Culture, Religion, Empowerment and Inequality in Female Education in Northern Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Historically, female education has suffered setbacks in some parts of Northern Nigeria mainly due to cultural and religious reasons— owing to the emphasis on the patriarchal social arrangement and politico-religious resistance to Western influences, etc. But modern democratic and capitalist developments position women's education as core to national educational reform that targets the North's relatively slow gains on international educational goals and development indicators. This study, therefore, examined relevant library data on constraints to women's education hence it aimed at exposing the barriers to female education in Northern Nigeria. It combined official Universal Basic Education (UBE), other agencies' data and personally conducted interviews to understand these factors and how they reflected historical conditions of women and education in Northern Nigeria. The objective was to examine conditions that shaped gender outcomes in education in Northern Nigeria, and analyze the overlap with long-held cultural and religious norms of gender differences. With a specific focus on literacy, it argued for integrating historically-relevant considerations in configurations of new educational reform. Being theoretical and analytical, it adopted the method of phenomenology, and concluded that some socio-political and religious factors bring about equality in Northern Nigeria, and this inequality has a huge negative impact in education especially as it concerns women education. The finding therefore was that as a consequence, that has hindered empowerment and development not just in the Northern but Southern Nigeria.

Key Words: Gender Inequality, Religion, Empowerment, Female Education, Northern Nigeria, Educational Challenges

Introduction

This work examines earlier reluctance to women's education due to the cultural norm of patriarchy and the politico-religious resistance to Western and Christian influences. The work also examines challenges and prospects, which includes the following: poverty barrier, class infrastructure, cultural and religious variables, intimidating environment, and security concerns. Gender role expectations and representations of gender differentials in Islam provide cultural and religious grounds for political resistance against ideas of gender equality in education. The modern primary education reform now aligns ambitious educational projects with international educational goals of gender parity. The data gotten from the interviewed persons, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) document, and other relevant agencies show the disparity in gender education. These identified factors play into the current gender outcomes in education and such variables mirror historical conditions under which women's education was not encouraged. Mirroring this disparity in gender education, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and the United Nations Children's Education Funds (UNICEF) Nigeria raised the alarm over the decline in female enrolment in Secondary schools in Nigeria in Northern Nigeria. It was reported that a large percentage of Nigerian girls drop out each year after primary education. Such development is not only worrisome and anti-progressive but also unacceptable for Nigeria (UBEC-UNICEF, 2022). This gender disparity situation corroborates a statement by UNICEF recently in Kano, Nigeria. In this regard, Rahama Farah submits thus:

> Currently, in Nigeria, there are 18.5 million out-of-school children, and 60 per cent of these out-of-school children are girls – that is, over 10 million girls are out of school and most of these children are actually

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from northern Nigeria. This situation heightens gender inequity, where only 1 in 4 girls from poor, rural families complete Junior Secondary school education (www.ubec-unicef-raise-concerns-over-continuous-decline-in-girls-enrolment-in-secondary-schools.news/529067)

This study combines official data, library documents and interview data to understand these factors and how they reflect the historical conditions of women in Northern Nigeria. It specifically investigates current trends in gender parity in education. It examines conditions that shape gender outcomes in education and analyze their overlap with long-held cultural and religious norms of gender differences. With a specific focus on literacy, the study argues for integrating historically-relevant considerations in configurations of new educational reform.

A seminal philosophical examination shows that some of these factors fuelling gender inequality, like culture and religious beliefs are mostly myths and suppositions. It reveals that notwithstanding the foundation of the cultural and religious positions about women folk, people's thoughts and actions in Northern Nigeria are wrongly influenced, and this continuously hinders progress on an educational balance of both genders.

Research Question: What challenges faces females, and also the prospects in actualizing optimal developmental goals in a gender unbalanced conservative and socio-religious environment?

