

Community-led education and girls' access to schooling in Nigeria: Historical legacies, cultural constraints, and pathways to empowerment

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of community-led education initiatives in expanding girls' access to schooling in Nigeria, with particular attention to the northern regions where gender disparities in education remain most pronounced. Drawing on a qualitative synthesis of thirty-one program evaluations, policy reports, and scholarly studies, the paper investigates how locally embedded interventions influence enrolment, retention, and broader social perceptions of girls' education. The analysis focuses on initiatives such as school-based management committees, mothers' associations, peer-led clubs, and religious partnerships that operate at the intersection of community structures and formal education systems. The study is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives: intersectional feminist theory, social capital theory, and ecological systems theory. Together, these frameworks allow the analysis to move beyond descriptive accounts of program outcomes and instead examine the social mechanisms through which community engagement reshapes educational participation. Evidence from the reviewed programs suggests that community actors often play a crucial mediating role between state policy and household decision-making. Where trusted local institutions endorse girls' schooling, enrolment gains are more likely to occur and, in some cases, to persist. Yet the findings also reveal important limitations. Increased access does not always translate into sustained participation or economic empowerment. Structural constraints such as poverty, early marriage, insecurity, and weak institutional capacity continue to shape educational trajectories for many girls. In several cases, educational gains remained fragile once external funding or program support diminished. The paper argues that community-led education initiatives represent a necessary component of efforts to address gender disparities in schooling. However, their long-term impact depends on broader institutional support. Policies that integrate community participation into education governance, strengthen adolescent retention mechanisms, and link schooling to viable livelihood pathways may offer more durable progress toward educational equity.

Keywords: Community-led education, girl schooling, educational equity, gender norms, education policy.

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is currently facing an existing paradox that is both longstanding and substantial. On one hand, the nation has one of the largest economies on the continent, and on the other, it has the burden of the highest number of out-of-school children in the world. Recent estimates show that some 10.5 million Nigerian children are not in the formal education system, of which girls make up a significant

proportion (UNICEF, 2022; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023; World Bank, 2022). While statistics on the numbers of out-of-school children in Nigeria might not be alarming in terms of quantity, it is substantial in terms of the opportunities that millions of Nigerian youth, particularly girls in the North, might miss in terms of their social and economic potential. According to UNICEF's

latest statistics on the situation in Nigeria, approximately 7.6 million Nigerian girls are currently out of school. Out of these, approximately half of the out-of-school girls in Nigeria were enrolled in either primary or junior secondary school (UNICEF, 2022). According to UNESCO's latest statistics on out-of-school girls across the world, Nigeria is

ranked among the top in terms of the total number of out-of-school girls in the world. While approximately one million girls in Nigeria do not progress to secondary school after completing primary school, approximately 600,000 do not progress to junior secondary school (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

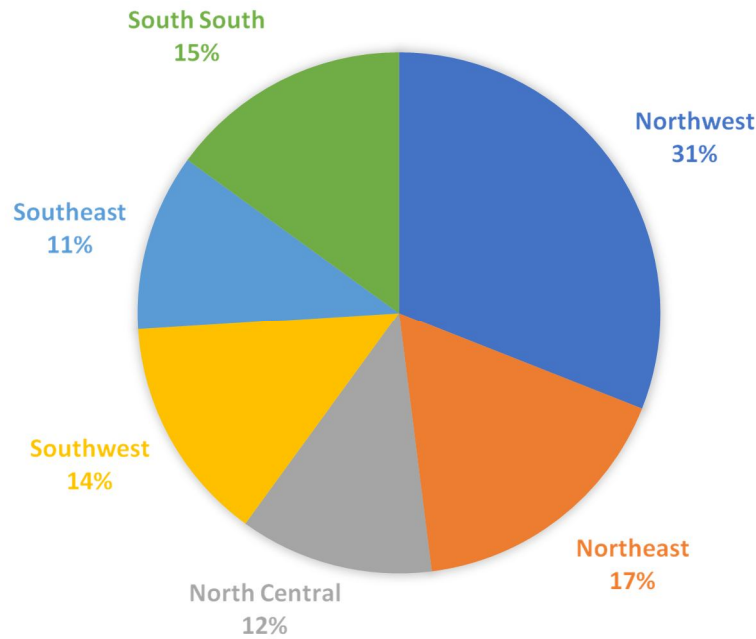


Figure 1. Regional Distribution of Out-of-School Girls in Nigeria. 48% of 7.6 million OOSG are from Northwest and Northeast (UNICEF Nigeria Cheat Sheet, 2022).

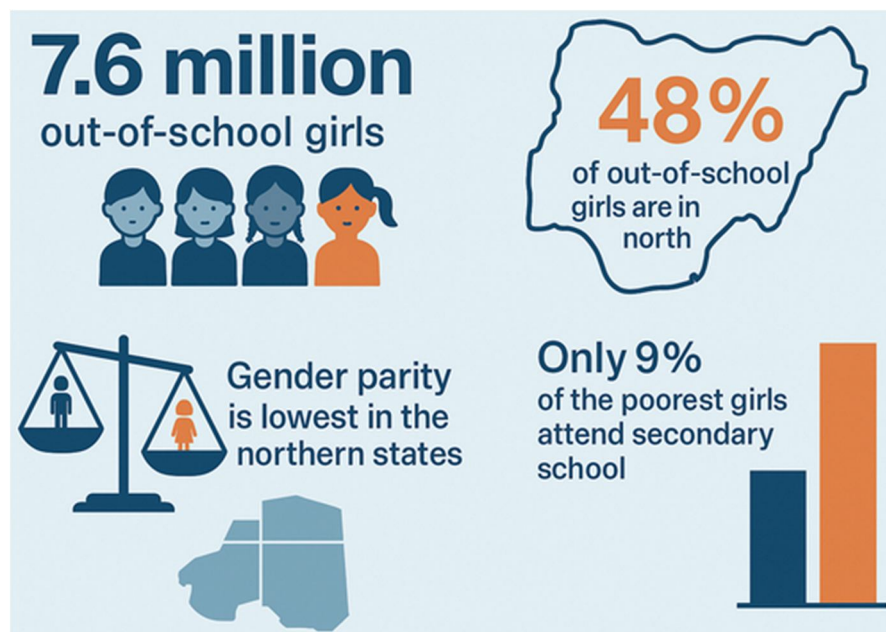


Figure 2. General overview of OOSG education in Nigeria.

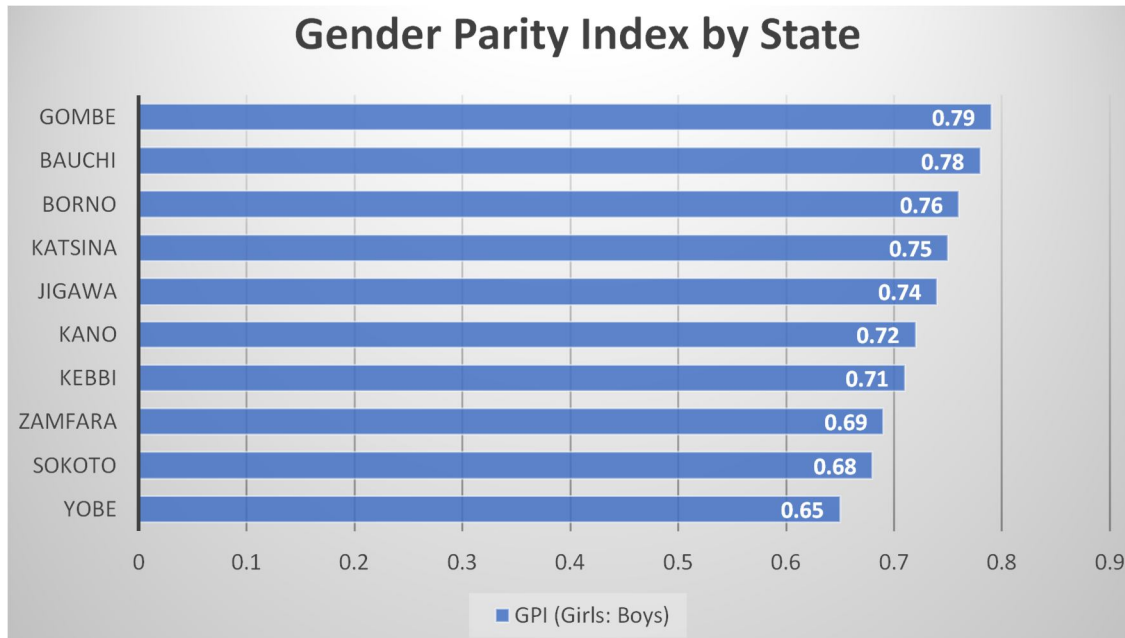


Figure 3. Gender Parity Index (GPI) below 1.0: Ten Nigerian states with largest gaps.

