

# WOMEN EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**Oroma Alikor, PhD**

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, Rivers State University, PMB 5080, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

**\*Corresponding Author:** Oroma Alikor, PhD**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18517043>

Article History	Abstract
<b>Original Research Article</b>	
<b>Received:</b> 20-01-2026	
<b>Accepted:</b> 05-02-2026	
<b>Published:</b> 07-02-2026	
Copyright © 2026 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.	<p><i>This paper explored women education and sustainable development in Nigeria and their implications with a particular focus on equal access to quality education for all, elimination of gender disparity in education, and full participation of women in leadership and decision making as enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 Agenda. Women, who constitute nearly half of Nigeria's population have continued to face systemic encumbrances to education due to cultural, religious, economic and political barriers. These impediments perpetuate cycles of poverty, illiteracy, and gender inequality. Drawing from historical analysis, the paper highlighted how cultural, political and religious practices, colonial and post-independence policies in Nigeria stifled women's access to education; encouraged gender stereotype and entrenched gender disparity in education and in key sectors of our national life. The study further examined UNESCO's position, which identified women education as an inevitable investment for nation building and sustainable development. Despite international interventions, challenges such as gender inequality, obnoxious cultural practices, child marriage, and inadequate infrastructure remain significant obstacles to women education. The study maintained that women education should be prioritized as a national development imperative rather than a gendered issue. In conclusion, the study affirmed that quality education of women will serve as a cornerstone for national development in Nigeria. Hence, the study recommended multi-sectoral interventions, participation of women in leadership and policy decision-making at all levels. It equally recommended that the on-going debates on the Bill for equitable representation of women in the socio-economic and political spheres of Nigeria be passed into law; while serious sensitization on the need for women to acquire higher education be intensified in all communities by government to ensure full involvement of women in national development, among others.</i></p>
<b>Citation:</b> Oroma Alikor, PhD. (2026). WOMEN EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT. UKR Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies (UKRJMS), Volume 2(2), 55-61.	<p><b>Keywords:</b> Economic Empowerment, Gender Inequality, Sustainable Development, Women Education.</p>

## Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged as the bedrock of development and social progress. In contemporary societies, the significance of women education cannot be overemphasized, particularly in a country like Nigeria where women constitute nearly half of the population. Despite this demographic advantage, women have historically faced systemic barriers to equal educational opportunities, often rooted in cultural, religious and economic structures. These barriers have resulted in gender

stereotype, gender inequality, poor human capital development and a persistent cycle of poverty. The disparity in the intellectual society especially towards women education has created a setback in the development of Nigeria. Education for sustainable development should encourage changes in knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to create a more sustainable and just society for all. In achieving this goal, women cannot be left behind (Nwogu & Okonkwo, 2023) because, according to Nwafor

and Agumagu (2008), the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.

Globally, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 5 (Gender Equality), emphasize the need to bridge educational gaps between males and females. Women education is not only a matter of human rights but also a critical instrument for achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. An educated woman contributes to improve family health, enhanced child education, poverty alleviation, reduced maternal and child mortality and economic growth (Odiaka, 2013). Hence women education should not only be encouraged, but be given its proper place in the scheme of things in educational policies and programmes to ameliorate gender inequality and its resultant effects.

