

Gender and Socio-Economic Disparities in Education in Nigeria

Dr. Kingsley Edinoh, PhD^{1*}✉; Ruth Asemota²; OCHE, Ivy Grace O³; Dr. Mrs. Adesola Oluwatoyin Omolabake⁴

¹Test Development Department, National Examinations Council (NECO) Headquarters, Minna, Niger State.

²Department of Guidance and Counselling, Faculty of Education, University of Abuja, Nigeria.

³Department of Education Management, Faculty of Education, University of Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria.

⁴Father O'Connell Science College, Minna, Niger State.

*Corresponding Author: Dr. Kingsley Edinoh, PhD

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17094127>

Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>Education is a fundamental driver of socio-economic development, yet disparities based on gender and socio-economic status continue to hinder equitable access to quality education in Nigeria. This paper explores the interplay of gender and socio-economic factors in shaping educational outcomes in Nigeria. It highlights systemic challenges such as cultural norms, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure, insecurity and weak institutions that disproportionately affect girls and children from low-income households. By examining existing policies and interventions, the paper provides insights into progress made and gaps that need to be addressed to ensure inclusive education for all. This is an analytic position paper. Through an analysis of secondary data gathered from various print and online sources, the paper emphasizes the need for addressing these challenges in order to effectively bridge the gender and socio-economic disparity in education in Nigeria.</i>
Received: 24-08-2025	
Accepted: 05-09-2025	
Published: 10-09-2025	
Copyright © 2025 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.	
Citation: Dr. Kingsley Edinoh, PhD; Ruth Asemota, OCHE, Ivy Grace O, Dr. Mrs. Adesola Oluwatoyin Omolabake, (2025). Gender and Socio-Economic Disparities in Education in Nigeria, UKR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (UKRJAHS), volume 1(7), 79-84.	Keywords: Education, Gender, Socio-Economic Disparity.

Introduction

Women represent more than half of the global population and make crucial contributions to social and economic development. Across different societies, they perform multiple roles, including motherhood, production, household management, community organization, and participation in socio-cultural and political activities. The latter, particularly, has been advanced through women's movements worldwide. In Nigeria, women equally account for almost half of the population and contribute significantly to national development. However, despite their numerical strength and diverse roles, women are still under-recognized in many spheres, including education, due largely to entrenched cultural stereotypes, religious norms, traditional practices, and patriarchal family structures (Edinoh, Odili, & Nwafor, 2023).

Education is universally acknowledged as a critical driver and key indicator of sustainable development (UNDP, 2015). Within the Sustainable Livelihood Framework introduced by the Department for International Development (DfID) in 1997, livelihood capitals/assets are

emphasized as determinants of individual well-being and

societal progress. Among these, human capital—comprising education, knowledge, skills, health, and other individual capabilities—stands out as fundamental (DfID, 2000). Education, therefore, is not only a catalyst for development but also a fundamental human right to be enjoyed by all, regardless of gender.

According to UNESCO (2015), ensuring both men and women are equitably included in education is essential for broad-based development outcomes. Education fosters both professional advancement and socio-economic empowerment. Several scholars, including Afzal et al. (2013), Schultz (2002), Barriteau (2000), and Tunali (1996), have underscored the vital role of gender-inclusive education in accelerating economic development. Collectively, these studies highlight the dangers of persisting disparities, particularly in Africa, where slow progress in education has hampered sustainable growth.

In Nigeria, education is widely regarded as a cornerstone for national transformation and individual empowerment. Yet, the country's diverse cultural practices and pronounced socio-economic inequalities continue to sustain disparities in access, retention, and academic performance. Gender and socio-economic status remain two of the most critical factors shaping these educational outcomes, thereby perpetuating cycles of inequality. This paper, therefore, interrogates the challenges and implications of gender and socio-economic disparities in Nigeria's educational system, while also assessing current policies and proposing strategies for building a more inclusive and equitable educational framework.

Context and Background

Nigeria is home to over 200 million people, with nearly 44% of the population under the age of 15 (World Bank, 2021). Despite improvements in literacy rates and school enrollment, disparities persist. The net enrollment rate for primary education was 68% in 2020, with significant differences between urban and rural areas and between genders (UNESCO, 2021). Girls are disproportionately affected by barriers to education. Cultural norms in some regions prioritize early marriage over schooling for girls (UNICEF, 2020). Additionally, children from low-income households face economic constraints, often having to work to support their families, further reducing their likelihood of attending school (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2019).