Research Statement

Educational policies can only be effective when the essential elements of social conditions upon which formal schooling depend, are implemented. Political adherence to international norms or structures of globalization is insufficient and often counterproductive because gender inequality is context-based; both genders could be at disadvantage but that is dependable on certain factors. Eliminating the substantive gender gap in education requires critical attention to specific conditions; historical and contemporary conditions that determine gender differences in educational outcomes. Eliminating this gap is particularly pertinent in Northern Nigeria because of the cultural and religious dimension of the socio-political control among them.

Theoretical Conceptual Framework

This study is theoretically framed on gender education. It integrates feminist critiques of male dominance and identifies an increasing significance of boys' educational disadvantages (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Most of the studies pinpoint the contextual nature of gender differences in education but these differences can be narrowed or eliminated with policy and educational practices that target root sources of gender inequities. A trade-off between girls and boys, where gains in girls' education can lead to disadvantages for the boys (Kenway and Willis, 1998) is explainable not only as a theoretically-anchored 'strategic mistake' but also as a failure to articulate and configure root causes of inequities between boys and girls in policy provisions and educational practices. As an E9 country (highly populated countries at high risk of not achieving stipulated international educational goals) Nigeria's response to gender inequalities in education through UBE and other internationally anchored interventions requires particular attention to the theoretical considerations of context.

The problem of gender inequality has a long root in the history of the existence of civil society and one that has continued to define mutual coexistence in society. The argument that nature has innate characteristics in man or woman that determines their social role in society emboldens gender disparity and by extension, disempowerment. The distinction against female folk dates back to the ancient era. Exponents of classics aver that initially, "a woman was created from corrupted sperm meant to result into man." This view is associated with Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, who saw women as "misbegotten male" or as the "result of a physiological failure at the moment of conception" (Fortenbough 1975, p.16). Such claims are not just mythical but irrational. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), supported the obnoxious notion that women folks are inferior creatures. Suffice it to say that 'women had a limited capacity for rational thought, their place being the house'.

There is a wide disagreement with the metaphysical concept of certain characteristics in man and woman that determine their engagement in society. Simon de Beauvoir stamps that gender identities are imposed, not intangible or innate. Similarly, Butler conceives gender as a set of mechanism by the powerful to define and classify identities. This idea is anti-metaphysical. It is a paradigm shift from the innate quality concept of gender. In this regard, gender inequality and disempowerment are imposed by structures other than for a relative purpose. Butler (2007) claims that a woman has

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neither historically been recognized as an existing identity at all nor a subject for political recognition and advancement.

Restricted access to education by women in Northern Nigeria has impeded and stunted their social growth, political participation and even understanding of their being in the society. According to the World Bank report, the disparity in access to educational opportunities is a pressing gender equity issue in Nigeria (World Bank, 2003). As an offshoot of restricted access to education, women suffer health-related challenges that would ordinarily abate through quality education. It is already a conclusive matter that education is an important, essential aspect of basic human development (UNICEF, 1990). But constant discriminations and limited access to education are worrisome as most educational environments are characterized by gender bias than gender equity. Drinan (2004) sees systematic discrimination against women as embedded within economic, social, political, and even linguistic structures in the society. With rising cases of gender disparity against the Girl-Child-Education, Obasi (2000) investigated the impact of economic recession on Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Nigeria and underscored that most Nigerian household under-invest in the education of girls because of a combination of poverty and gender-biased tradition. The increasing early marriage amongst school-age girls in Northern Nigeria originates from bias in women's education. This increasing social norm is not induced by primordial culture but by imposed religious beliefs within the region. Education, a tool for human development in society is affected by political, economic, social, and religious eccentricities of a particular environment. As women continue to experience limited access to education, they shy away from the political realities of the environment, leaving the social and political dynamics under the control of male folk. Murphy (2003) contends that gender norms create disparities in power, autonomy, and well-being, typically to the disadvantage of females.

There has been a lot of effort towards encouraging female education in the northern part of Nigeria for several decades, and according to Zakari, the efforts seem not to yield good results. He submits that,

> Recent statistics indicate that in most of the states in northern Nigeria, literacy level is (on the average) less than 35%; in the best-performing states, the average is around 43%. Overall, the average female literacy level in the region is

less than 40%. This simply means that only 2 out of 5 women can read and write (2016, https://www.thecable.ng/women-education-northern-nigeria-due-new-approach)

Methods and Data Source
Being theoretical and analytical, this study involves an analysis of secondary data. Although a mixed method of research was employed on the way, it is majorly library oriented. It analyzed relevant data from books, journals, unpublished works like theses, conferences and seminar papers, news papers and magazine articles and data from interviews.