### **Historical Evolution of Women Education and Gender Inequality in Nigeria**

The history of women education in Nigeria is deeply rooted in precolonial and colonial contexts. In the precolonial era, women education was informal, focusing on domestic roles, moral training, farming and cultural values. Men were prioritized for formal education when the colonial system arrived, while women were often excluded or restricted to training in domestic science and teaching. Before the presence of Europeans, the Nigerian society had their own educational system. The purpose of this education in the pre-colonial era was to make young ones grow and understand the norms, ways of life and nature of the Nigerian society. The pre-colonial education also emphasized young ones acquiring skills, attitudes and values that would be needed for societal development and social cohesion. This educational system was for both genders. The girl was trained to be a good wife, while the boy was prepared to become a good husband (Mohammed & Yarinchi, 2013). Adenusi in Ibe-Moses and Okafor (2021) added that the traditional education is a lifelong education as functionalism was the main driving principle. The children learnt by participatory education through demonstration, recitation, ritual ceremony and imitation. The skills that were transmitted from traditional/pre-colonial education system to young generation were mainly traditional medicine, law, science, and technology. The young women learnt the skills of making baskets, mats, household brooms, etc., between 9-10 years. During the colonial period (1860s-1950s), missionary schools reinforced gender stereotypes by providing women with education largely limited to roles in the home or church. Men had access to professional careers in medicine, law and administration, while women were restricted to teaching, nursing, and household chores. This created long-term

structural gender inequality in literacy rates and professional participation.

Post-independence Nigeria (1960s onward) witnessed some progress in women education, though patriarchal norms persisted. But before independence on October 1, 1960, regionalization of education created a kind of rivalry among the three regions-East, West, and North, in terms of policies and programmes. They therefore cash in on the outcomes of the 1952 Cambridge Conference, the sole aim of which was to find ways and means of improving and expanding educational provisions in Africa as contained in the report of the Conference titled "African Education". In this regard, the West quickly went into planning and consultations. As a result, in January 1955, Chief S.O. Awokoya – the Minister of Education in Chief Obafemi Awolowo led government introduced Universal Primary Education (UPE) in the Western region (Nwafor, 2016). In 1957, Eastern region also launched the same programme. However, it was observed that the attempts by the two regions to introduce UPE scheme were not without serious hitches as a result of inadequate preparation and faulty implementation. The subsequent educational policies of this nature such as the UPE scheme of 1976, and Universal Basic Education (UBE) of 1999, all failed to address gender specific barriers like child marriage, gender stereotype, poverty, and cultural practices. Admittedly, the post-independence educational policies gave women more access to educational opportunities than before, but the gap still persists.

In the 21st century, statistics show stark disparities in gender education. According to (UNESCO, 2022), about 10.5 million children are out of school in Nigeria, with girls making up the majority. In Northern Nigeria, where early marriage and religious conservatism prevail, girls are disproportionately excluded from schooling. This gender marginalization has continued to affect women literacy, employment opportunities and leadership roles at all levels of government.

### **Gender Inequality**

Gender inequality also refers to the unequal treatment or perception of individuals based on their gender. It manifests in restricted access to education, employment, political participation, and healthcare and leadership opportunities. In Nigeria, gender inequality is entrenched in cultural norms, patriarchal system, religious practices and economic constraints. This imbalance has long hindered women's full participation in national development. Gender inequality in Nigeria is a multifaceted concept influenced majorly by different cultures, beliefs, values and ideologies that dwell on male preference and male supremacy, and therefore promote subordination of women. In some parts of Nigeria, it is widely believed that women do not need to be educated,

it is believed that a woman's place is the home, and that all she has to aspire to is to get married and cater for the children and her husband (Olomojobi, 2015). This assertion is summed up in the popular saying that, "women education ends in the kitchen", which has been hotly criticized, and rejected by women.

Gender inequality refers to the differing rights and opportunities afforded to men and women based on gender roles, ultimately resulting in unequal treatment (Dastidar, 2018). Gender inequality is generally discussed with regard to women. Usually, women are not treated equally as men; men have more opportunities and benefits in society than women. Women experience discrimination in every sphere of life, which limits their freedom of choice and hinders the development of their innate abilities. Gender inequality stems from the idea that one gender has greater worth than the other, or that one gender should have more duties, obligations, and privileges than the other. The idea of gender inequality perpetuates prejudiced opinion, creates discriminatory practice, and stereotypes that limit people's potential because of their gender. While biological differences between males and females do exist, gender inequality is not primarily about biology, but rather about how societies define and enforce roles, aspirations and expectations.

