

## **Girl-Child Education: A Genuine Tool for Poverty Reduction and Inclusive Development**

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### **Abstract**

*Girl-child education refers to the aspect of education that aims at developing the skills and knowledge of girls and women from all castes, races, and backgrounds. In Nigeria, like many other developing countries, girl-child education has often been neglected due to deep-seated cultural beliefs and economic difficulties that cut across the land, from the North to the south and from the East to the West. This paper, therefore, examined girl-child education issues concerning poverty reduction and development within the setting of Nigerian society. The rampancy, causes, implications, and remedies were conspicuously highlighted with a deliberate focus on girl-child education as a tool for its reduction as well as enhancing inclusive development amidst the persistent social problems facing the nation. The concept of girl-child education was explicitly discussed. Benefits and challenges facing girl-child education as well as implications for inclusive development were also discussed. The paper observed that Nigeria is still struggling to meet its set target of a poverty-free nation despite several governments' efforts on girl-child education. The paper eventually offered appropriate solutions and recommended among others that the government should aggressively invest in girl-child education by ensuring that girls and women have access to quality education for the much-desired positive impacts on the larger economy and the overall inclusive development of the nation.*

**Keywords:** Girl-child, Education, Poverty, Reduction, Development, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Education is the process by which individuals are made more functional members of their society. Education is an inalienable right of all, irrespective of the person's circumstances (Obinaju, 2014). To educate a girl child means to train her mind, character, and abilities. Education is a fundamental human right that should be availed to every girl child, irrespective of age and nationality. Education is a critical factor in reducing poverty and promoting long-term economic growth (World Bank, 2018). Girls' education is a strategic development priority. Women who are better educated are likely to be healthier than the uneducated ones (UNESCO, 2019). They tend to be involved more in the formal labour market, earn more income, give birth to fewer children, marry at a later age, and provide better health care and education to their children (Malala Fund, 2020). These factors, put together, can help households out of poverty.

However, female education has suffered great neglect in the past due to cultural beliefs and traditions, among other reasons. As reported by UNICEF (2007), and cited by Grace (2010), the global figure for out-of-school children is estimated to be 121 million, out of which 65 million (approximately 53.8%) were girls, and over 80 percent of these girls live in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2011, according to President Goodluck Jonathan, Nigeria had 9 million (37%) out-of-school children, which is more than one-third of its primary school-age children and is the highest in Africa (Tayoaka et al., 2014). In another development, the Nigerian President, Muhammed Buhari, as quoted on January 16, 2020, stated that Nigeria has 13.2 million out-of-school children, with the girl-child accounting for 60% of this figure (Buhari, 2020, as cited in Adebayo, 2021). Despite the efforts of Goodluck Jonathan, Nigerian girls not in school still number around 7 million.

Girls are discriminated against in Nigeria in access to educational opportunities, food, and nutrition (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The girls have been left behind in Nigeria's education system, particularly by many families who have often prioritized the education of boys, denying their female counterparts the same opportunity to learn and develop the skills necessary to succeed in life (Afolayan, 2018). This has not only perpetuated gender inequality but also deprived the country of the full potential of half of its population (UN Women, 2020). Girl child education in this paper is therefore being discussed in subsections under the following headings: concept of girl child education, importance of girl child education, girl child education and inclusive development, government efforts on girl child education, and challenges facing girl child education.

### **Concept of Girl Child Education**

A girl child is described as a female child between infancy and early adulthood (Okay, 2012). A girl-child is also referred to as a female between the ages of 6–18 years (Mukhtar et al., 2011). The National Child Welfare Policy (1989, as cited in Ada, 2007) defines the girl-child as a person below 14 years of age. It is a known fact that education is a platform through which skills, knowledge, and abilities for reducing poverty and enhancing inclusive development are acquired (World Bank, 2018). Girl child education, therefore, refers to the aspect of education that aims at developing the skills and knowledge of girls and women from all castes, races, and backgrounds (UNESCO, 2020).

