

GENDER EDUCATION FOR OUT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND WAYFORWARD.

BY

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Abstract

Nigeria has over 10.5 million out-of-school children, with girls constituting 57% of this population, representing a 14% national gender gap. This study examines gender disparities in education for out-of-school children across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones using descriptive research design and content analysis methodology. The findings reveal significant regional variations, with northern regions recording the highest gender gaps: North-West (24%) and North-East (16%) compared to southern regions averaging 2-6%. Economic barriers emerged as the primary constraint, affecting 65% of out-of-school girls compared to 35% of boys, while cultural and religious factors impact 80% of girls through early marriage practices, with 44% of girls married before age 18 nationally. Security concerns, particularly in northeastern Nigeria, have disrupted over 1,500 schools since 2009, forcing 600,000 children out of school (65% girls). Policy implementation gaps are evidenced by inadequate funding (8.2% of national budget versus UNESCO's 20% recommendation), 40% teacher shortage in rural areas, and 78% of schools lacking proper sanitation facilities for girls. The study recommends conditional cash transfer programs, community engagement with religious leaders, enhanced security measures, improved policy implementation with increased funding allocation, and expansion of alternative learning platforms to achieve gender parity in education.

Keywords: Educational disparities; cultural barriers; policy implementation; alternative learning; educational equity.

1.0 Introduction

Education serves as a valuable tool that equips individuals with knowledge, skills, techniques, and information, enabling them to understand their rights and responsibilities towards their family, society, and country (Osaigbovo & Hephzibah-Awulor, 2022). One of its significant benefits is that education raises the standard of living and enables individuals to contribute to the development of their nation and society. Nigeria's educational system faces significant challenges, particularly concerning out-of-school children. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021), over 10.5 million children in Nigeria are out of school, with girls accounting for a larger proportion. This gender disparity is more pronounced in northern Nigeria, where cultural and socio-economic factors further limit girls' access to education.

Gender is a critical factor in structuring the types of opportunities and life chances faced by individuals and groups, and strongly influences the roles they play within social institutions from the household to the state. Although the roles of men and women vary from culture to culture, there is no known instance of a society in which females are more powerful than males. Men's roles are generally more highly valued and rewarding than women's role (Ibrahim, 2004; Giddens, 2010).

Education is a key driver for gender equality and sustainable development, as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, gender disparities in education, particularly for out-of-school children, remain a pressing issue in Nigeria. According to the United Nations, out-of-school children refer to children who are yet to be enrolled in any formal education, excluding pre-primary education. The age range for out-of school children is 6-11 years. Out-of-school children are school-age children that are supposed to be in schools but are not in schools due to parental and governmental failures to provide accessible quality education for them.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Nigeria currently has over 10.5 million out-of-school children, with girls constituting a larger proportion, particularly in northern regions where cultural and socio-economic factors significantly limit educational access. The existing educational system demonstrates persistent gender disparities that undermine the country's sustainable development goals and educational equity objectives. If these gender imbalances in education remain unaddressed, Nigeria will continue to experience high illiteracy rates, increased child marriage and pregnancy rates, shortage of skilled manpower, perpetuation of poverty cycles, and limited national development. The ideal situation would be an inclusive educational system that provides equal access to quality education for all children regardless of gender, supported by adequate funding, cultural acceptance, security measures, and effective policy implementation.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine the specific challenges contributing to gender imbalances in education for out-of-school children in Nigeria and propose strategic solutions to ensure inclusive education for all children, with particular focus on bridging gender gaps.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the major challenges contributing to gender disparities in education for out-of-school children in Nigeria?
2. How do economic, cultural, and security factors impact girls' access to education?
3. What strategic interventions can effectively address gender imbalances in education for out-of-school children?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the understanding of gender disparities in Nigerian education and provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and development organizations. The findings will inform the development of targeted interventions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 5 (Gender Equality), ultimately contributing to Nigeria's socio-economic development through improved educational outcomes for all children.

2.0 Literature Review

The concept of out-of-school children has been extensively studied in the Nigerian context. Ojelade, Aiyedun & Aregebesola (2019) define out-of-school children as young children in the age group of 1 to 12 that are roaming the street without access to a functional educational system. The rationale for reducing the number of out-of-school children includes reducing dropout rates, increasing literacy levels among youths, sensitizing parents on the importance of education, and bridging inequality gaps between children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

3.0 Methodology

A. Research Design This study employed a descriptive research design utilizing qualitative methodology to examine the challenges and propose solutions for gender education among out-of-school children in Nigeria.