These disparities increase when viewed in terms of economic class. For example, 81% of girls from the wealthiest economic group attend secondary school in Nigeria, but only 9% of girls from the poorest economic group do the same (World Bank, 2022). This has not been a recent trend. Educational inequality in Nigeria has a long history. The colonial government focused on education via missionary activity in the South but neglected the North, where Islamic traditions ran deeper and could not be easily assimilated into Western models of education (Banefoh, 1994). The Victorian spirit of the time was not very supportive of girls' education to start with. And in the North, colonial resistance to missionary education in the first place put girls at a great disadvantage. Since independence, initiatives such as the 1976 Universal Primary Education plan have held great promise for educational reform. But implementation has not matched the promise. The economy has not helped, particularly in the 1980s with the Structural Adjustment Programs, and the disconnect between national policy and local realities has been a barrier to reform (Banefoh, 1994; Egberi and Madubueze, 2023).

This has an inter-generational effect. Denial of education makes girls more susceptible to early marriage, childbearing, violence, and health complications. Nigeria has an adolescent fertility rate of 104 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 years, ranking among the highest in the world. This rate is increasing in the 10-14 age group in Nigeria (World Bank, 2022). There is an assumption that education is empowering. However, studies indicate that it is not necessarily true. Education is not enough if it does not address issues of gender, domestic obligations, and individual goals (Ganguli, Hausmann and Viarengo,

2020; Lundberg, 2020).

In the midst of all these complexities, there is hope. For instance, the efforts of School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) in increasing enrollment in schools in Nigeria's Bauchi and Zamfara states (GEARN, 2024) offer positive results. Additionally, the efforts of mothers' associations and girls' clubs created by the GEP3 initiative (UNICEF, 2022) show that it is possible to narrow the gap between what is intended by policies and what is being implemented. This is not just about increasing enrollment but changing perceptions, engaging traditional leaders in the process, and creating learning environments that are relevant, safe, and participatory. Girls who are part of such programmes demonstrate better levels of confidence, right awareness and even better performance at school (TEGINT, 2012). This study examines the extent to which these community-led efforts, based on Nigeria's socio-cultural context, help overcome the multi-layered barriers to girls' education. It explores the legacy of colonialism and historic norms that still govern access; how poverty, insecurity and infrastructural shortfalls combine with gender to create educational exclusion; and how community-driven efforts are challenging this narrative from the inside out. By putting local agency and structural critique at the centre of this discussion, this paper aims not to simply evaluate what is there, but to set out what is possible.

Despite a growing amount of scholarship on the issue of gender disparities in Nigerian education, an important analytical gap exists. A lot of the current literature has been focused on macro-level determinants such as poverty, early marriage, insecurity in the region and uneven implementation of policies (Lewin, 2009; Offorma, 2009;

Egberi and Madubueze, 2023). These studies have made an enormous contribution to the understanding of structural barriers to the education of girls. However, there has been less focus on the community-level mechanisms by which educational access is negotiated, contested and at times expanded in local social environments. Community participation tends to be mentioned in discussions of policies, but rarely is it looked at systematically as a key driver of educational change. As a result, processes by which the community actors, such as religious leaders, mothers' associations and school-based committees, influence girls' schooling are insufficiently theorised.

This paper fills that gap by synthesizing evidence relating to community-led education programs in Nigeria and how these programs interplay with local cultural practices and institutional limitations, as well as gendered expectations. The paper aims to surpass the usual approach of understanding the education of girls as a problem of access only and rather addresses the social dynamics that determine the process of making schooling meaningful and sustainable among girls in marginalised spaces.

Research objectives and questions

This study aims to critically assess the role of community-led education initiatives in addressing gender disparities in Nigerian education. It investigates how these efforts navigate structural constraints and entrenched cultural values, particularly in Northern Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

- Trace the historical roots and trajectories of gender disparities in Nigerian education.
- Identify and analyze the cultural, religious, and structural barriers limiting girls' access to and retention in school.
- Evaluate the emergence, operations, and effectiveness of community-led initiatives.
- Determine the enabling conditions and constraints for such models.
- Develop grounded recommendations for scaling up effective practices without compromising local responsiveness.

Guiding research questions include:

- How have historical policies and postcolonial educational structures shaped gendered educational access in Nigeria?
- What are the most significant cultural and structural constraints affecting girls' educational access today, particularly in the North?
- How are community-led educational models operationalized in Nigeria, and how do they address local constraints?
- What distinguishes successful community interventions

from those that fail or stagnate?

- How can these approaches be supported, sustained, and scaled without losing contextual sensitivity?

Theoretical framework

The proposed study assumes a multi-theoretical approach. To begin with, the conceptualisation of educational exclusion of girls in intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989) implies that child education exclusion might not be viewed in isolation since it has the overlapping structures of oppression. The theory pre-empts the gendering, classes, area, and religion as interconnected elements of systematic oppression. Second, the social capital theory (Putnam, 2000) explains that community-based models are successful because they make use of a bonding and bridging network of trust, shared norms, and collective effect. Third, the ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which has been transformed to the educational setting, allows analyzing the interactions between individual, family, community, and institutional levels that influence girls' educational opportunities. Combined, these lenses allow the exploration of the subject of exclusion and empowerment in a richly textured way, instead of concentrating on access to understand who is involved, on what terms and to what ends.

Significance of the study

This article can add to the academic discussion and policy-making in a number of important ways. First, it provides a detailed and Nigeria-specific study of community-based education models, which is an interesting gap in the comparative development-education literature. Second, it pre-empts the interaction between gender, structure, and agency, thus dismantling the technocratic approach to girls' education in a problem of access. Third, the historical, empirical, and cultural analyses will enable the study to provide the decision-makers and practitioners with a set of critical issues as well as practical suggestions to design more effective, fair, and culturally sensitive interventions. By so doing, the research not only aims to add to the current body of knowledge but also to get engaged in the current change of the educational picture in Nigeria, thus helping to build an educational space where everyone, irrespective of geography, wealth, and circumstances, could claim their right to learn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical and structural foundations of gendered educational inequality in Nigeria

The trajectory of girls' education in Nigeria is typified by a

compounded convergence of exclusionary histories and institutional inertia. The missionary education of the South during the mid-nineteenth century, which also explained the policies of early colonialism, was based on the ideology of Victorian gender roles, where boys were taught much more than girls, as they received the education leading to moral values, and girls were taught the skills of the domestic sphere (Banefoh, 1994). The north had Islamic buildings and an administrative reluctance to colonialism, which postponed formal education, specifically for girls. In 1881, the population of girls in school was 947 relative to 1,310 boys in the territory covered by southern missions (Banefoh, 1994). The post-independent years came with grandiose promises, such as the Universal Primary Education (UPE) project in 1976, but the policy failed because of economic austerity measures, corruption, and lack of good infrastructure, thus exacerbating the same inequalities that the policy was supposed to address

(Egberi and Madubueze, 2023). Enrollment statistics on girls' schooling in the 1980s and 1990s have clearly shown the severity of this crisis: Nigeria was 21st of 44 African countries on access by girls to primary education, and rural and northern states fared even worse (Banefoh, 1994). These structural inequalities continue to exist. The recent statistics show that approximately 7.6 million girls in Nigeria are not in schools, 3.9 million girls in primary, and 3.7 million girls in junior secondary (UNICEF, 2022). The dropout rates are severe: in one million girls, the dropout rates occur before the primary school is completed, and another 600,000 girls drop out before they can move on to junior secondary. This is a geographically concentrated issue; 48 per cent of out-of-school girls are in the north, where the norms of gender, security issues, and poor policy implementation collide most acutely (UNICEF, 2022; World Bank, 2022).

