apparent in Northern Nigeria where economic, religious and cultural factors often deny most girls access to education, especially in the North-West. Using a qualitative research methodology, this paper assesses the factors debilitating against girl child education in Northern Nigeria between 1999 and 2015 and their implications. This study finds out that factors such as early marriage, gender discrimination, low government support and the condemnation of co-education were responsible for the low enrollment of girls in schools across the Northern region. The paper concludes that to achieve the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals-2 (MDG2) and Sustainable Development Goals-4 (SDG 4), the government, international community, NGOs and parents must put their hands on deck to break the social, economic, religious and cultural barriers denying girls full and equitable access to education in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: *Girl child education, Social Inclusion, MDG2, SDG4, Northern Nigeria, Challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Due to the significance of inclusive education, especially based on the existing realities of the twenty-first century, the Nigerian government introduced some policies. These policies range from constitutional provisions as spelt out in Article 21A of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which made it clear that the state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children from six to 14 years as the state may determine by law. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) Charter declares that 'every child shall have the right to education and full realization of this right shall, in particular, ensure equal access to education in respect of males, females, gifted and disadvantaged children for all section of the community' [Olanmi (2014): 8]. These governmental efforts were concretized by the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 in which Nigeria with the support of UNICEF (United Nations International Emergency Children's Fund) attempted to domesticate the convention into national law [Nasidi and Wali (2023): 1-7]. In July

Child's Rights Act of 2003, after the assent of the Nigerian president [Magbadelo (2009)]. Despite all these efforts, the girl child education, especially in the Northern part of Nigeria is still at its lowest ebb. This was largely attributed to certain socio-religious, economic and cultural reasons that hindered the girls from acquiring both the Western and Islamic forms of education.

This paper is based on empirical data collected from February 2014 to December 2015. It relies on primary sources ranging from newspapers, government and inter-government documents, as well as reports to oral interviews conducted in Northern Nigeria. Contrary to most recent research works that tend to emphasize feminist discourses in Northern Nigeria, the major focus of this paper is to find out the roles played by religious and cultural beliefs, poverty, gender discrimination, and low governmental support systems in depriving girl child education in the region. In so doing, an effort is also made to assess the said factors within the socio-economic, political and cultural realities of Nigeria.

Despite the massive transformation in the field of education in terms of the establishment of schools, colleges and universities in Nigeria, the question of inclusivity concerning girl child education remains a serious challenge. Although other scholars such as O. E. Osita-Oleribe [Osita-Oleribe (2007)], G. Nmadu, S. Avidime [Nmadu, et al (2010)], L. M. Tyoakaa, J. I. Amaka, [Tyoakaa, et al (2014)], A. Ishaq and M. Ali [Ishaq & Ali (2014)] have written on the issue, their attempts are more generic than specific to the factors affecting girl-child education in Northern Nigeria. On this basis, therefore, this paper studies this neglected or generally overlooked area to understand the plight of girls in terms of equitable access to education, as well as advancing inclusivity.

The paper is largely divided into three (3) important sections and sub-sections. While the first one deals with the introduction, statement of the research problem and the methodology adopted, the second section focuses on the major factors responsible for the denial of girl-child education in Northern Nigeria such as cultural belief system, poverty, gender discrimination and low government support. The last section is the conclusion of the paper.

Methodology

This study adopts a purely qualitative research methodology for data analysis. It is also based on primary and secondary sources. The primary data was largely generated through oral interviews with policy-makers and other constituted authorities, newspaper reports, and government documents. The selection of different informants for the interviews surely provides interesting perspectives and viewpoints on the subject matter.

Secondary data in the form of both published and unpublished materials were also consulted. This includes; books and journal articles, theses, and dissertations. The choice of different sources for historical reconstruction creates room for check-mating and corroborating various viewpoints to produce a factual historical analysis. It also bridges the gaps in historical reconstruction left by archival silences, over-exaggeration, falsification, and lack of chronology as in the case of oral tradition.

Findings and Discussion

Cultural Belief System

The cultural belief system constitutes one of the major factors militating against girl child education in Northern Nigeria. These beliefs have a significant impact on the parental decision on whether to send their girl child to school because many Nigerian parents show a negative attitude towards it, while some show a positive attitude towards it by sending their girl child to school but probably due to environmental factors such as government enforcement and laws regarding education [Umar (2004); Kurfi (2015)]. Musa Ibrahim opines that cultural restriction is a factor that contributes to the low level of enrollment and retention of girl children into the educational system stating the fact that, about 30% of school-aged girls drop out of school having already begun childbearing at an early age [Musa (2019)]. This phenomenon implies that many have suffered from psychological imbalances since they are mostly not mature enough to manage a marital home. UNESCO experts observe that cultural restrictions militate against girl child education in Northern Nigeria concluding that ‘in some cultures, girls are restricted in the kind of roles they can play, education inclusive’ [UNESCO (2015)].