## Women Education

This concept implies the process of educating females in order to make them efficient and effective members of their societies both at home and outside. Women education should enable them to look after their daily life, responsibilities and legitimate rights. Indeed, it encompasses formal and informal learning opportunities that empower women with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes for personal growth and societal development. It involves primary, secondary, tertiary and vocational education for females. Beyond literacy, women education plays a transformative role: improving reproductive health, enhancing women's voices in decision-making and equipping them with skills for innovation and entrepreneurship.

Gender inequality is a noticeable factor in education. The World Bank (2019) reported that primary school enrollment in Nigeria was nearly equal between boys and girls, with a gender parity index (GPI) of 0.96. This GPI falls to 0.88 when it comes to secondary school enrollment suggesting a higher proportion of boys than girls. UNICEF (2017) conducted a study on out of school children, girls made up to 52.9% of the total, compared to boys' 42.7%. However, recent data from UNICEF and the World Bank from 2022 shows slight improvement, with the enrollment rate in primary schools for females scaling to 70.7% and

boys to 74.7%. However, the out-of-school rate for girls is still very high at 43.6%, whereas it is just 37.9% for boys.

Reasons for gender gap include economic disadvantage, early marriage, and cultural norms that place less value on the education of girls. The majority of parents in the North are opposed to sending their female children to school because they believe that doing so will expose them to Western ideas that are incompatible with their cultural beliefs (Idoko, 2021). This obstacle that keeps females from getting quality education, is deeply rooted in societal expectations, culture, religion, and forced and early marriage, especially for girls in the Northern Nigeria (Salau & Aleru, 2018).

## Sustainable Development (SDG 2030)

The United Nations cited in Alamu (2017) defined sustainable development as a system approach to growth and development to manage natural resources, production and social capital for the welfare of their own and future generation. Sustainable development could probably mean equitable and balanced, meaning that, in order for development to continue indefinitely, it should balance the interests of different groups of people within the same generation. Sustainable development implies meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations emphasizes inclusive education and gender equality as central to achieving global peace and prosperity. Goals 4 and 5 particularly highlight:

- i. equal access to quality education for all, irrespective of gender.
- ii. elimination of gender disparities in education.
- iii. ensuring women's full participation in leadership and decision-making at all levels.

Thus, women education and gender equality are not isolated issues but critical pathways to achieving Nigeria's broader sustainable development aspiration. The sustainable development goals, specified for human beings are: eradication of poverty, decent work and economic growth, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, justice and strong institutions (UNESCO, 2022). The key driver to the achievement of these lofty goals is no other than education-a critical tool for human capital development of both men and women.

Human capital development is generally recognized as realizing wide-ranging development. Investing in women education has been empirically connected to healthier

economic development. This is because education will enable poor women to actively participate in and benefit from economic growth (Aberu & Lawal, 2022). A meaningful human capital development that would be at the front burner of any national development must not be devoid of inclusivity of both genders in the policy formulation.

### **UNESCO's Position on Women Education and Gender Inequality**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) strongly advocates for gender equality in education as a global priority. According to UNESCO (2023), educating girls is the single most effective investment for sustainable development. Again, each additional year of schooling for girls increases their future earnings by 10–20, and lastly, UNESCO observes that countries with high female literacy rates have lower infant and maternal mortality rates.

UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2022) emphasized that gender parity in education is indispensable to achieving all SDGs. In Nigeria, UNESCO has partnered with government and NGOs to promote girl child education initiatives. Such as award of scholarships and intensive campaigns against gender-based violence. However, progress remains uneven due to persistent socio-cultural and economic challenges.

### **Challenges of Women Education vis-à-vis Gender Inequality in Nigeria**

Despite national and international efforts, women in Nigeria still face multifaceted barriers as identified by Dastidar (2018). They include the following hydra-headed problems.