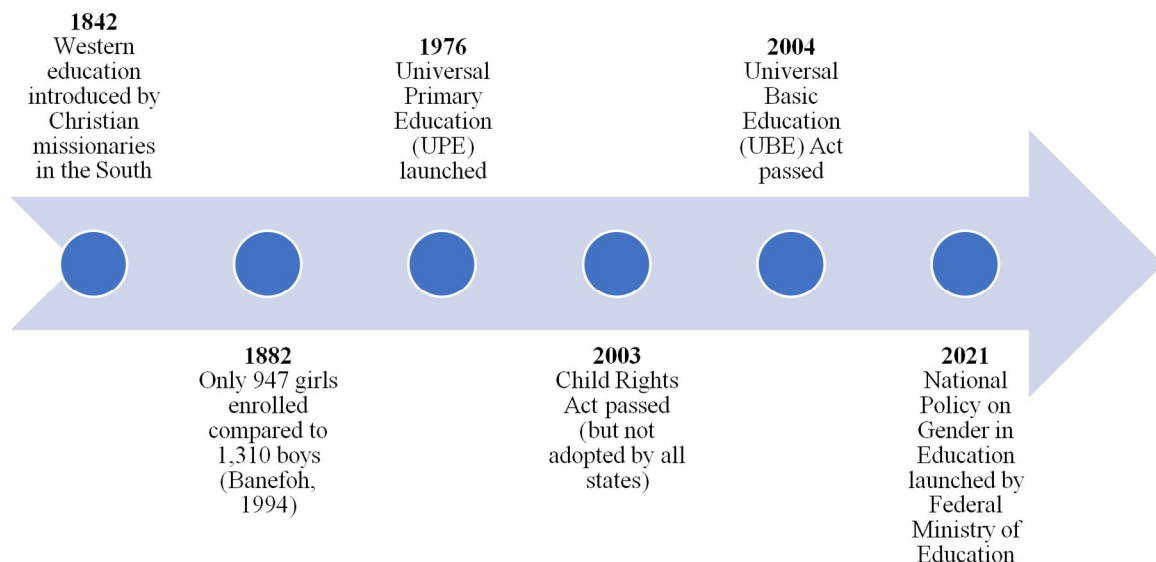


Figure 4. Major policy milestones in Nigerian girls' education (1842–2021). Source: Banefoh (1994); Federal Ministry of Education (2021); Egberi and Madubueze (2023).

Socio-cultural and economic barriers: Norms, marriage and marginalization

Education is often cast as the antidote to poverty and inequality. But for many Nigerian girls, barriers are not necessarily material; they are also cultural. Researchers continuously note that early marriage and purdah (female seclusion), as well as the preference of sons over girls, are high-level limitations to girls attending schools, especially in the north (GEARN, 2022; AFC et al., 2024). An example in the Northwest where 39% of girls are wedded prior to the age of 18. This is a custom that ends educational prospects and cycles of deprivation through the generations (UNICEF, 2022). These practices have been

embedded in more underlying patriarchal arguments that see female education as optional or even dangerous to morality. At other times, pockets of religious conservatism have been opposing government and NGO interventions, particularly when Westernized (Banefoh, 1994; Egberi and Madubueze, 2023). Exclusion is further aggravated by economic factors. The household spending on education (uniforms, transport, examination fees, etc.) may take up to 75 per cent of the household budget of low-income families (NPC, 2011). These costs are heavy burdens to the rural households whose livelihoods depend on subsistence farming or unskilled labour. Sons are generally preferred when it has to be allocated on the assumption that it will give higher returns in the long run

(Offorma, 2009; Egberi and Madubueze, 2023). Even those girls who attend school, poor infrastructure and unsecured environments (e.g. long commuting to school, no sex-segregated toilets) are also a cause of absenteeism and dropout, particularly during menstruation or adolescence.

Institutional and policy frameworks: Promises and pitfalls

Nonetheless, Nigeria has exhibited policy ambition. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004 provides free and compulsory education and sets 2 percent of the national Consolidated Revenue Fund aside for education via the Unified Basic Education Committee (UBEC). The ratification of the Child Rights Act by 26 states and the National Policy on Gender in Education (2021) are other efforts to institute gender parity (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021). These policies, however, as various analysts point out, have poor implementation, lack comprehensive monitoring, and coordination throughout the federalised system in Nigeria (Egberi and Madubueze, 2023; UNICEF, 2022). The least used tool has been the School-Based Management Committee (SBMC) mechanism; it has proven to be effective in increasing enrolment and enhancing school-community relationships when properly funded and trained (GEARN, 2022). However, SBMCs in most states are nominal, male-dominated and devoid of accountability systems. The voices of girls are not heard in the process of making

choices in the committee, and when they are, their voices are tokenistic (Rose, 2003).

Community-led interventions: Promise and limitations

Recent interventions have highlighted the promise that community-led approaches hold in addressing the complex ecology of exclusion in girls’ education. Interventions such as the Transforming Education for Girls in Nigeria (TEGINT) showed promising results in improving the level of gender parity within the intervention schools, showing an increase in the pass rate of girls and an improvement in the level of agency and voice through the establishment of girl clubs and peer advocacy (TEGINT, 2012). The UNICEF-led GEP3 intervention was able to enroll over 1.3 million girls through the integration of CCTs and the engagement of religious leaders and the integration of Qur’anic schools, showing that community-led approaches are more likely to gain traction compared to other approaches (UNICEF, 2022). However, such approaches are still faced with the sustainability conundrum. The Community-Based Management Committees (CBMCs), for instance, are highly dependent on micro-grants and volunteerism, both of which are vulnerable to political instability (AFC et al., 2024). Another limitation is that most approaches have failed to put in place effective transition and retention strategies, particularly at the transition from primary to secondary education, where dropout rates are the highest.

Table 1. Comparative features and outcomes of selected community-led education programs.