While conducting interviews, much attention was given to the social context and the interpretations given by the participants. Hence, an interview guide was developed based on these themes: perception of challenges, prospects of female education and the challenges in achieving gender balance.

The phenomenological qualitative research method was deployed to interface with the subject. Phenomenology as a research method studies an event or activity as it happens, from various angles using interviews, videos, and on-site visits, etc. One can add existing information using perspectives and insights from the participants themselves about the activity or event. It is primarily an experience or perception-based research method (Vashishtha, 2019). More so, phenomenological analysis connects with different qualitative approaches such as ethnography, symbolic interactionism, and hermeneutics (Glaser, 2017). It is also a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual's experiences within the world (Neubauer, *et al.*, 2019). Phenomenology as a philosophical method, "describes the philosophical approach of research, it states that what is directly perceived and felt is considered more reliable than explanations or interpretations in communication" (Remeyni, *et al.*, 1998: 97).

The study is a mixed-method design which uses the narrative method of qualitative research. A narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research in which the stories themselves become the raw data. This approach has been used in many disciplines to learn more about the culture, historical experiences, identity, and lifestyle (Butina, 2015). The narrative method of qualitative research enables a researcher to gather data or facts from one or two subjects through interviews and documents for further analysis.

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The mixed methodology design of this study employs data collected by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), an arm of the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria, it also includes the data received from relevant agencies to construct the trend in gender inequality in education in Northern Nigeria.

We interviewed a random sample of 30 male and female junior high school students, teachers and parents from twenty-five communities in three Northern Nigerian states: Kano, Katsina, and Jigawa. Participants are selected equally from Islamic Qur'anic schools and state-sponsored public schools, and the interviews focused on participants' experiences of gender inequality, parental choices for children's education, and school expectations of boys and girls.

Table 1: Girls' Attendance Rates to School by Region

Region	
North West	35.5 %
North East	38.0
North Central	65.2
South –South	79.9
South East	80,0
South West	78.0

National Population Commission, 2011

Table 2: Girls' Literacy by Regions

Regions	
North West	24.0
North East	25.4
North Central	40.0
South –South	70.4
South East	63.5
South West	79.9

Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), 2010

The literacy rate in Nigeria (2018) using various regions and gender characteristics

Regions	Male	Female
North East	50.5%	31.8%
North West	59%	29%
South East	86.7%	79.3%
South South	88.5%	79%

statista.com, 2018

There are many factors that shape gender outcomes in education especially as it relates to the Northern Nigeria. We shall thus discuss them one after the other.

Culture: This is a big factor in life as it holds much in what identifies a people in several ways. According Abah, *et al*, culture is an important phenomenon in life because it is a determinant to certain attitudes found among a people. Putting it more explicitly, they opine that,

> culture is people's way of life that influences their thoughts, actions and behaviours…it stands for a group of people who share a common set of values and beliefs.

[It] is expressed in the following cultural elements: symbols, norms, customs, attitude, rituals, physical artefacts, unique metaphors and jargons, shared beliefs, values, behavioural norms, language, festivals, ceremonies, pastimes, food, and even architecture, among others (2025, p.3061-2)

That portrays how influential culture is in a people's life. In the same view, it could equally be said that it has in a very negative way, affected education in the Northern Nigeria. The majority of the cultural and social values of Northern Nigeria have unanimously contributed to gender disparity in education in

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favour of males. Denga (1993) believes that one prominent cultural view of women's education is that women should stay home and learn to tend to their families instead of attending school. Another person, Obasi (1997), based his line of thoughts on 'Nigerian tradition', a tradition that attaches a higher value to a man than a woman, whereby the latter's position is held to be in the kitchen. This tradition is influenced by bad patriarchal practices which give the girls no traditional rights to succession and encouraged preferences for the education of a boy rather than a girl.