Education is a vital tool for girls and women to claim their rightful place in society (Malala Fund, 2019). It also helps them realize their potential in economic, political, and social aspects. Above all, it is the most powerful means to lift people out of poverty (European Journal of Social Sciences, 2021). For the girl child, education is one of the first steps in participating in society and freeing herself from economic exploitation and patriarchal oppression. Education is an instrument capable of correcting inequality in any society (UN Women, 2019). The exclusion of girls from education denies them the opportunity to develop their potential and to play a crucial role in their families, country, and the world at large (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Providing more education for girls will increase their involvement in the political process and further the spread of information on several health-related threats, such as female circumcision, early pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases. Educating girls may also result in a decrease in infant and maternal mortality, domestic and sexual violence, and child marriages (UNICEF, 2021).

### **Importance of Girl Child Education in the Society**

The benefits of girl-child education to men and society cannot be over-emphasized. Girl child education is of great benefit to the individual, her family, the community, and the country as a whole. Below are some of the benefits of girl child education in Nigeria:

1. **Impacting on the education of the future girl child:** If a girl child is educated and grows up to become a successful mother in her chosen career or vocation, she is likely to ensure that her children equally receive good education for them to enjoy the benefits she enjoyed. So if we educate a girl, we educate a family and a nation.
2. **Reduction in infant mortality rate:** Educated mothers are acquainted with diseases and the various preventive measures to avert them, unlike uneducated mothers whose children are more likely to die from preventable diseases such as cholera, tetanus, poliovirus, measles, etc. For instance, in the rural area, cultural challenges may prevent immunization from getting to the children and/or mothers that need it thereby putting them at risk of future health challenges and financial stress on the children or family. If not well handled, it may result in fatality.
3. **Contribution to national development:** Through girl-child education, important basic knowledge and vocational information are acquired for wealth creation and job placement (if she attains a higher level of education). Taxes are paid by these engaged women to government coffers which are now used for various developmental projects.
4. **Reduction in child marriage:** It is the practice in some communities in the Northern part of the country to give the hands of their young girls in marriage at early ages (around 9 years). This act abruptly put an end to their education. Denied access to education will affect the girls seriously as they grow up to become illiterate adults. There is a high tendency that educated girl children when grown-up will want to give education to their female children because of its benefits and the edge they have over the illiterate women counterparts.

### **Challenges Facing Girl Child Education in Nigeria**

Many girl-children are not in school today for various reasons. They are denied access to education due to issues like poverty, discrimination, culture, and emergencies (UNICEF,

2021). These girls have the same aspirations as their male counterparts to attend school, secure good jobs, and support their families and communities. Instead of being encouraged, they often face discrimination and are regarded as second-class citizens (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Below are some of the key challenges facing girls' education:

1. **Early Marriage:** Child marriages occur worldwide, but the highest rates are in Niger (76%), the Central African Republic, and Chad (68% each). In Northern Nigeria, marriage is often prioritized over education, leading to an abrupt end to schooling for many girls (Okafor, 2019). While boys can also be affected, girls are disproportionately impacted, often resulting in lifelong poverty due to limited education (UNFPA, 2021).
2. **Pregnancy:** Many schools enforce policies that ban pregnant girls from attending (Plan International, 2020). Even after giving birth, many do not return due to stigma, financial constraints, or inflexible school programs (Amnesty International, 2021).
3. **Violence in Schools:** About 246 million children experience violence at or on their way to school yearly, with girls being particularly vulnerable (UNESCO, 2019). In Africa, nearly half of schoolchildren face bullying, and 18 million girls aged 15–19 experience sexual violence, often leading to school dropout (WHO, 2020).
4. **Lack of Funding:** Families and communities often prioritize boys' education, leaving girls with inadequate financial support (World Bank, 2019). Many believe investing in girls is wasteful since they will eventually marry (Adichie, 2018).
5. **Child/Domestic Labor:** Economic hardships force many girls into labor, depriving them of education (ILO, 2021). These girls face risks like trafficking, sexual abuse, and forced labor (UNODC, 2020).
6. **Unsafe Routes to School:** Long, unsafe commutes expose girls to harassment, assault, and abduction (Global Partnership for Education, 2021). Many parents keep girls home due to these dangers (Malala Fund, 2020).
7. **Hygiene Issues:** Poor sanitation facilities force menstruating girls to miss 3–5 school days monthly. Mixed-gender toilets also increase risks of sexual harassment (UN Women, 2020).
8. **Inadequate Female Teachers:** Schools with few female teachers are less welcoming to girls (Education International, 2019). In Liberia and CAR, only 20% of primary teachers are women.
9. **Conflict Zones:** Girls in war-torn areas are 90% more likely to miss secondary school (UNICEF, 2022). Attacks on girls' schools further deter attendance.