Program	Lead agency	Key features	Outcomes	Challenges	Source
TEGINT	ActionAid/NOWA	Girls’ clubs, gender training, SBMC support	15% rise in parity, increased voice	Limited rural reach, funding gaps	TEGINT (2012)
GEP3	UNICEF	Cash transfers, religious leader advocacy	1.3M girls enrolled	Patchy follow-up, cultural resistance	UNICEF (2022)
AENN	FHI 360	Radio hubs, female mentorship	Literacy increases (IRC study)	Access limited in remote zones	AFC et al. (2024)
ESSPIN	British Council	Teacher training, SBMC strengthening	Better pedagogy, retention gains	Weak SBMCs in low-funding states	GEARN (2022); British Council (2014)

Aspirations, identity and gender norms: A critical blind spot

Although structural barriers are increasingly recognized, relatively few interventions target the internalized norms and gendered identity scripts that drive educational aspiration and persistence. Lundberg (2020) asserts that,

in fact, the most predictive factors of educational attainment are actually aspirations and not ability and resources. Her study in the US shows that even when controlling for grades and family socioeconomic status, girls significantly aspired to and expected the completion of college compared to boys. Moreover, this effect was even more pronounced in poor youth. This study suggests

that social identity might be the key factor in determining the future of the child. In the Nigerian context, the above argument is supported. Both McCall (2024) and Ganguli et al. (2021) suggest that the practice of education must be accompanied by the reworking of the narratives in the community around girlhood, aspiration, and adulthood in order for empowerment to be achieved. If the aspiration of the girl is limited by the narratives of the community that marriage and motherhood are the ultimate goals in life, the girl will not engage in the practice of education even if she has the opportunity. She will be in school, but not in a related motivational way.

Educational access vs. life outcomes: The labor force gap

Even where access gaps narrow, the transition from education to empowerment remains elusive. As Ganguli, Hausmann and Viarengo (2021) emphasize in their cross-country labor participation analysis, educational parity does not automatically yield economic equity. In fact, while women in many regions now match or surpass men in tertiary enrollment, they remain less economically active. The disparities are particularly acute for married females or mothers. The study highlighted the persistence of marriage gaps and motherhood gaps, both of which have striking parallels in the Nigerian case. The marriage gaps are highlighted by the sharp decline in the labor force participation of females after marriage. Although the study did not directly consider the Nigerian case, the cultural issues highlighted in the study, such as the role of the household and employer discrimination, are particularly acute in Northern and rural Nigeria. Indeed, the findings are supported at the national level: despite the progress made in terms of access to education in the urban centers, the labor market is still highly gendered, with females overrepresented in the informal, low-income sector and underrepresented in the formal sector. There are many programs focused on the education of females that fail to go the extra step in terms of developing the vocational, financial, and entrepreneurial skills that are so necessary for economic empowerment (Plan International, 2019; McCall, 2024). Thus, the community-based education programs that are designed must consider the question of what happens after the classroom. Who will provide support for the girl-child in the economic arena, and on what cultural terms?

Several recent studies highlight the need for an integrated approach that connects the girl-child's schooling with her economic empowerment and reproductive health. The Global Women's Fund agricultural training programs and the SEWA e-commerce literacy programs are highlighted in McCall (2024) as examples of empowerment frameworks that could be translatable into the Nigerian context. However, these programs have yet to be trialled in the Nigerian environment.

Comparative regional approaches: Ghana, Sierra Leone and cross-learning

A comparative study of the Nigerian case and its West African counterparts reveals some salient points. The study conducted by AFC-CSEA-Dalan (2024), on Accelerated Education Programs (AEPs) and Girls' Education Programs (GEPs) in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, reveals some common structural barriers such as poverty, child labour, and patriarchy. Yet there are some variations in the ways the communities and the states are responding. Ghana, for example, has introduced flexible curricula and multi-grade teaching in the Complementary Basic Education program, facilitating the re-entry of older girls who did not receive formal schooling. In Sierra Leone, the combination of Accelerated Learning and Skills Development, coupled with transitional counselling, has proved successful. In Nigeria, the programs, particularly in the Northeast region (AENN, GEP3), have recorded some success in terms of access and psychosocial support; however, these programs are often found wanting in terms of transition strategies and cost-effectiveness, as seen in other programs (AFC et al., 2024). Another factor that is often overlooked is the cultural approach; some programs are using gender-neutral approaches that do not consider the specific needs of the girl child (Shah et al., 2016). The study reveals another important finding: the absence of longitudinal studies. In the three countries, particularly in the Nigerian case, there is little understanding of what happens after the re-entry programs. What are the chances of the girl being retained in the system? Will she move on to secondary education or the workforce? Will the community continue the programs after the funding runs out?

Theoretical perspectives: Intersectionality, social capital and ecological systems

This review is grounded in a theoretical tripod that reflects the complexity of Nigeria's educational gender gaps:

- **Intersectional Feminism (Crenshaw, 1989):** This framework provides an understanding of the relationship between gender and other dimensions of subordination, e.g. religion, geography, age, and marital status. For instance, it would provide insight into why early marriage in Katsina or Borno is not just an issue of gender but is embedded in insecurity, religiosity, and economic status. This theory shows us that there is no one solution that works in all contexts and that the solution must be context-specific.
- **Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000):** Successful community-led interventions in Nigeria might not just be about resource provision but about mobilizing trust, solidarity, and normative behavior. SBMCs, girls' clubs, and mothers' associations can be powerful "bridging capital" spaces where cultural resistance is softened

through peer endorsement. The absence of such relational trust structures partly explains why top-down models falter, even when technically well-funded.

• Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979): This model places the girl child in a set of nested systems: the micro-system (family, peers), meso-system (school, community), exo-system (state, NGOs), and macro-system (law, culture). Thus, the phenomenon of educational exclusion is not just an event but the end result of a set of forces. It might manifest in different ways, from

the absence of a toilet in school to the absence of the father at the PTA.

Put together, these perspectives explain both the structural stickiness of Nigeria’s gender gaps and the potential points of intervention. They reveal how exclusion is reinforced through institutions, norms, and daily decisions. Also, they highlight how change might be orchestrated across multiple levels.

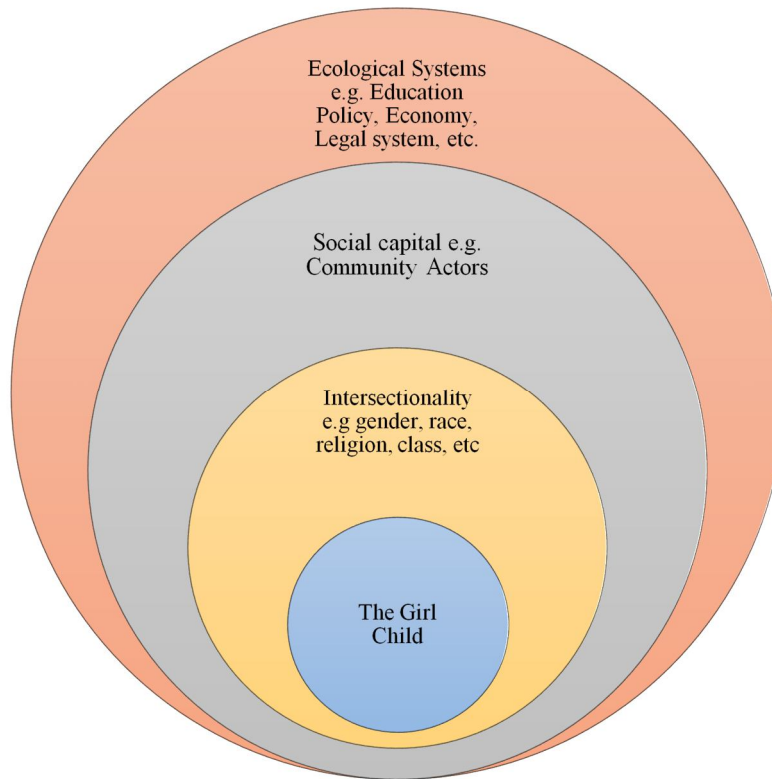


Figure 5. Analytical framework: Structures, identity and community influence on girls’ education. Integrated theoretical framework: Intersectionality, social capital and systems thinking.