In Northern Nigeria, women are culturally understood as having lower social or public status when juxtaposed with educational opportunities. Northern Nigeria (historical and contemporary) has peculiar cultural practices that are potently hurtful to women's emancipation, such as early/forced marriages, wife-inheritance, and widowhood practices (Nmadu, 2000; Francis, 2012). Although the Islamic law/Holy Quran grants the right to both men and women to share in inheritance, the men in some cases are reluctant to cede the right of inheritance to women. Mostafa (2019) sums up the reason thus; 'traditional thinking, economic gains, male dominancy and dependency of women on men are some key responsible factors not to give the share of right of inheritance to women'. More so, within the family knit, gender stereotype tends to be institutionalized when mothers provide the role model for daughters, while the fathers demonstrate to sons what it means to 'be a man'. Females are subjected to subordinate positions and a preference is given to male children. This set standard limits the Northern Nigerian woman to menial labour; working in the fields/farms, carrying loads, tending to babies, preparing food and being seen as sex objects by men.

In addition, it has been observed that some cultural norms restrict the freedom of females by withholding their rights to make decisions on their sexuality and reproduction. In many instances, "violence" against women by their intimate partner is considered part of the "natural order" of male-female relationships, especially considering the debate and interpretation of the fourth chapter of the Quran; An-Nisa 4:34 (Alkiel, *et al.*, 2017; Asra, 2006).

In an attempt to give a detailed account of the effect of gender issues in the Northern part of Nigeria, Regina (2012, p.22) states that "gender constraint resulted in a lack of confidence, self-esteem and inability to compete with women from other parts of the country; they play a passive role in matters of decision-making at the household level." Education

is not highly rated among girls/females because people conceive it to be interfering adversely against their cultural authenticity, and this causes dismay in men and parents who think that education ruins girls and women, contrary to what they expected them to be in the spheres of tradition (Regina, 2012). Gargiulo (2017) has listed poverty, class infrastructure and limited resources, cultural reasons, intimidating environment, and safety reasons as barriers to providing girls' education in Nigeria and stressed that 'the situation is dire in northern Nigeria, where only 20 per cent of women can read and have received an education'. Similarly, Madu & Obi (2021) listed cultural influence, sexual violence & abuse, religious chaos, economic factor, fear of the safety of the girl child and poverty as barriers to female education in Nigeria.

Religion: It is not a secret that religion is not only one of the top contributors to gender inequality but also security crisis ravaging many parts of the world especially Africa and Nigeria in particular. Religion as an active influential factor that causes security crisis in Northern Nigeria is as old as man, and so, the question of total eradication of religion cannot even arise. Human beings necessarily have to manage it through rational approach that stretches to the sense of humanism and critical rationalization of some religious beliefs and preaching (Ugwu and Eneh, 2022). Religion is one of the many things that could guide the masses into peaceful existence with one another. However, some religious and cultural practices restrict the role of women play in their homes, making it almost impossible for them to even think about doing anything outside it, such as holding a political post. In Northern Nigeria, some religious sects such as the Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad– meaning 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad' still believe and propagate the idea that Western education is a 'taboo', 'sacrilege' or 'forbidden' (Boko Haram) (Adibe, 2012) and that it is inadequate for people to acquire western education. This belief stemmed from Islamic values opposing the long-standing Western civilization. It is against this backdrop that Madu and Obi report that

> the emergence of religious insurgents in various places denies females access to Western education. In Nigeria, some religious sects terrorize female schools. Unfortunately, many Nigerian girls and their families are afraid to venture into education owing to security factors, especially after the Boko Haram incidences, when Islamic sects

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kidnapped and even gave out some schoolgirls as child brides. On April 14, 2014, the Vanguard Newspaper reported that about 207 Government Secondary School students in Chibok, Borno State, were abducted from their school dormitory by Boko Haram. On February 19, 2018, Boko Haram abducted some girls from a Science Secondary school in Dapchi, Yobe State (2021, p.168)

Despite these challenges, some Muslim women have made breakthroughs, participated and contributed in different fields— education, science and technology, politics, etc. Many became Ministers, Senators, House of Reps and State of Assembly members to mention but just few.