Conceptual Clarification of Gender Equality

Building on the work of Alexander and Welzel (2007), gender equality can be understood through four key dimensions. The first relates to women's livelihood, often measured using the Gender Development Index (GDI). This index captures disparities between men and women in areas such as literacy, educational attainment, living standards, and life expectancy. The second dimension is civic participation, which considers the proportion of adult women engaged in civic activities such as signing petitions, attending demonstrations, or participating in boycotts. A third measure is positional empowerment, assessed through the Gender Empowerment Index (GEI), which records the representation of women in leadership, managerial, and administrative roles. Finally, gender equality in political representation is gauged by the share of women occupying seats in national parliaments.

Alexander and Welzel (2007) observed that when countries are ranked across these four dimensions, notable variations emerge. For example, Honduras, South Africa, and Mozambique were found to rank below the 25th percentile on both the GDI and GEI, yet exceeded the 75th percentile in terms of women's representation in parliament.

Conversely, nations such as the United States and Great Britain ranked within the 90th percentile for gender development and civic participation, and above the 75th percentile for empowerment, but fell slightly below the 50th percentile in parliamentary representation. Similarly, while Japan and France scored within the 90th percentile on the GDI, Japan remained in the 25th percentile for women in parliament, with France only slightly above that threshold. Interestingly, most European and English-speaking democracies consistently ranked above the 75th percentile across all four measures of gender equality. By contrast, countries such as Nigeria, Mongolia, and India persistently fell below the 25th percentile in every dimension, whereas Croatia, Portugal, Estonia, Latvia, and Malta occupied mid-range positions across the indicators (Alexander & Welzel, 2007).

Factors Contributing to Disparities

(i) Cultural Norms and Gender Bias

Culture strongly shapes how individuals behave and how societies respond to issues of gender. Deeply rooted cultural norms and gender bias remain significant barriers to gender equality and broader socio-economic development in Africa. Traditional beliefs about women's roles and status, particularly in rural communities, continue to restrict women's opportunities (Sadie, 2005, cited in Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019).

In northern Nigeria, for example, cultural practices such as child marriage reinforce gender gaps in education. UNICEF (2020) reports that about 43% of girls in the region are married before the age of 18, which drastically reduces their chances of continuing their education. Conversely, boys are more likely to be encouraged to pursue schooling, especially in areas where patriarchal structures remain dominant. As Kangas et al. (2015) argue, such constraints are rooted in entrenched patriarchal systems that grant men authority over family and decision-making, sustaining a gendered division of labour and limiting women's empowerment.

These dynamics are not unique to Nigeria. In Ethiopia, for instance, societal values shaped by culture and religion often define women primarily as wives and mothers. Gender Links (2019) notes that women's worth is still largely tied to domestic roles, and International IDEA (2021) highlights proverbs in Amharic that discourage women's visibility in public or political spaces—for example, sayings that confine women to kitchens while portraying men as natural leaders. Such cultural narratives reinforce doubts about women's leadership capabilities and hinder their participation in governance.

Nigeria itself is widely recognized as a patriarchal society, where men dominate public and private spheres. Ogunode

and Salman (2023) observe that patriarchal practices significantly limit women's presence in higher education, including low enrolment and underrepresentation in university leadership. The National Gender Policy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2006) and several scholars (Ndiyo, 2011; Nakpodia & Urien, 2012; Lawan & Muhammed, 2014) emphasize that patriarchy continues to erode women's rights, influencing the socialization of children and shaping discriminatory development policies. These practices also perpetuate gender-based violence, early marriage, widowhood rites, and harmful traditions such as female genital mutilation.

Earlier works by Aina (1998), Ogunode (2016), Sarkinfada and Hussaini (2019), and Ogunode and Ndubuisi (2021a) similarly underscore that culture is a powerful instrument in defining gender relations. They argue that understanding gender ideology in Nigerian society requires a close look at how cultural systems have institutionalized patriarchal dominance, thereby constraining women's social, educational, and political opportunities.

(ii) Economic Inequality:

Economic deprivation remains one of the strongest determinants of unequal access to education in Nigeria. For many households living under financial strain, immediate survival often takes precedence over long-term investments such as schooling. In such contexts, families may resort to marrying off their daughters at an early age, both to reduce household expenses and as a means of generating resources to support male children's education. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2019) reports that more than 40% of Nigerians live below the poverty line, rendering education a luxury rather than a necessity for many families.

Similar patterns are observed across other African contexts. In South Sudan, for example, entrenched cultural norms and financial hardship intersect to restrict women's participation in public and economic life. Practices such as child or arranged marriages frequently force girls to abandon schooling, thereby curtailing their opportunities to pursue professional careers or secure financial independence. UNESCO data cited in Gender Links (2019) reveal that female literacy among women aged 15 to 64 in South Sudan stands at only 20.6%, highlighting the severity of the gap. Customary law further reinforces these limitations by valuing women primarily in their roles as mothers and daughters, with their worth tied to the wealth they bring through marriage. Women are thus perceived as custodians of tradition rather than as equal contributors to national development, which perpetuates economic marginalization.