Gaps and silences in the literature

Despite growing attention, several critical gaps persist in the literature on girls’ education in Nigeria:

- Data transparency and disaggregation: Many program reports lack district-level data, longitudinal follow-up, or disaggregated metrics by gender, age, and marital status (AFC et al., 2024; Egberi and Madubueze, 2023).
- Cultural reflexivity: Some interventions continue to assume that more schooling is self-evidently desirable to all. But as Lundberg (2020) and Dessy et al. (2022) show, this assumes aspiration homogeneity. In reality, girls’ educational desires are filtered through cultural and

familial norms that frame school as temporary or secondary to marriage.

- Post-school trajectories: The school-to-work transition remains under-explored. Without vocational alignment, labour market reforms, and protective laws for working women and mothers, education remains a fragile ladder out of poverty.
- Community ownership models: While SBMCs and CBMCs are celebrated, less is known about what sustains their momentum. How do they survive leadership turnover, political instability, or funding cuts? What social arrangements maintain girls’ support structures when projects end?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design grounded in documentary synthesis. The goal is not statistical generalization. Instead, the analysis seeks to understand patterns that recur across documented experiences of community-led education initiatives in Nigeria.

Girls' educational exclusion in Nigeria rarely stems from a single factor. It emerges through overlapping conditions. Household poverty matters. So do gender norms. Religion, regional politics, insecurity, and school infrastructure. Each interacts with the others in ways that make simple explanations inadequate. Because of this complexity, a flexible qualitative approach was considered appropriate. The research draws conceptually from two intellectual traditions. The first comes from interpretive policy analysis, which treats policy outcomes as socially situated processes rather than purely administrative outputs (Yanow, 2000). The second comes from intersectional feminist scholarship, which emphasises that gender inequality cannot be separated from other axes of marginalisation such as geography, class, religion, and marital status (Crenshaw, 1989). Taken together, these perspectives encourage attention to context. They also encourage caution when interpreting program outcomes.

Rather than measuring program success through standardized metrics alone, the study asks a different question. Under what social conditions do community-led educational initiatives appear to work? And equally important, where do they struggle?

Data sources and scope

The analysis is based on a structured review of documented evidence drawn from academic publications, policy evaluations, donor reports, and institutional research studies. In total, thirty-one sources were included in the final synthesis. These sources fall into several broad

categories:

- Peer-reviewed academic studies on girls' education, gender norms, and schooling access in sub-Saharan Africa
- Program evaluation reports from major education interventions in Nigeria
- Government and multilateral policy documents relating to education reform
- Institutional working papers and development research reports

Many of the most detailed accounts of community education initiatives appear in evaluation reports rather than academic journals. This is particularly true for programs such as GEP3, AENN, ESSPIN, and TEGINT. These reports often contain implementation details that are rarely available elsewhere. For that reason, grey literature was treated as an essential source of evidence rather than a secondary supplement.

The geographical focus of the review is Northern Nigeria. This region contains the highest concentration of out-of-school girls in the country (UNICEF, 2022; World Bank, 2022). It is also where most large-scale community-led education initiatives have been implemented. Nevertheless, national-level policy studies and comparative regional analyses were also included when they offered relevant context.

Literature search and selection process

The search process followed a structured screening procedure inspired by the PRISMA framework for systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009). The objective was transparency rather than rigid adherence to clinical review protocols, which are not always appropriate for social science research. Searches were conducted across several academic databases and institutional repositories using combinations of keywords related to girls' education, gender norms, and community-led schooling initiatives in Nigeria. The principal search platforms and keyword combinations are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Database search strategy used in the literature review.

Database / Source	Example search terms	Records retrieved
JSTOR	"girls' education Nigeria", "community schooling Nigeria", "gender parity education Nigeria"	41
Scopus	"girls' access schooling Nigeria", "school-based management committees Nigeria", "gender education policy Nigeria"	27
Google Scholar	"community-led education Nigeria", "girls schooling northern Nigeria", "education access Nigeria gender"	56
Institutional repositories (UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank, British Council)	"GEP3 Nigeria", "girls education program Nigeria", "community education evaluation Nigeria"	22
Total		146

Searches were conducted between March and May 2025 using several academic databases and institutional repositories. These included JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar, the UNESCO digital library, and organizational databases maintained by UNICEF, the British Council, and the World Bank. Search terms were developed iteratively. Initial queries included combinations of phrases such as:

- Girls' education in Nigeria
- Community-led schooling
- Gender parity in education in Nigeria
- School-based management committees in Nigeria
- Early marriage schooling access
- Accelerated education programs in Nigeria

The initial search produced 146 records. After duplicate entries were removed, 104 documents remained for title and abstract screening. A further filtering stage excluded materials that lacked empirical evidence or that focused on education systems outside Nigeria without meaningful comparative relevance.

Fifty-eight documents proceeded to full-text review. Of these, thirty-one met the final inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the analytical synthesis. The literature search and screening procedure followed a structured process inspired by the PRISMA framework for systematic reviews. The selection process is summarized in Figure 6.

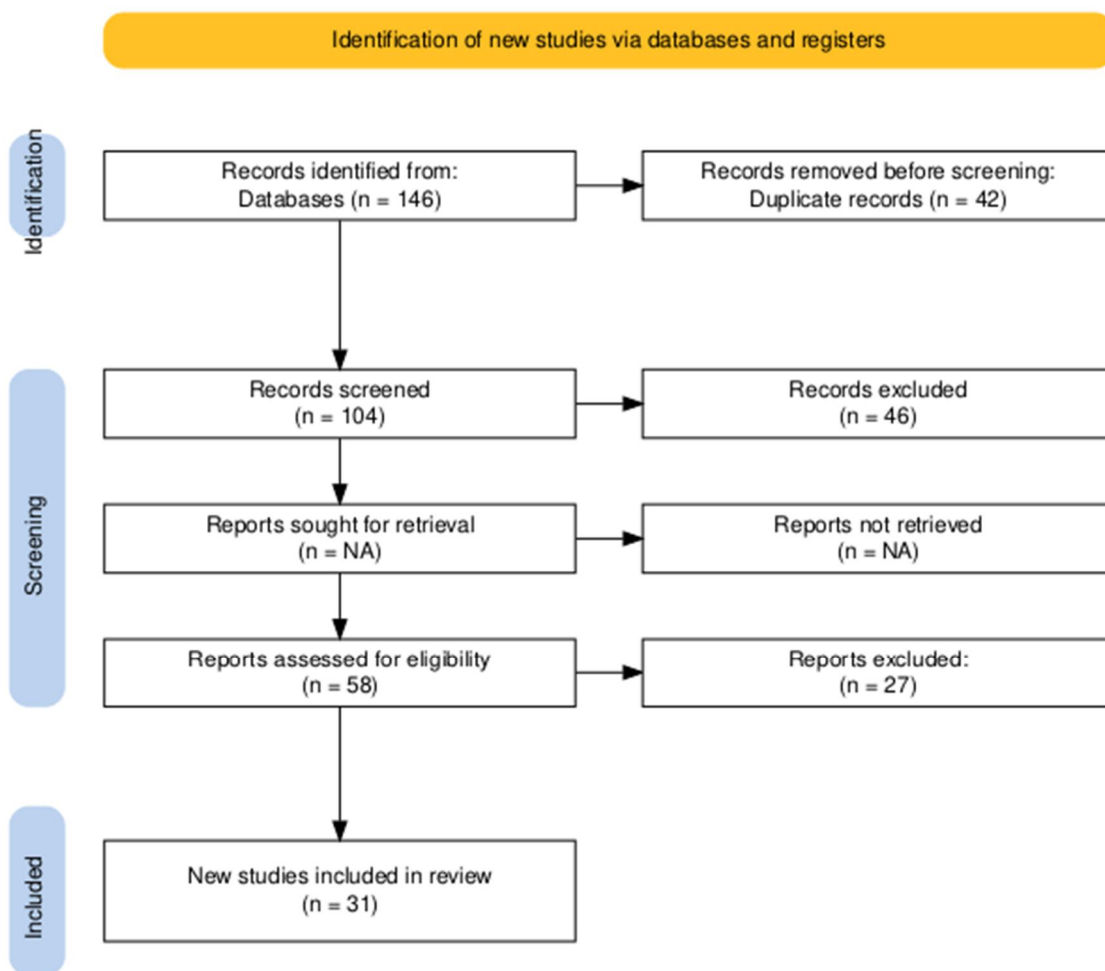


Figure 6. PRISMA flow diagram showing the literature search and screening process used in this study (Source: Haddaway et al, 2022. Adapted from Moher et al., 2009).