Concerning women's education, the practice of Purdah in Islam or seclusion determines the extent to which a woman should be visible in public places. This stems from the cultural traditions and religious narrations which claim that men were assigned more roles than women, particularly, protection, and as a result, some interpretations of Islam and religious traditions interact to undermine the fundamental rights of the girl child (Francis, 2012; Aisha, 2017). In the Quran 4:34, it is made known that men are the protectors and maintainers of women. God has given one more strength than the other, and this interpretation has been in varying ways according to some contexts and circumstances of some Islamic scholars. Traditional and cultural practices have impeded on the social status of the female child in society compared to the male child. Her educational opportunities are determined negatively by the belief that women are inferior and divinely created to be subordinate to men through passive social roles. Both men and women are encouraged in both Islamic and modern education, but in the house, man is superior to women from the Islamic perspective.

The dominant narratives of Islam give privilege to men to the disadvantage of women, even in educational accessibility. Women are stereotyped, deprived, and disempowered from public activities such as education. This notion was, in some ways, displayed by the then President of Nigeria, Mr. Muhammadu Buhari when he said, in a press conference in Germany that a woman's role doesn't go beyond the kitchen and the other room. Put more directly: "I don't know which party my wife belongs to, but she belongs to my kitchen and my living room and the other room" (BBC, 2018). Though this statement was about his wife, the whole world conceded that it's probably the way Nigeria, as a country, sees her women, and who would disagree? These factors have contributed to gendered educational segregation, career discrimination and a polygamous practice with adverse effects on women's educational enrolment.

If women have equal rights and access to education, they participate in business and economic activity. There will be an increased earning power and income to combat poverty through feeding, clothing and providing for entire families. Educated women tend to be more informed about nutrition and healthcare, have fewer children, marry later, and their children are usually healthier. An increase in girls' education improves human development outcomes such as child survival, health, and schooling. Lower female education harms economic growth as it lowers the average level of human capital. According to Kiran Jewraj,

> Lower female education harms economic growth; it lowers the average level of human capital. Developmental Economists argue that in developing countries, female education reduces fertility, and infant mortality and increases children's education. Gender inequality in education directly and significantly affects economic growth (2019, https://page.org.pk/the-advantages-of-women-education/March27)

It is necessary for various government agencies saddled with women's affairs to push for quality education for the female folk that would enable them to overcome socio-cultural barriers that have continued to hinder the development of female folk, especially in developing countries. Female education reduces gender imbalance, hence according to Irina Bokova:

> Gender equality in education is a fundamental human right – it is also essential to achieving sustainable development. In our increasingly global world, the societies that succeed best guarantee women and girls equal access to education, thereby giving them the skills and opportunities to develop their talents and interests, so they can contribute to building more robust and more resilient communities (2012, p.6)

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Access to not just education but quality one is part of the fundamental human rights of everybody. It therefore becomes even a more serious issue when it concerns women and girls. If education is conceived from this angle, it becomes not only a right but a moral obligation unto people to ensure that because the proceeds from education will still give back to the people and the state what they have instituted and fought for, everybody should, therefore, have an access to education. Though in relation to subjects of law and morality, a similar perspective of an argument has been maintained somewhere else. The contention was that that if the people make law that everybody should access education, then it would not only become a right, but has a moral tone in an interpretative attempt (Ngwoke and Ugwu, 2021).

Empowerment: The contribution of women to society is usually through the workforce gotten through empowerment. When women are not empowered, a little per cent of the workforce is used, thus leading to the wastage of economic resources, on a large scale. The history of women's empowerment dates back to the mid-17th Century with the legalistic meaning; to invest with authority. Later, it began to be used in an affirmative and more general way to mean "to enable or permit somebody or a group of people" (Asabe, 2014). A woman's empowerment is the change towards the women's life and capacity, which helps them to increase their capacity to fulfil their aspirations and talents. It provides an enabling environment for women to thrive and achieve maximum level of their potential.