10. **Disability Discrimination:** Girls with disabilities face compounded barriers, with only 41.7% completing primary school compared to 52.9% of non-disabled girls (WHO, 2018).
11. **Poverty in Developing Countries:** Poor nations struggle to fund education, despite its proven role in reducing poverty and boosting economies (OECD, 2020).
12. **Natural Disasters:** Crises like floods and pandemics push girls into early marriage and out of school (ODI, 2021). Families losing livelihoods can no longer afford education (Brookings, 2022).

### **Government Efforts of Government on Girl-Child Education**

In 2013, World Bank Country Director Marie-Francoise Marie-Nelly stated that 100 million Nigerians live in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2013). According to the World Bank, extreme poverty means living on less than \$1.25 daily. More recently, the World Poverty Clock (2023) reported that 71 million Nigerians live in extreme poverty. The Rivers State's All Progressives Congress governorship candidate, Tonye Cole, reinforced this by stating, "Nigeria has the awful distinction of being the world capital of poverty, with 71 million people living in extreme poverty today (World Poverty Clock, 2023) and a total of 133 million people classed as multi-dimensionally poor according to National Bureau of Statistics data" (Cole, 2023, as cited in The Guardian, 2023).

Global and local statistics demonstrate that Nigeria's poverty state requires deliberate intervention through various strategies, including significant investment in girl-child education, which has proven effective in reducing unemployment (UNDP, 2022). Below are highlights of government efforts to improve girl child education:

1. **Establishment of the National Commission for Mass Literacy and Non-formal Education in 1991.** This commission was tasked with collaborating with stakeholders to eradicate illiteracy in Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Education, 2015).
2. **Universal Basic Education (UBE) program:** Launched in 1999 to provide compulsory, qualitative basic education for all Nigerian children, including girls (UBEC, 2020).
3. **Girls' Education Project (GEP):** A UNICEF-supported initiative implemented in collaboration with state governments to increase girls' enrollment and retention in Northern Nigeria (UNICEF Nigeria, 2021).
4. **Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Program:** A government initiative providing cash transfers to poor households conditional on school attendance, particularly for girls.

5. **Safe School Initiative (SSI):** A government-led program to enhance school safety, especially in conflict areas (Federal Ministry of Education, 2014).
6. **National Gender Policy (NGP):** Developed in 2006 to promote gender equality and eliminate discrimination against women and girls (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2006).
7. **National Plan of Action for the Education of Girls (NPAEG):** Established in 2004 to improve girls' education outcomes, particularly in Northern Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Education, 2005).

### **Strategies to Improve Girl Child Education in Nigeria**

According to UNICEF chief field officer in Kano, Mr Rahaman Muhammed Farah, recently disclosed that 10 million girls are out of school in Nigeria and that the majority of them are from the Northern part of the country. This shows that the country must do something urgently to reverse the number. Below are the ways to improve the girl child education in Nigeria:

1. The Nigerian government and the media should increase public awareness and implement laws that forbid discrimination against girl-child education to raise the standard of female education
2. The government should make frantic efforts to remove the barriers that can prevent girls from accessing education. e.g. provision of sanitary pads and water for schools to encourage adolescent girls from coming to school during their monthly flows.
3. Parents and guardians should endeavor to reduce the house chores of the girl child. Assigning girls with plenty of domestic work is common to families in developing countries such as Nigeria etc. It is advised that house chores should be shared among members of the family so that girls can have time for education.
4. The Government should ensure adequate security in schools so that they will be safe havens for girls. This will also encourage more girls' enrolment in school and improve their attendance as well.
5. There should be massive education of teachers on gender issues: Teachers are known to be custodians of knowledge and as such must teach with open minds without biases concerning gender. Teachers should endeavor to neutralize any conceptions about girl child education.
6. Church, Mosque and other religious leaders should also join the crusade for girl child education by properly educating their followers, which may involve parents, guardians, etc about the importance of girl child education as well as neutralizing any wrong view they may be holding on firmly to.