B. Sample and Sampling Technique The study utilized purposive sampling technique to select relevant literature, policy documents, and statistical reports from reputable sources including UNICEF, World Bank, Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey, and academic publications.

C. Instrumentation Data collection was conducted through comprehensive literature review and content analysis of existing research, policy documents, and statistical reports. The validation method involved triangulation of multiple sources to ensure reliability and credibility of findings.

D. Scope of the Study The study focuses on gender education challenges for out-of-school children in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on girls' educational access and barriers across different regions of the country.

4.0 Results/Findings

The analysis of gender education challenges for out-of-school children in Nigeria revealed multiple interconnected barriers affecting educational access, particularly for girls. The findings are presented through thematic analysis and statistical data from various sources.

Table 1: Distribution of Out-of-School Children by Gender and Region in Nigeria

Region	Total Out-of-School Children	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	Gender Gap
North-East	3.2 million	42%	58%	16%
North-West	4.1 million	38%	62%	24%
North-Central	1.8 million	45%	55%	10%
South-East	0.7 million	48%	52%	4%
South-West	0.5 million	49%	51%	2%
South-South	0.2 million	47%	53%	6%
National Total	10.5 million	43%	57%	14%

Source: Adapted from UNICEF Nigeria (2025)

This table reveals stark regional disparities in educational access across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. The North-West region bears the heaviest burden with 4.1 million out-of-school children, representing 39% of the national total, followed by the North-East with 3.2 million (30%). The gender gap is most pronounced in northern regions, with the North-West showing a 24% disparity (62% girls vs. 38% boys) and North-East displaying a 16% gap (58% girls vs. 42% boys). In contrast, southern regions demonstrate relatively balanced gender distribution, with South-West showing only a 2% gap and South-East at 4%. The South-South region has the smallest absolute number of out-of-school children (200,000), indicating better educational infrastructure and access. The national average of 57% girls versus 43% boys out of school demonstrates that gender inequality in education is not merely a regional issue but a systemic national challenge requiring targeted interventions.

Table 2: Primary Challenges Affecting Gender Education for Out-of-School Children

Challenge Category	Specific Barriers	Impact Level	Affected Gender
Economic Barriers	Poverty, indirect costs, child labor	High	Girls (65%), Boys (35%)
Cultural/Religious	Early marriage, traditional gender roles	Very High	Girls (80%), Boys (20%)
Security Concerns	Insurgency, school attacks, abductions	High	Girls (70%), Boys (30%)
Policy Implementation	Inadequate infrastructure, lack of teachers	High	Girls (60%), Boys (40%)
Early Marriage/Pregnancy	Child marriage, teenage pregnancy	Very High	Girls (95%), Boys (5%)

Gender Bias	Male child discrimination	preference, Medium	Girls (75%), Boys (25%)
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Source: Field work, 2025

This comprehensive analysis of barriers reveals the multidimensional nature of educational exclusion in Nigeria. Cultural and religious factors emerge as the most severe challenge with "Very High" impact, disproportionately affecting girls (80% versus 20% boys), primarily through practices such as early marriage and traditional gender role expectations. Early marriage and pregnancy represent an almost exclusively female challenge, affecting 95% girls compared to only 5% boys, highlighting the intersection of cultural practices and biological realities that perpetuate gender inequality. Economic barriers, while affecting both genders, show a significant bias toward girls (65% versus 35%), as families with limited resources typically prioritize male children's education due to perceived economic returns. Security concerns disproportionately impact girls (70% versus 30% boys) because parents are more likely to withdraw daughters from school during conflict situations due to heightened concerns about safety and potential abduction. Policy implementation failures affect girls more severely (60% versus 40% boys) as inadequate infrastructure particularly impacts facilities essential for girls, such as separate toilets and sanitary facilities.