First, cultural and religious barriers in most Nigerian societies are patriarchal. Patriarchal traditions prioritize male-child education, while relegating girls to early marriage and domestic roles. Patriarchy refers to a society ruled and dominated by men over women, which has made women to be looked upon as mere household wives and passive individuals in government and decision making process. In Northern Nigeria, for example, early child marriage significantly hinders female education. In this regard, cultural barriers have dwarfed the contributions of women to national development.

Again, many families particularly in rural areas may not afford to educate both their male and female children at the same time. This has resulted in preferential investment in boys' education. This could be as a result of poor family background and large family size. Importantly, insurgency and insecurity in some regions such as the Northeast and Northwest (e.g., Boko Haram abduction of schoolgirls)

discourage female education. It appears that the criminal elements target girls' schools for their nefarious activities, which has led to closure of some schools. Although, Nigeria has policies that are bedeviled by gender inequality, poor implementation, underfunding, and corruption which undermine socio-economic progress. These inherent flaws create policy gaps, contradictions and inconsistencies. It is unfair that women are often perceived as second class citizens, secondary earners and homemakers. These notions discourage investment in higher education of women. This has some psychological effects on women, hence many of them feel demoralized to further their education. It has been observed that a lack of sanitary facilities in schools disproportionately affects girls, particularly during menstruation. All these cause high drop-out rates. Women have remained underrepresented in policy-making, meaning that their specific educational needs are often neglected, because they are often excluded in vital policy decision-making process, which is usually dominated by their male counterparts.

### **Implications of Women Education and Sustainable Development for National Development**

The overall development of any nation is the responsibility of both male and female genders, but in Nigeria, it is evident that male gender has dominated almost all the avenues of national development. As a result of marginalization of women in access to educational opportunities, their contributions to ensure a better and more sustainable future are grossly minimized. Hence, the implications of women education vis-à-vis sustainable development for national development cannot be ignored or neglected. For this reason, a critical analysis of the implications of women education and sustainable development for national development is inevitable.

In the first place, giving women unfettered equal access to quality education, unarguably would give them opportunities (hitherto limited to men) to gain equitable economic empowerment, which will showcase their potential and capabilities in different spheres of life. With quality education, i.e., education beyond the secondary school level, Nigerian women can become stakeholders in the productive economic sectors. In the labour market, the contributions of well-educated women would be very glaring as it is obvious that most of them are not only disciplined, but are morally courageous to shun social vices and corrupt tendencies. Where this scenario prevails, Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) undoubtedly will grow appreciably.

However, if Nigeria continues to allow its moribund norms and practices which enthroned male dominance in society, the resultant effects can be better experienced than expressed. For example, Nigeria is noted as one of the

poorest countries of the world. In a release by World Bank on “Nigeria’s Development Update”, over 129 million Nigerians live below national poverty line (Tunji & Aina, 2024). Majority of these Nigerians living in abject poverty are mostly women, since they constitute more than half of the total population of Nigeria. These women are mostly uneducated because of obnoxious cultural norms, which have become endemic obstacles to national development.

Importantly, access to quality education by women in line with sustainable development goals (SDGs) 4 and 5, if fully put into practice would be highly beneficial to the Nigerian society, especially in the health sector. Women with quality education are more likely to ensure they have in good sanitary environment; practise safe family planning, attend antenatal clinic, and other best health practices that can reduce maternal and child mortality. The reverse is the case if the female gender is denied access to quality education. The result of this can lead to inability to access knowledge of reproductive health and relevant health facilities. For Kaili and Chen (2021), the consequences of this has led to the death of many women during and after child birth.

Furthermore, sustainable development goals vis-à-vis women education and national development has relevance for educated mothers, who invest much in their children’s education. Such children turn out to be great men and women in different fields of human endeavour. The implication here is that with good foundation laid for these children, intergenerational poverty would have been broken, and sustainable future assured. It is evidently clear that it is the educated human capital, among whom are women, that engenders socio-economic and political development of any nation.