(iii) Infrastructure and Resource Gaps

Sarkinfada (2013) describes infrastructural facilities as the essential amenities that support both academic and non-academic service delivery in educational institutions. These include libraries, laboratories, lecture halls, administrative buildings, hostels, road networks, water supply, electricity, and internet connectivity. Despite their importance to educational development, many institutions continue to struggle with shortages and inadequacies in these facilities. Ogunode, Kingsley, and Rauf (2023), alongside Udida, Bassey, Udofia, and Egbona (2009), emphasized that the absence of adequate infrastructure creates a major obstacle to the achievement of educational objectives. Where classrooms, staff offices, laboratories, and computers are insufficient, teaching and learning processes are inevitably hindered.

This challenge is more pronounced in rural areas, where schools often operate with limited classrooms, outdated or insufficient learning materials, and a shortage of qualified teachers. In contrast, schools in urban centers tend to be better equipped, widening the educational gap between rural and urban learners. This disparity often leads to biased decisions about resource allocation, where boys are more likely to be prioritized over girls in accessing the limited opportunities available (World Bank, 2021).

(iv) Security Concerns

Insecurity in Nigeria has become a pressing social issue with profound implications for education, the economy, and society at large (Olowonefa, Edinoh, & Asemota, 2025). Solomon and Solomon (2021) note that the rising forms of insecurity have assumed disturbing dimensions, severely disrupting various sectors, especially education and tertiary institutions. In the North-East, insurgency and terrorism have destroyed schools, displaced families, and led to the death or forced recruitment of young men into militant groups. These conditions have left women and girls particularly vulnerable, often resulting in their exclusion from formal education. The Boko Haram insurgency, which explicitly opposes Western education, has significantly widened both gender and socio-economic inequalities (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

In an attempt to mitigate these threats, managers of tertiary institutions have been encouraged to work closely with federal and state security agencies to safeguard campuses and learning environments. As a result, many institutions have introduced various security management strategies aimed at protecting students, staff, and other stakeholders. However, institutions in regions such as the North-East, North-West, and parts of the South-East remain highly exposed. In many cases, security measures are either insufficient, poorly coordinated, or inadequately implemented, leaving communities with persistent feelings of vulnerability. Consequently, for many families,

education becomes a secondary concern as the struggle for safety and survival takes precedence.

(v) Weak Institutions

The federal government has established several agencies to oversee the implementation of gender policies in public and private institutions. However, many of these bodies remain weak and ineffective in fulfilling their mandates (Edinoh, Odili, & Nwafor, 2023; Ogunode & Salman, 2023). The *National Gender Policy* (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008) provides both institutional and operational frameworks designed to promote gender equality across all sectors. It introduced the Gender Management System (GMS), built on four pillars—enabling environment, GMS structures, GMS mechanisms, and GMS processes—to guide the management of gender equality initiatives.

The responsibility for mainstreaming gender equality does not rest solely on government agencies; it extends to line ministries, state and community apparatuses, civil society, and the private sector. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Women's Affairs and its organs at federal, state, and local government levels are expected to play the central coordinating role in advancing women's empowerment and enforcing compliance with gender policies. Unfortunately, most of the public institutions tasked with ensuring the effective integration of gender policies in both public and private organizations, including universities, remain weak and lack the institutional strength to drive meaningful change (Sarkinfa, 2020; Nigeria Centenary Country Report on Women, 2013; National Gender Policy, 2008).

Policy Interventions and their Impact

Despite the challenges affecting gender equality in education, successive governments and development partners have introduced various policy interventions aimed at bridging the gap. However, the scope and effectiveness of these interventions remain limited.

(i) Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme

Launched in 1999, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme was designed to provide free and compulsory education for children aged 6–15 years. Although the policy has improved enrollment rates, its impact is undermined by persistent challenges such as inadequate funding and weak implementation structures (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019). Funding constraints remain particularly critical. Victor and Babatunde (2014), Sarkinfa (2013, 2016) argue that the inability of both federal and state governments to implement the UNESCO recommendation of allocating 15–20% of the annual budget to education is largely responsible for the underfunding of the sector. Consequently, UBE's potential to fully address issues of access and equity has been significantly constrained.