Inclusion criteria

Documents were included in the review if they met three conditions. First, the study had to contain empirical or evaluative evidence related to girls' education in Nigeria or

closely comparable contexts. Purely theoretical discussions were excluded unless they offered widely cited conceptual frameworks. Second, the document needed to engage directly with community-based or community-influenced education initiatives. Programs that

focused exclusively on national policy reform without community involvement were not included. Third, the study had to provide sufficient methodological transparency. Sources lacking clear data collection methods or analytical explanation were removed during screening.

These criteria helped ensure that the final dataset contained material capable of supporting meaningful interpretation rather than general commentary.

Quality appraisal of sources

Given the diversity of source types, a formal quality appraisal process was necessary. Each document was therefore assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist for qualitative and mixed-methods research (CASP, 2018). The appraisal considered several factors:

- Clarity of research design

- Transparency of data sources
- Credibility of analytical procedures
- Relevance to girls' education and community participation

Studies that demonstrated strong empirical grounding and methodological clarity were prioritised in the synthesis. Reports with limited methodological explanation were used cautiously and primarily for contextual information.

Quality appraisal does not eliminate interpretive judgement. Development research often involves complex field realities that resist strict methodological uniformity. Nonetheless, applying structured criteria helped maintain analytical discipline throughout the review process. To ensure methodological rigour, the included studies were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) framework for qualitative and mixed-method research. A summary of the appraisal results is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of quality appraisal of selected studies using CASP criteria.

Study / Report	Study type	Data sources	Methodological clarity	Overall appraisal
UNICEF (2022) – Girls' Education in Nigeria	Program evaluation	National survey and administrative data	High	Included
GEARN (2022) – Girls' Education in Northern Nigeria	Mixed-method evaluation	Field surveys and stakeholder interviews	High	Included
British Council (2014) – ESSPIN Evaluation	Mixed-method program evaluation	School performance data and interviews	High	Included
TEGINT (2012) Program Evaluation	Qualitative program report	Community interviews and focus groups	Medium–High	Included
McCall (2024) – Community-Based Education Working Paper	Qualitative analysis	Case studies and NGO reports	Medium	Included
AFC, CSEA & Dalan (2024) – West Africa Education Report	Regional comparative study	Policy review and program analysis	High	Included

Thematic coding and analytical strategy

All selected documents were imported into NVivo for systematic coding. The coding process followed a hybrid approach combining deductive and inductive analysis. Initial codes were derived from the study's theoretical framework. These included categories such as structural barriers, community governance mechanisms, gender norms, educational aspirations, and program sustainability. As the documents were read more closely,

additional themes emerged organically from the data. For instance, several reports discussed the role of religious authority in shaping community acceptance of girls' schooling. Others highlighted the fragile transition between primary and junior secondary education. These patterns were incorporated into the coding framework as new analytical categories.

Coding was conducted iteratively. Early themes were refined as additional documents were analysed. Some categories merged. Others were divided into more specific

sub-themes. By the end of the process, the data had coalesced around three broad analytical domains:

- Structural conditions shaping girls' access to schooling
- Cultural and community dynamics influencing educational participation
- Programmatic interventions designed to address these barriers

These domains correspond closely with the study's research questions.

Analytical framework

Interpretation of the coded data was guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives.

- Intersectional feminist theory provides a lens for understanding how gender interacts with other dimensions of social hierarchy, such as class, religion, and geography (Crenshaw, 1989). This framework helps explain why educational exclusion often varies dramatically across Nigerian regions.
- Social capital theory offers insight into how community networks influence collective behaviour (Putnam, 2000). In many cases, programs succeed not simply because they provide resources but because they mobilise trust within existing social structures.
- Ecological systems theory adds another layer of analysis. Bronfenbrenner's model emphasises how individual outcomes emerge from interactions across multiple levels of social organisation. Family expectations, school environments, community norms, and national policy frameworks all interact within this system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Together, these perspectives make it possible to examine not only whether community-led initiatives work, but also why their outcomes vary across different contexts.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relies entirely on secondary sources. Direct fieldwork was not conducted. As a result, the analysis depends on the quality and scope of existing documentation. Evaluation reports also vary considerably in methodological detail. Some programs provide extensive quantitative data. Others rely primarily on qualitative narratives. This inconsistency limits precise cross-program comparison. Finally, longitudinal evidence remains scarce. Many initiatives report enrolment gains but provide little information about long-term educational or economic outcomes for participating girls.

These limitations do not invalidate the findings. They do,

however, suggest caution when drawing broader conclusions about program impact.

Ethical considerations

The research does not involve direct human subjects. Nevertheless, ethical principles of academic integrity guided the study throughout the review process. All data sources are cited transparently. Interpretive claims are grounded in documented evidence wherever possible. Care has also been taken to avoid misrepresenting the contexts in which community programs operate. Education interventions in fragile environments often involve complex social negotiations. Representing these dynamics responsibly is therefore an important scholarly obligation.

FINDINGS

Access gains through community-led interventions

The educational interventions that have been organized by the communities in a number of states in the North of Nigeria have increased access to schooling among girls in those states where the rates of formal educational participation have been low. Empirical evidence from programmes such as the Girls' Education Project Phase 3 (GEP3) and the Education Crisis Response (ECR) shows measurable gains in enrolment and re-entry to school for girls in Bauchi, Katsina, Kano and Zamfara. As the program assessments of UNICEF show, GEP3 contributed to the enrolment of about 1.3 million girls in the period between 2012 and 2021 solely due to the combination of conditional cash transfers, distribution of school supplies, and community mobilization approaches (UNICEF, 2022).

The mechanisms of these gains seem to go beyond material incentives. According to the social capital view, community-based programs act as relational intermediaries between the formal education systems and the local social structure (Putnam, 2000). School-based management committees (SBMCs), mothers' associations and religious leaders are intermediaries who translate the state educational goals into culturally valid practices in their societies. When schooling has traditionally been linked to external authority or colonial traditions, these players offer a significant source of social approval, thus alleviating parental inhibition to promote group approval towards the idea of girls attending school. This trend is specifically pronounced in those regions where religious leaders have been very keen to back education programs. A number of assessment reports suggest that, with public support of girls' schooling by imam networks or Quranic school teachers, increases in enrolment were more sustainable than in regions where programs were largely based on government communication (GEARN, 2022).

These findings align with broader research suggesting that education reforms in culturally conservative contexts often gain traction when they are framed within existing moral and religious frameworks rather than presented as external interventions (Lewin, 2009).

At the same time, the magnitude of these enrolment gains varies considerably across locations. In some communities, increases were modest but symbolically significant. In others, gains were more substantial. Such variation suggests that access outcomes are shaped not only by program design but also by the local configuration of social norms, leadership structures, and community trust.