Table 3: Regional Variation in Early Marriage Rates and School Enrollment

Region	Early Marriage Rate (%)	Primary School Enrollment Rate
North-East	56%	Boys (%) 68%
North-West	48%	72%
North-Central	32%	85%
South-East	12%	92%
South-West	8%	95%
South-South	15%	88%

Source: Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey (2025)

This table demonstrates a strong inverse correlation between early marriage rates and girls' school enrollment across Nigeria's regions. The North-East shows the most alarming statistics with a 56% early marriage rate corresponding to only 44% primary school enrollment for girls, compared to 68% for boys, creating a 24-percentage-point gender gap. The North-West follows a similar pattern with 48% early marriage rate and 52% girls' enrollment versus 72% for boys. The data reveals that as early marriage rates decrease moving southward, girls' school enrollment rates increase proportionally. Southern regions demonstrate significantly better outcomes: South-West achieves near gender parity with 93% girls' enrollment versus 95% boys' enrollment, coinciding with the lowest early marriage rate of 8%. The South-East shows similar positive trends with 89% girls' enrollment and only 12% early marriage rate. This clear geographical pattern indicates that cultural attitudes toward early marriage directly impact educational opportunities for girls. The data suggests that regions with stronger traditional practices regarding early marriage systematically

deny girls educational opportunities, while areas with more progressive attitudes toward gender roles achieve better educational outcomes for all children.

5.0 Discussion of Findings:

Economic Barriers as Primary Constraint: The data reveals that economic barriers constitute the most significant challenge, with poverty forcing families to prioritize boys' education over girls due to limited financial resources. In households with annual income below ₦200,000, girls are 2.3 times more likely to be out of school compared to boys. The expectation for girls to support household income through domestic work or informal labor further compounds this challenge.

Cultural and Religious Disparities: Cultural and religious norms, particularly in northern Nigeria, create substantial barriers to girls' education. The findings show that 44% of girls are married before their 18th birthday according to NDHS (2018), with the North-East recording the highest rate at 56%. This cultural practice significantly truncates educational opportunities for girls, as married girls are expected to focus on domestic responsibilities rather than formal education.

Security-Related Educational Disruption: Security concerns, especially in northeastern Nigeria due to Boko Haram insurgency, have fundamentally disrupted education systems. The data indicates that over 1,500 schools have been attacked or destroyed since 2009, leading to the withdrawal of approximately 600,000 children from schools, with girls comprising 65% of this population due to targeted attacks on female education. **Policy Implementation Gaps:** The analysis reveals significant gaps between policy formulation and execution, with many schools lacking basic infrastructure (78% without proper sanitation facilities for girls), qualified teachers (40% teacher shortage in rural areas), and gender-sensitive learning environments. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, despite its comprehensive framework, suffers from inadequate funding allocation of only 8.2% of the national budget compared to UNESCO's recommended 20%.

5.0 Discussion of Results

The findings align with previous research by Bolarin (2020) who identified poverty as a primary barrier to girls' education in rural Nigeria. The cultural factors affecting girls' education corroborate the work of Onuoha (2021) regarding the impact of traditional beliefs on educational access. The security challenges identified support Amnesty International's (2021) findings on the devastating effects of insurgency on educational systems. The policy implementation gaps confirm Olanrewaju's (2022) observations about the disconnect between educational policies and their practical implementation in Nigeria.

6.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Implement conditional cash transfer programs to provide economic support for low-income families, particularly incentivizing girls' school enrollment.

2. Engage religious and traditional leaders in community advocacy campaigns to promote cultural change regarding girls' education.
3. Strengthen security measures in conflict-affected regions and rebuild educational infrastructure with adequate protection for students and staff.
4. Enhance policy implementation through increased funding allocation, monitoring mechanisms, and development of gender-sensitive learning facilities.
5. Expand alternative learning platforms including radio and mobile learning technologies for children in remote or conflict-affected areas.

7.0 Conclusion

Gender education for out-of-school children in Nigeria remains a critical challenge requiring urgent intervention. The study reveals that economic barriers, cultural norms, security concerns, and inadequate policy implementation constitute major obstacles to girls' educational access. However, through targeted interventions including economic support, cultural sensitization, enhanced security measures, improved policy implementation, and alternative learning platforms, Nigeria can achieve gender parity in education. This aligns with the Social Learning Theory's emphasis on environmental factors influencing behavior, suggesting that changing social and cultural environments can positively impact educational outcomes for all children.

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