(ii) Girls' Education Project (GEP)

The Girls' Education Project (GEP), implemented by UNICEF in partnership with the Nigerian government, targets improved access to education for girls, especially in northern Nigeria where gender disparities are most pronounced. The programme has recorded measurable success in increasing enrollment and retention of girls in schools, thereby contributing to narrowing the gender gap in education (UNICEF, 2020). Nevertheless, its sustainability and scalability remain dependent on consistent government support and community participation.

(iii) Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Programmes

Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) schemes provide financial incentives to poor households on the condition that children, particularly girls, are enrolled and retained in school. These initiatives have proven effective in reducing the financial barriers associated with schooling and mitigating the effects of poverty on educational access. However, their coverage remains limited, with many vulnerable households excluded from the intervention (World Bank, 2021).

Suggestions

(i) Community Engagement

Efforts to change cultural norms should involve community leaders, parents, and local stakeholders. Advocacy campaigns highlighting the benefits of girls' education can help shift societal attitudes. Another critical measure is to engage women through awareness campaigns.

(ii) Targeted Financial Support

Expanding CCT programs and providing scholarships for disadvantaged students can alleviate the economic burden on families.

(iii) Improved Infrastructure and Teacher Training

Investing in rural schools and training teachers to deliver quality education are critical steps to address disparities in educational outcomes.

(iv) Enhanced Security Measures

strengthening security in conflict-affected areas is essential to protect schools and ensure uninterrupted learning.

Conclusion

Gender and socio-economic disparities in education continue to pose significant challenges to Nigeria's sustainable development. Although various policies and programmes have made notable progress, the persistence of cultural, economic, institutional, and infrastructural barriers undermines their effectiveness. Achieving gender equity in education therefore requires more comprehensive,

inclusive, and context-sensitive strategies that address both systemic and attitudinal challenges. Importantly, the pervasive cultural trends that favour and perpetuate gender disparities across Africa have fostered a climate of conservatism and resistance to the central role of gender equality in national development. Overcoming these barriers necessitates deliberate re-orientation by individuals, groups, institutions, and agencies—both governmental and non-governmental. Such re-orientation must translate into attitudinal change, policy enforcement, and social transformation. Only then can gender parity and women's empowerment serve as catalysts for building a more equitable educational system and, by extension, a more prosperous and sustainable future for Nigeria and the African continent.

REFERENCES

1. Afzal, M., Butt, A.R., Akbar, R.A., and Rosh, S. 2013, 'Gender disparity in Pakistan: a case of middle and secondary education in Punjab', *Journal of Research and Reflections in Education*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp.113 -124.
2. Aina, O. I. (2012). Two halves make a whole gender at the crossroads of the Nigerian Development Agenda. An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the Oduduwa Hall, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun state, Nigeria on Tuesday 25th September, 2012.
3. Alexander, A. C. & Welzel, C. (2007). Empowering Women: Four Theories Tested on Four Different Aspects of Gender Equality. Sociology. Retrieved from: www.democracy.uci.edu
4. Barriteau, V. E. 2000, 'Feminist Theory and Development: Implications for Policy, Research', and Action, in Barriteau, V.E. Parpart, J.L., and Connelly, M.P. (eds.), *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development*, International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, ON, Canada.
5. DFID 2000, 'Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets', Department for International Development, United Kingdom.
6. Edinoh. K, ODILI. C.A, Nwafor A.C (2023) Analysis of Factors Responsible for Gender Gap in the Appointment of Vice-Chancellors in Universities in Nigeria. *International Journal on Integrated Education Vol.6,Iss7, Jul 2023.p32-41* <https://journals.researchparks.org/index.php/IJIE>
7. Federal Ministry of Education. (2019). *Annual education sector performance report*. Abuja: Federal Government of Nigeria.
8. Gender Links, (2019). Ethiopia Fifty-Fifty Policy Brief. Unpublished. Gender Links, (2019). Burundi Fifty-Fifty Policy Brief. Unpublished. George, R. (2019). Gender norms and women's political participation: Global trends and findings on norm change. Retrieved from: <https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/2019/02/gender-norms-and-womens-political-participation-global-trends-and-findings-norm>
9. Human Rights Watch. (2021). *They set the classrooms on fire: Attacks on education in Northeast Nigeria*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org>
10. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2021). Women's Political Participation ~ Africa Barometer 2021. Retrieved from: www.idea.int. doi:<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2021.21>.
11. Kangas, A., Haider, H., Fraser, E., & Browne, E. (2015). Gender and governance. Retrieved from: <https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/gender/gender-and-governance/>
12. Lawan, M. A. & Muhammed, H., H. (2014). Investigating gender differences in Academic performance in Chemistry and Physics among NCE student of Sa'adatu Rimi collage of education kumbotso: *Kano Journal of Educational Studies* (KAJEST), 4 (1), 71-76
13. Nakpodia, E. D. & Urien, J. (2012). Gender discrimination in Nigerian school system. *International Journal of Development and Management Review*, 1(7), 74-79.
14. National Bureau of Statistics. (2019). *Poverty and inequality in Nigeria: Executive summary*. Abuja: NBS.
15. Ndiyo, N. A. (2011). A dynamic analysis of education and economic growth in Nigeria. *Journal of Development Areas*, 41(1), 1-16.
16. Nigeria's National Gender Policy (2008). Strategic framework (implementation plan). *Federal Republic of Nigeria 2008 - 2013*. Abuja. Nigeria 25. Nigerian University System Statistical Digest (2019).