Retention, transition and fragility of access gains

The problem with continued participation is more difficult to achieve, even though numerous community-based programmes have managed to enrol girls in schools. Evidence across multiple program evaluations suggests that dropout frequently occurs at key educational transition points, particularly between primary and junior secondary education. National statistics illustrate the scale of this challenge. Only 9 percent of girls from the poorest households complete secondary education, compared with 81 percent from the wealthiest quintile (World Bank, 2022). These disparities become even more pronounced

in rural areas where schooling costs, domestic labour demands, and early marriage pressures converge.

From an ecological systems perspective, this pattern reflects the interaction of influences operating at multiple social levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Educational participation is shaped simultaneously by household expectations, school infrastructure, community norms, and national policy environments. A community initiative may successfully shift attitudes at the village level, yet still struggle against structural constraints such as long travel distances to secondary schools or the absence of female teachers. Several program reports highlight this tension. Non-formal learning centres established under the AENN initiative successfully reintroduced displaced girls to basic literacy education. Yet the transition from these centers into formal schooling often remained uncertain. Differences in curriculum structure, certification systems, and teaching schedules sometimes created institutional barriers that limited progression into government schools (AFC et al., 2024). Gendered social expectations also play a significant role in shaping retention patterns. Qualitative accounts frequently point to puberty as a turning point in girls' educational trajectories. Parents often become more cautious about school attendance once daughters reach adolescence, especially when schools are located far from home or staffed primarily by male teachers. In these situations, community endorsement alone may not be sufficient to sustain participation.

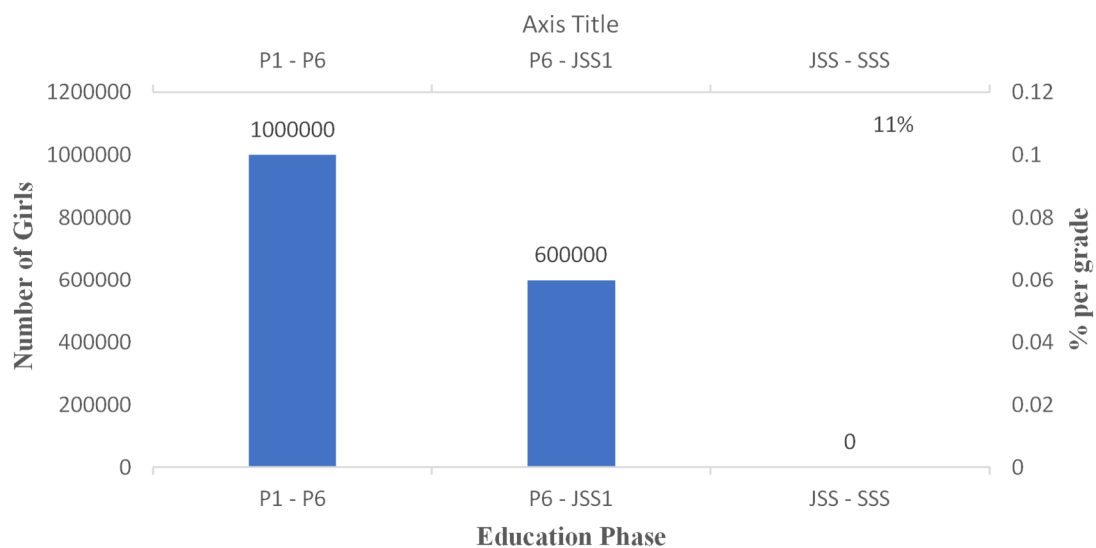


Figure 7. Key dropout points in girls' education trajectory (Nigeria).

Pedagogical and social pathways to empowerment

Beyond access and retention, a number of programs have tried to develop forms of empowerment in the schooling process itself. Programs like the Transforming Education for Girls in Nigeria (TEGINT) program integrated girls

clubs, peer mentorship programs and gender sensitive teaching methods in schools where the programs were implemented. According to the evaluation reports, these spaces yielded some significant changes in the confidence of girls and their self-expression. Participants often reported being more willing to talk in discussions in the

classroom or in community meetings (TEGINT, 2012). These outcomes represent a subtle but meaningful change in the lives of girls in terms of schooling. Viewed through an intersectional lens, such initiatives deal with more than the issue of educational access alone. They intervene in the social expectations that influence how girls conceive of their own possibilities in society (Crenshaw, 1989). Programs that encourage girls to articulate aspirations or question early marriage norms introduce new narratives about what education might lead to.

Nonetheless, such changes can be easily weakened. Girls who are interviewed in program evaluations indicate that they are often faced with conflicting expectations beyond the classroom. Within the school environments, they may be encouraged to lead, debate and imagine professional futures. At home, more old-fashioned expectations of modesty and early marriage usually prevail. The result is a sort of partial empowerment. Girls become confident and aware, but the social structures around them may constrain the actual expression of these capacities. Such tensions make it important to work with families and community leaders in addition to students themselves. Empowerment initiatives that focus exclusively on girls without addressing broader community norms may struggle to produce lasting change.

Local sustainability and program durability

A common theme throughout the reviewed programs is one of sustainability. A lot of projects require external funding, especially at the initial stages. Conditional cash transfers, school infrastructure improvements and facilitator stipends often play an important role in establishing community participation. When outside funding is reduced, however, program activity sometimes slows down. Several of the structures supported by the ESSPIN initiative are reportedly rendered inactive when donor funding ceased, especially in places where local governments did not take over operation costs (GEARN, 2022).

From a social capital perspective, the above pattern generates important questions about the durability of externally stimulated community networks. Programmes that are congruent with existing social institutions seem to be more likely to survive after project cycles. In a number

of states in the north, community leaders operated advocacy campaigns for the schooling of girls even after the formal program structures had melted. Such situations led to educational programs being incorporated into larger community discourses regarding the sense of moral responsibility and social development.

The difference between these outcomes suggests that sustainability depends less on the scale of financial investment than on the degree to which programs become integrated into everyday community practices.

Beyond the classroom: Community education and economic transitions

A final pattern concerns the relationship between education and economic opportunity. Several community initiatives have begun incorporating vocational training components alongside formal schooling. Programs such as Plan International’s Girls-for-Girls (G-for-G) campaign combine peer mentorship with training in entrepreneurship and leadership. These initiatives attempt to address a persistent paradox within gender and education policy. Increased educational participation does not automatically translate into improved labour market outcomes for women. Cross-national research suggests that even when women achieve comparable levels of education, participation in formal employment often remains constrained by social expectations surrounding marriage and motherhood (Ganguli, Hausmann and Viarengo, 2021).

Evidence from Nigerian program evaluations reflects similar dynamics. Girls who complete schooling frequently encounter limited employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas where formal labour markets are small. In some cases, vocational training programs have enabled small-scale income generation through tailoring or agricultural processing. Yet the long-term economic impact of these activities remains difficult to measure due to limited longitudinal data.

These findings suggest that educational empowerment cannot be understood solely in terms of classroom participation. The broader social environment continues to shape how educational achievements translate into real economic opportunities.

Table 4. Skills and post-school outcomes in community-led programs.

Program	Skill	Economic impact	Limiting factor
AENN	Tailoring, Literacy	Small-scale earnings	No formal pathway
Plan G-for-G	Leadership, Advocacy	Delayed marriage	Lacks employer link
NFLCs	Hygiene, Numeracy	Domestic utility	No formal transition
TEGINT	Self-expression, Rights	Aspirational gains	Lacks economic follow-up

Sources: Plan Int’l, McCall (2024), GEARN.

Aspirations, gender identity and cultural constraints

The problem of girls' education in Nigeria is often framed as a question of "access." But as Lundberg (2020) argues, educational outcomes are not merely a function of enrollment or ability. Rather, aspiration. Her longitudinal analysis in the U.S. showed that even after controlling for grades, family income, and school quality, girls were more likely than boys to want, expect, and plan for college. This finding, though based in a different context, strongly echoes in Nigeria's informal learning centers and peer networks, where aspiration is often the quiet axis of difference between participants and non-participants.