7. The members of the public should be carried along on the issue of girl child education. This can come in the form of awareness creation for the noise about girl child education to be loud enough for all the stakeholders to begin the prioritization of girl child education.
8. The government should create a proper working system to meet the special needs or demands of female students. School calendars and timetables should be flexible enough to allow for seasonal jobs that can fetch them money to support their education.
9. The primary education management board and other related bodies should improve on their functions and activities. This body and other related ones are assigned the roles of bringing government policies to bear in the local government areas. In other words, they decentralize government policies and programs for effectiveness and easy participation of the people.
10. The government should ensure that all laws and regulations that will favor girl child education are followed and duplicated across the strata of government.

## Summary

Education is a fundamental human right that should be availed to every girl-child regardless of age, sex, color, and nationality (United Nations, 1948). No question that educating girls is a prerequisite for eradicating poverty (World Bank, 2018). Education is a critical factor in reducing poverty and promoting long-term economic growth (UNESCO, 2020). Girls' education is a strategic development priority that holds numerous benefits for any society (Global Partnership for Education, 2021).

Educated women tend to participate more in the formal labor market, earn higher incomes, have fewer children, marry at a later age, and provide better healthcare and education for their children (World Bank, 2019). These factors can lift many households out of poverty (Malala Fund, 2020). Education empowers and transforms women by breaking the cycle of exclusion that keeps them at home and disengaged from decision-making (UN Women, 2021).

Higher education, in particular, prepares women for leadership roles in government, business, and civil society (UNDP, 2022). Research indicates that women make ideal leaders as they tend to allocate resources more wisely than men, with a larger percentage of their income being spent on food and education for their children (UN, 2020). Therefore, enhancing women's economic and political participation directly benefits future generations (UNICEF, 2021).

Providing quality university education for women constitutes a long-term investment in their children's futures (OECD, 2019). Deliberate investment in girls' education not only

reduces poverty but also enhances inclusive development for a better society (ADB, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Girl child education has become an issue of global and national concern considering the increasing number of out-of-school children yearly as evidenced by various statistics globally and Nigeria in particular. The benefits of educating the girls in the society cannot be over-emphasized. However, for Nigeria to enjoy the sweet in girl child education, it must put in deliberate efforts to confront the various challenges militating against girl child education so that the attendant benefit of gainful employment which reduces poverty can be harvested. Also, the big statistical figures on out-of-school children can only be reversed if all hands are on deck to achieve the various aims and objectives of government policies and programs on girl child education.

### **Recommendations**

Girl child education can be a good tool to reverse the trend of unemployment in Nigeria and also achieve massive development without leaving anybody behind if the following recommendations can be considered

1. The government should employ more qualified teachers in the rural areas where the majority of vulnerable girls reside and ensure a balanced distribution of educational amenities and facilities in both the urban and rural areas. This will encourage the teachers in the rural areas to stay for a longer period of time before seeking transfer elsewhere.
2. There should be a strict follow-up and implementation of the Universal Basic Education program in the country.
3. The government should create more awareness on the promotion of girls' rights so that they can be protected by all and sundry.
4. Females should be allowed to lead or drive the implementation of most government policies and projects targeted at improving girls' education in order to have great impacts on the girls.
5. The government should encourage girl-child education using scholarships as bait of enticement to enable poor parents and those who have to consider sending only boys to school over scarce resources to be able to send their girls to school.
6. There should be thought-through strategies to strengthen the enforcement of policies to enable pregnant girls and young mothers to stay in school and discourage child marriages.



7. Government agencies should revive, review, and monitor the curriculum and teachings in classes that are gender biased.
8. The government should ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for girls. Just as the new IG, Egbetokun, has set up a special force to secure schools across the country.
9. The government should ensure that displaced girls in every part of the country have access to basic education.
10. The post-insurgency reconstruction program for the Northeastern part of the country should involve strategies that will encourage and promote girl-child education at all levels in the sub-region.

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