The prevalence of the problem of girl child education is due to cultural relativity, although many reasons show that these cultural beliefs are rooted in the history of the people, we cannot neglect the fact that culture, as well as history, are dynamic, thus, the rights of the girl child can no longer be negotiated in the name of cultural belief and restrictions [Hassan (2015)]. The protection and promotion of the rights of the girl child secure a future for such a child as well as the nation at large. Several literatures agree on the fact that cultural beliefs are responsible for the denial of girl child education [Bilkisu (2015); Okpani (2003); Aisha (n.d), UNICEF (2001), Maimuna (2016); Eresimadu (1984); Okwara (1997)]. The following are cultural factors responsible for the denial of girl child education in Northern Nigeria:

Early marriage

Most of the girls in Northern Nigeria are married at a premature age which militates against their attendance and retention in school [Gender Development Database (2009)]. Statistic data show that ‘over half of all girl children in North-West and North-East are married off before the age of 16 and expected to bear children within the first year of marriage [NDHS (1999)]. It indicates that 20% of teenagers aged 15-19 were already mothers and another 6% were pregnant with their first child because of early marriage. Nationally, the median age of marriage for girls was 18.3 years, but it was much lower in Northern Nigeria where early marriage is regarded as a means of maintaining female chastity. The median age for marriage was found to be 15.1 years in the North East and 14.7 years in the North West. Of women aged 20-24, 20% had been married by the age of 15 and 40% by the age of 18. However, in some parts of the North, girls get married even earlier than these average figures suggest.

Condemnation of coeducation

As suggested by previous studies, most parents in Northern Nigeria fear that Western education could have devastating consequences on their girls while studying with boys in the same school. Parents believe that girl child education may threaten the moral training and orientation of girl children, especially with the few cases of young girls being pregnant in school either by their teachers, or their classmates. This decision is deeply rooted in the orthodox Islamic traditions of the people since the Jihad of Sheikh Uthman ibn Fudi in 1804 [Nasidi, (2020): 1-20].

Preference of educating the male child

Many cultures in Northern Nigeria have a relative worth of educating boys than girls thereby sending the male child to school and leaving behind the girl child at home to perform domestic house chores. A. Dauda argues that 'these historical, ideological and cultural variables constitute the major stumbling blocks to the smooth acceptance of girl child education in Northern Nigeria' [Dauda (2008): 2-30]. This was based on the notion that if the girl child is trained, she goes to another family, unlike the boys who will later become the breadwinners of the family. A. Dauda further compares the conditions of girls' education in the Southern and Northern parts of Nigeria and concludes that Western education of girls has greater rejection in the North due to socio-cultural beliefs of the community. A. S. Mohammed also reaffirms that girls' education is denied because 'of certain traditional beliefs which put them at the risk of neglect and denial' [Mohammed (2004): 24]. These case studies evidenced that certain beliefs hamper girl child education in Northern Nigeria. While some stated specific cultural beliefs, other literature did not specify the types of cultural beliefs that restrict girl child education. However, in some families, cultural beliefs do not affect the chances of girls' enrollment into school. What could be the factor then? These issues are discussed below.

Poverty

Poverty is regarded as a major challenge to girl child education in Northern Nigeria. A Paper, presented at the workshop on Gender Disparities held by UNICEF, on 15-17 January, argues that poverty constrains the girl children's education who are occupied with the problem of daily survival [UNESCO (2015)]. This is because most parents do not consider a girl's education a priority. After all, they have little or no disposable income to supplement family expenses and the cost of education. In line with this, the Situation assessment and analysis "Children's and Women's Rights in Nigeria: A Wake-up Call" observes that 'poverty prevents many families from enrolling their girl child to school or forcing them to withdraw their girl children prematurely from school due to the cost of education' [UNICEF (2001)]. It is also difficult for many families to afford the cost of sending their girl child to school, as well as the psychological support needed for the progress in learning. The same source further states that the cost of sending a girl child to school is broken down into two major components; direct and indirect costs [Ibid].