It is a tripartite opinion that the full measure of the quality of a nation's social and economic growth and overall status is not measured ordinarily through its level of economic growth but by the inclusive socio-economic and political status of women in the country. The implication is that a country is not 'developed' in the real sense if many women are neglected or deprived of their basic options, access to knowledge, individual rights and freedom of social and political representation (Asabe, 2014). Rodgers (2014) presents evidence on how women's empowerment and the reduction of gender inequality lead to more rapid economic growth, improved labour productivity, healthier children, and more responsive government. However, this is not obtainable in the northern part of Nigeria. Most women have not achieved free and independent decision-making in their affairs. They are still living in exclusion and cannot participate in some public activities. Other factors include the existence of social norms that are anti-women. Besides these factors, there are also religious, social and economic factors hindering the education of girls in Northern Nigeria.

In remedying the situation, the National Women's Trust Fund runs mentorship programs for girls to encourage future female leaders (Luke 2019). There are socio-political programmes organized for adolescent girls and young women, yet, these programmes are held only in developed parts of the country. As a result, these empowerment programmes have little or no effects on helping women in rural areas. More so, the UN Women Africa, an initiative and empowerment platform, has been very vocal about women's well-being and providing sustenance for women who sought to go into business. The UN Women Africa aims at empowering women in sustainable Agribusiness. It aims at making land accessible to women for agriculture and land ownership which is the exclusive preserve of the men folk. This initiative also provides women's engagement in peace and security in northern Nigeria.

Key Findings and Conclusion

The findings revealed no concrete formal initiatives or policies to remove cultural and religious barriers hindering gender balance in northern Nigeria. Many female students do not know their fundamental rights in society. It is the same with parents, who do not know that females have an equal right to education and leadership just as males.

Another vital area of need is information regarding human rights as signed by international organizations in Nigeria; hence, an urgent need for the reorientation of religious heads, traditional rulers and parents in those areas. Giving little or no attention to the plight of females as they struggle to compete with their male counterparts under uneven platforms will result in an uninformed female generation who are excessively incompetent and may find it challenging to compete with peers from other cultures.

But statistical evidence from the data used in this work indicates continuing gender gaps between girls and boys in Northern Nigeria. Compared to the Western and South-eastern parts of the country, Northern Nigeria still encounters significant challenges to gender equality in education. Indeed, parts of the South-eastern states experience more significant disadvantages for boys than girls. Aggregate data on Nigeria, therefore, is deceptive if the context is not clarified. Preliminary result from interviews indicates an ongoing parental reluctance to girls' education when faced with an exclusive choice between boys and girls. However, further analysis will reveal if this condition is explainable by

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historical needs of cultural and religious sensibilities that shaped the politics and economy of Western formal education or reflections of current economic conditions that still lack viable options for women with school-related skills.

In conclusion, findings may not be generalizable across the various States in Northern Nigeria, but this gives a veritable perspective of the challenges of females in some populated States in Northern Nigeria. This study, therefore, suggests a reformation, reorientation and advocacy of female education. With more access to educational facilities, there will be less early pregnancy and marriage and more transitions to higher academic endeavours. Such enablement provides the prospects of fulfilling their optimum potency and becoming resourceful.

Contribution and Future Directive

Although Nigeria has had National Policies on Education for decades and continues to pursue universal primary education vigorously, the apparent disconnect of policy provisions and educational practices from historical and some contemporary conditions significantly undercut efforts to achieve stated educational goals. Accordingly, progress in gender equality in education has been slow in coming. This study makes a strong case for linking current educational reform programs to conditions with long historical origins. A significant implication for educational policy is that existing educational interventions and specific pedagogical tools might be anachronistic. The distillation of historic forces into current conditions requires more flexible and adaptive educational strategies that respond to the specific needs of particular groups. Creating uniform standards and frameworks for the entire country might perpetuate instead of decrease the forces that engender gender inequality and, by extrapolation, determine economic and social development.

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