In addition, where gender equality in education is encouraged, i.e., giving equal educational opportunity to both genders in terms of admission into higher institutions, courses of study based on ability and aptitude, national development will be guaranteed because there are roles which are peculiar to each gender, and that being the case, complementarity of various roles will certainly ensure an enduring national development that would lift Nigeria out of the club of under-developed nations to a comity of developed nations where gender parity is countenanced and cherished.

Finally, Nigerian women who have no quality education cannot and will not be given opportunity to participate in any important national or state agency or ministry. Hence, the emphasis by the SDGs 2030 focus so much on quality education for women and gender parity in education. In this respect, well-educated women will not only occupy positions of trust, but will equally actively and fully participate in policy decision making at all levels. It is only when women are involved in decision making that they can

influence decisions that would have been inimical to the female gender which could impede national development. Currently, in Nigeria, there is a strong move to pass a Bill on gender equity. This, no doubt, is a recognition of the important roles educated women could play in national development. In effect, what is expected from the passage of the Bill is essentially gender equity, and not gender equality as some male chauvinists who have myopic notion of this lofty intention perceive it.

## Conclusion

Women education in Nigeria is not merely a matter of equity but an indispensable pillar for achieving sustainable development. The persistent challenges of gender inequality have continued to limit women’s access to education.

The implications of women education extend beyond the classroom; they directly affect family health, fertility rates, child survival, household income, national productivity, civic participation and overall social stability. When women are educated, they are empowered to make informed decisions, break free from economic dependency and contribute to governance and leadership. This translates into a multiplier effect that enhances national progress and secures intergenerational benefits. Conversely, denying women equal educational opportunities undermines Nigeria’s ability to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 and SDG 5. In all, the SDGs aim at providing human-centred framework for measuring genuine development, which quality education, especially for women, if implemented religiously would place Nigeria on a higher developmental pedestal.

Furthermore, the neglect of women education poses a major threat to Nigeria’s socio-economic stability. No nation can sustainably grow when half of its population remains undereducated and underutilized. A society that marginalizes women in education not only violates their fundamental human rights, but also sacrifices its own potential for innovation, productivity and resilience in a competitive global order.

Therefore, the struggle for women education should not be seen as a women’s issue alone but as a national development priority. Achieving gender parity in education requires a multi-sectorial approach that integrates government commitment, community participation, cultural reorientation and international collaboration. Policies must go beyond access to ensure retention, quality and relevance of education for girls and women. Special attention should be paid to addressing poverty, early marriage, harmful traditional practices and gender-based violence that discourage women from pursuing education at all levels.

In conclusion, women education remains the most powerful tool for advancing sustainable national development in Nigeria. Closing the gender gap in education will not only uplift women but will also transform families, communities, and the nation at large. True development can only be achieved when both men and women are equally educated, empowered and positioned to contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic and political growth of Nigeria. The future of sustainable development in Nigeria rests squarely on the recognition that an educated woman is an indispensable tool for an empowered nation.

## Recommendations

From the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government at all levels should enforce compulsory free basic education for girls and penalize non-compliance by and enacting a law with a stiff penalty to discourage early child marriage.
2. The Government should, as a matter of necessity enact enforceable laws that will protect individuals from gender-based discrimination in all areas of national life, as well as laws that allow women to own properties, and inherit their deceased parents' properties.
3. Government agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) should intensify awareness campaigns to abolish cultural obnoxious norms and practices that discourage women education. The sensitization should include gender based violence against women and stigmatization of women as second class citizens.
4. There should be deliberate efforts by Government, other well-meaning Nigerians, and International Organizations to provide scholarship awards for the education of the girl-child. In some other instances, they should be provided with skill-based programmes for those in rural communities. The end result would be economic empowerment, and poverty alleviation or reduction.
5. Government at all levels should ensure equity or fairness in political participation and representation to enable educated women play key roles in national development as well as in policymaking positions.
6. Ministry of Education should establish data-driven accountability frameworks to track progress on SDGs 4 and 5, in order to assess the extent of the compliance of our education system to those goals.

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