17. Nigeria Centenary Country Report on Women (2013). Hundred years of the Nigerian woman: Story, successes and challenges.
18. Mlambo, C. & Kapingura, F. (2019). Factors influencing women political participation: The case of the SADC region. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5(1), 1-13 doi:10.1080/23311886.2019.1681048
19. Ogunode. NJ, Edinoh. K, RAUF,O.S. (2023) Programme Accreditation in Tertiary Education. *European Journal of Higher Education and Academic Advancement* Volume 1, Issue 5 | 2023
20. Ogunode, N, J. & Salman, A. A. (2023). Gender imbalance in Nigerian university system. *Nigeria-American Journal of Public Diplomacy and International Studies*, 1(2), 59-68.
21. Ogunode, J. N. & Ndubuisi, A. G. (2021a). An investigation on factors preventing girl-child from further education in rural areas in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. *Journal of Science and Education*. 2(1), 30-38.
22. Ogunode, N. J. (2016). Issues and challenges of girl education in Nigeria. *JESS*, 1(2), 121-134.
23. Olowonefa,J.A ,Edinoh,K.& Asemota.R (2025). Security Management Strategies and Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria. *Best Journal of Innovation in Science, Research and Development*, 4(5), 64–71. Retrieved from <https://www.bjisrd.com/index.php/bjisrd/article/view/3294>
24. Sarkinfada, H. & Hussaini, M. (2019). Women participation in organisational activities in a democratic society as perceived by stakeholders in Northwest Nigeria. *International Journal for Scientific Research and Management*, (IJSRM), 7 (12), 1411-1448.
25. Sarkinfada, H. (2020). Stakeholders perception of the contribution of women centres for continuing education to the socio-economic development of graduates in North-West Nigeria. *Journal of Sociology and Education in Africa*, 17(1), 50 – 60.
26. Sarkinfada, .H.. (2013). Infrastructural Challenges in Nigeria Secondary Schools as Hindrance to Quality Education. published by African Journal of Academic Excellence 2(1) 1-5 ISSN; 2141-5099. KatsinaAfrican journal of academic
27. Sarkinfada, .H. (2016) Participants Perception of Learning Involvement and Challenges of Adult Continuing Education Programmes in Kwara State. *International Journal of Contemporary Education and Management(IJCEM)* 11(2). 126-143. ISSN: 3609-7986 . Oxford publications.
28. Schultz, T.P. 2002, 'Why governments should invest more to educate girls', *World Development*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 207-225.
29. Tunali, I. 1996, 'Education and work: experiences of 6-14 year old children in Turkey', *Education and labour market in Turkey: Proceedings of a seminar held in Ankara, Turkey*, State Institute of Statistics, Turkey.
30. Udida, I.A., Bassey, U.U, Udofia, I.U., Egbona, E.A. (2009). System performance and sustainability of higher education in Nigeria. Being a paper presented at the 11th International
31. UNESCO 2015, 'Global Education Monitoring Report - The Education for All Development Index', United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO, Paris, France, < <http://en.unesco.org/gem-report/education-all-development-index>>, accessed 16 Sept. 2016
32. UNDP 2015, 'Human Development Report 2015, United Nations Development Programme- UNDP, New York, USA, <<http://hdr.undp.org>>, accessed 14 April 2017.
33. UNESCO. (2021). *Nigeria education sector analysis*. Paris: UNESCO.
34. UNICEF. (2020). *Child marriage and education in Nigeria: A statistical analysis*. New York: UNICEF
35. Victor, A. A., & Babatunde, E. G. (2014). Motivation and Effective Performance of Academic Staff in Higher Education (Case Study of Adekunle Ajasin University, Ondo State, Nigeria). *Online Submission*, 1(2), 157-163.
36. World Bank. (2021). *Education statistics in Nigeria*. Washington, DC: World Bank.