- i. ***Direct Cost:*** this includes tuition fees, cost of uniform, textbooks, learning materials including exercise books, pens, and pencils, pocket money and the cost of transport money to and from school. These are paid by the household directly to the school or to the child in cash. However, following the National policy on education, primary school education is free [FME (1981)]. The reality is quite different, since the Federal and State governments are unable to finance education fully from their budget, administrators in public schools raise money by imposing fees and levies under one guise or another. For instance, parents are required to pay the Parent-Teacher Association fees, examination fees, report card fees, and extra lesson fees apart from buying other learning materials [UNICEF (2001)].
- ii. ***Indirect Cost:*** the indirect cost is the hidden cost of time that children devote to school. These costs are heavy on many parents, especially for students living in rural areas, but also for many in urban areas [Abubakar (2016)]. This inhibits the access of many girl children into the educational system. Nigerian

Demographic Health Survey maintains that, among females aged 15-24 who had left school, 29% cited their inability to pay for school costs as the reason for dropping out. This was by far the most important reason given by those who had dropped out before completing primary school (36%), and at the end of primary school (41%). Other poverty-related reasons were the need to earn money (5%) to help parents or provide for the family [NDHS (1999)].

The Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) project found that among the reasons why girl children do not attend schools included the cost of living in school [Falayajo, Makoju, Okebukola, Onugha & Olubodun (1997)]. The authors, such as I. E. Okpani [Okpani (2003)], A.S. Muhammed [Mohammed (2014)], N.G. Ojimadu [Ojimadu (2005)], M.H. Kurfi [Kurfi (2015)], Hajara [Hajara (2010)], K. Maimuna [Maimuna (2016)], D. Birmingham [Birmingham (1995)], A.I. Aisha [Aisha (n.d)], H. Bilkisu [Bilkisu (2015)], and Mamman [Mamman (1996)], all exhibit similarities on their research findings [United Nation (2015), stating that poverty always challenges the state of girl child education in Northern Nigeria. In the same regard, Ikwen [Ikwen (2006)] and Abolarin [Abolarin (2010)] argue that poverty is a major factor that hinders the girl child from having access to education. Parents also regard school fees as a burden and thus girls often engage in menial jobs such as hawking that could generate financial benefits for the family. In addition, I.E. Okpani [Okpani (2003)], A.I. Aisha [Aisha (n.d)], and N.G. Ojimadu [Ojimadu (2005)] maintain that girls engage in street hawking practices to generate income for their families by selling foodstuffs in the market or on the street. While this goes on, the girl misses the opportunity to go to school, which becomes detrimental to her career development in education.

From this discussion, therefore, poverty constrains girls' access to education. Sad but true, one could find instances where some families are rich, but they still did not consider girls' education a priority. As such, the argument that poverty is the sole factor inhibiting girl child education is countered [Samuel (2016)]. Hence, poverty is one among other challenges affecting girl child education. Besides, it is not all girl children who are denied access to education are sent to street hawking to generate income for the family. This may be true for some poor and rural families but not in all cases.

Gender Discrimination

Numerous girls have no access to school in the Northern part of Nigeria, especially in the North-West [Ogbebo (2014): 20] It is unfortunate that even in the 21st century, female child is denied equal access to education facing gender discrimination from the earliest stage of her life, through childhood into adulthood [Kurfi (2015): 277-290]. In addition, S.A. Galadanci observes that 'the general system of education is a bit biased towards providing education to half of its communities that is the male sex while the female folks were almost neglected' [Galadanci (1971): 5-10]. To buttress this point, UNICEF states that more than 100 million children had no access to primary education in Africa and out of this number, 60 million were girls [UNICEF (1999)]. It is quite devastating that the future mothers responsible for the socialization of children are denied equitable access to education, which slows down societal development. Aisha opines that the illiteracy level of youth across several regions in the world is by gender bias [Aisha (n.d)]. In most regions, boys are more

illiteracy rate of girls [Mamuda (2019)]. The effect of gender inequality makes the girl child vulnerable to abuse, harassment, exploitation and maternal mortality which could also be reduced with qualitative education of the girl child. Statistics by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs show that the proportion of girls' education is still trailing that of males [Federal Ministry of Women Affairs (2006)]. Only 44.1% of girls in 2005 enrolled in school, while their male counterparts accounted for about 55.9% of school enrollment. According to A. Afigbo 'It is therefore not surprising that girls' inadequate access to education has been into place because of gender discrimination they face' [Afigbo (1991): 216].

More generally, girls' educational opportunities tend to be circumscribed by patriarchal attitudes about gender roles, which results in some parents attaching greater importance to the education of boys than girls. Overall, only 59% of girls aged 6-15 are enrolled in school in the North compared to 63% of boys [NDHS (1999)]. Because Nigeria is a deeply patriarchal society, especially in the Northern part of the country, gender discrimination constitutes the greatest factor affecting girls' access to education, especially in large families where funds are insufficient to enrol all children [UNICEF (2001)]. In addition, N. Mamman observes that one clear area of noted imbalance against girls is education and this discrimination exacerbates conflict and poverty by preventing most girls from obtaining the education needed support to improve their prospects [Mamman (1996)]. World Bank reports that gender inequality in education has the largest negative effect on the deprived girl, and society will also lose, which brings more poverty, malnutrition, illness and other forms of deprivation [World Bank (2001)]. UNESCO states that 'inequality in education is highly correlated to poverty, and its elimination will help eliminate poverty generally [UNESCO (2015)]. In addition, female education has spill-over effects on society, including improved fertility rates, household and child health, and educational opportunities for the rest of the household' [Globalization Review (2006)].

H. Bilkisu [Bilkisu (2015)], D. Birmingham [Birmingham (1995)], and N.G. Ojimadu [Ojimadu (2005)] exhibit similarities in their findings that gender discrimination serves as a factor in the denial of girl child education. In accordance to the Gender Report of 2012, about 42.1 million girl children in Nigeria are eligible for primary school, but only 23.3 million are enrolled [Gender Report (2012)]. Although the literature on the challenges of girl child education in Northern Nigeria claims that since society ascribed roles in terms of gender discrimination, boys have more chances of enrollment into school than their female counterparts, one would argue that gender discrimination cannot serve as a major underlying factor inhibiting girls' access to education. For instance, what about the cases of families where the children are all females but still, were denied access to education? Thus, other factors need to be put into consideration not necessarily based on gender.

Low Government Support

This serves as a determinant factor, that contributes to the backward state of girl child education in Northern Nigeria. I.E. Okpani observes that the most striking factor of girl child education is low governmental efforts in tackling the problem of girl child education, which is accompanied by changes in governmental policies [Okpani (2003): 20-21]. UNICEF opines that the problem of girl child education is due to low governmental effort and the problem of school administrators in public schools who imposed levies and fees within the educational system [UNICEF (2001)]. Along the

same line, M.H. Kurfi argues that the lack of enforced legislature on the problem of girl-child education is the major factor affecting the backward state of girl-child education in Northern Nigeria [Kurfi (2015): 277]. The argument on low government effort on the problem of girl child education is true to some extent because each government has its policy and the sectors it pays attention to during the period of its tenure. For example, if a previous government formulated policies to tackle the problem of girl child education, a preceding government might not necessarily focus on the problem. However, it cannot be denied that both Federal and State governments have made several attempts to promote girl child education. They have also participated in many conventions and conferences both nationally and internationally among which include Universal Primary Education in 1976, the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977, the production of a blueprint on women's Education by the Federal Ministry of Education in 1987 and the Declaration of free education for girls in many Nigeria states in 1988. Yet, existing literature still attributes the problem of girl child education to the government [Nasidi and Wali (2023): 4-8].

Other factors discussed by previous writers on the issue include poor efficient management of resources, poor parental support, poorly qualified teachers, and inadequate school infrastructure. A.I. Aisha argues that another important factor which may be hidden but also affects girl child education is the enrollment age of girls into secondary schools [Aisha (n.d)]. The 2006 National Population Census indicates that 15 years was the enrollment age of girls into secondary schools which is equivalent to the stage at which the physical development of a girl child into maturity is manifested. The social environment in Northern Nigeria is occupied by Muslims, who, therefore, give marriage of girl child premium to guard her chastity. A.I. Aisha concludes that when the girl child is to be enrolled at an early age and by the time, she must have completed her basic and secondary school education, such a problem will not clash with the cultural and socioeconomic needs of parents marrying off their daughters [Aisha (n.d)].

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the major challenges militating against girl child education in Northern Nigeria. The study revealed that these factors include cultural belief, gender discrimination, the colonial foundation of girl child education in Northern Nigeria, poverty, and low government effort in funding girl child education in the region. Thus, the research filled in the gaps left by previous studies. Despite the Federal government's efforts in recent years, gender disparities in education persist, with girls facing significant barriers to accessing and completing quality education. This paper observed that addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach involving policy reforms, community engagement, and targeted intervention programs. Through this process, gender stereotypes and social norms would be challenged. It will also improve access to safe and inclusive learning environments, especially by providing economic support systems to help families prioritize girl-child education.

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