In TEGINT's club model, girls articulate dreams of becoming teachers, lawyers, and doctors. All visions often met with encouragement in school. But at home, they are met with skepticism. This reflects a clash of gender scripts: in the classroom, success is marked by voice, visibility, and mobility; in the household, it is measured by modesty, obedience, and readiness for marriage. Community-led education programs navigate these dualities imperfectly. Some adapt to local norms like scheduling around chores and segregating classrooms. Others provoke backlash by appearing to challenge male authority or Islamic customs. This is particularly pronounced during adolescence. As Lundberg and Bertrand (2013) argue, gender identity norms become more rigid during the teenage years, leading boys to resist school (as feminized), and girls to withdraw from ambition (as masculinized). In Nigeria, these pressures are further sharpened by the practice of early marriage. 39% of girls in the Northwest are married before 18, often with limited negotiation power (UNICEF, 2022). Once married, girls face restrictions not only on school attendance but also on visibility, movement, and ambition.

Community-based education can resist these norms, but only partially. Programs that do not actively engage families, religious leaders, and male siblings often find that the school environment becomes a temporary oasis. It is not a harbinger of structural change. Long-term shifts in aspirations and gender roles require repeated community dialogue, not just curriculum content.

Structural bottlenecks and institutional constraints

The final pattern across the findings concerns the limits of community-led models in the absence of state infrastructure and legal enforcement. Many programs, especially those reliant on donor funding, achieve short-term success but struggle to sustain impact without policy integration. For example, only 26 out of 36 states have adopted the Child Rights Act, meaning early marriage remains legal and unenforced in many of the regions where community education is most needed (UNICEF, 2022). Similarly, despite the UBE Act's commitment to "free and compulsory basic education," many schools

continue to charge indirect fees. They request examination fees, PTA dues, textbook costs, etc., that drive dropout, especially for girls. In the UBEC 2018 audit, it was found that even in public primary schools, informal costs could consume up to 75% of a poor household's income (NPC, 2011). Community programs may reduce these burdens temporarily (via school kits or CCTs), but without state subsidy or oversight, the financial logic often wins out.

Teacher availability is another constraint. Many community learning hubs rely on volunteer or under-trained facilitators, especially in conflict zones. In the North, the absence of female teachers is a persistent deterrent: parents are more likely to withdraw girls than send them to male-run classes, especially post-menarche. While some programs (e.g., ESSPIN) invested in female teacher recruitment, the impact has been uneven, with rural deployments often unfulfilled due to poor incentives and housing conditions.

Finally, monitoring and evaluation systems remain weak. With few disaggregated data sets available by district, gender, and age, it's difficult to track impact, compare interventions, or adapt models in real time. Some programs report enrollment but not retention, others track inputs but not learning outcomes, and a few follow graduates into adulthood. Without such feedback loops, program learning is stunted, and best practices cannot scale.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a complex and often contradictory landscape of community-led education in Nigeria. This discovery is marked by localized gains, systemic fragility, and persistent normative barriers. Girls are being brought into classrooms in greater numbers through community-rooted initiatives, yet the full promise of education remains inconsistently realized. These girls miss out on retention, empowerment, and transition to livelihoods, which are supposedly the core takeaways of education. This discussion reflects on these patterns through the lens of the study's core theoretical frameworks: intersectionality, social capital, and ecological systems theory. It also interrogates the structural and epistemic limits of current models, suggesting pathways for rethinking scale, sustainability, and transformation.

Community ownership and the limits of participation

The findings confirm a pattern widely suggested in development literature yet insufficiently examined in the Nigerian context. Community engagement plays a decisive role in expanding educational access for girls. Programs that worked closely with mothers' associations, religious authorities, and school-based management committees tended to record more stable enrolment gains

than those implemented primarily through administrative channels. These outcomes help address one of the key gaps identified in the literature review. Much of the existing scholarship on girls' education in Nigeria has concentrated on structural barriers such as poverty, child marriage, and school infrastructure (Lewin, 2009; Offorma, 2009; Egberi and Madubueze, 2023). Those explanations remain persuasive. Yet they tell only part of the story. Educational participation is also shaped by the everyday social negotiations that occur within communities themselves. Decisions about schooling often unfold in family discussions, religious gatherings, or village meetings rather than within formal policy arenas.

From the perspective of social capital theory, community-led initiatives succeed when they mobilize networks of trust that already exist within local social structures (Putnam, 2000). These networks provide legitimacy that external programs alone rarely achieve. When respected community figures publicly endorse girls' schooling, the decision to send daughters to school becomes less socially risky for parents. Yet participation has limits. Community committees sometimes reproduce the same gender hierarchies that educational reforms attempt to challenge. Women may be formally represented on SBMCs but remain hesitant to speak in meetings. Male community leaders often retain the final authority over educational decisions. In such contexts, participation does not automatically translate into empowerment.

These findings suggest that community engagement should not be treated as a simple policy solution. It is better understood as a contested social space in which competing visions of gender roles and educational futures are negotiated.

Aspirations, identity and the social meaning of schooling

The analysis also highlights a tension between educational aspiration and prevailing gender norms. Many girls participating in community-based programs express ambitions that extend well beyond traditional expectations. In interviews cited in program evaluations, girls frequently describe aspirations to become teachers, doctors, or legal professionals. At the same time, these aspirations coexist with powerful social expectations surrounding marriage and domestic responsibility. The school, therefore, becomes more than a site of learning. It becomes a space where competing interpretations of femininity are negotiated. This dynamic resonates with findings from educational sociology research suggesting that gender identities often shape how young people interpret academic success (Lundberg, 2020; Bertrand and Pan, 2013). In some contexts, educational ambition may be perceived as socially acceptable for boys but more

ambiguous for girls, particularly during adolescence.

An intersectional perspective helps clarify why these tensions vary across communities (Crenshaw, 1989). A rural Muslim girl in Sokoto encounters different expectations from those faced by a Christian student in urban Lagos, even when both participate in the same national education system. Religious traditions, economic opportunities, and regional political histories all influence how communities interpret the value of girls' schooling. Programs that succeed in sustaining girls' participation often address these cultural dynamics directly. They engage parents, religious authorities, and community elders rather than focusing exclusively on students themselves. This broader engagement helps shift the collective narratives that shape educational decisions.

Education without employment: The empowerment paradox

A second major theme emerging from the findings concerns the relationship between education and economic opportunity. Policy discourse frequently treats schooling as a pathway to empowerment. The assumption is straightforward. More education should produce greater economic autonomy and social influence. Reality appears more complicated. Even where girls complete schooling, economic opportunities remain uneven. Women in many parts of Nigeria continue to face limited access to formal employment and credit markets. In rural regions, the local economy may offer few opportunities for skilled employment regardless of educational attainment. This pattern reflects a broader phenomenon observed in global gender research. Cross-national studies show that closing gender gaps in education does not automatically eliminate disparities in labour force participation (Ganguli, Hausmann and Viarengo, 2021). Marriage, childcare responsibilities, and employer discrimination often continue to shape women's economic trajectories.

Within this context, empowerment should perhaps be interpreted more cautiously. Schooling may expand girls' knowledge, confidence, and social awareness. Yet the ability to convert these gains into tangible economic outcomes depends on institutional conditions that extend far beyond the education sector. Programs that integrate vocational training, entrepreneurship education, or mentorship networks attempt to bridge this gap. Their long-term impact remains uncertain. Available evaluation reports provide only limited evidence on whether participants achieve sustained economic independence.

The relationship between education and empowerment, therefore, remains incomplete. Education opens possibilities. Whether those possibilities become realities depends on broader social and economic structures.

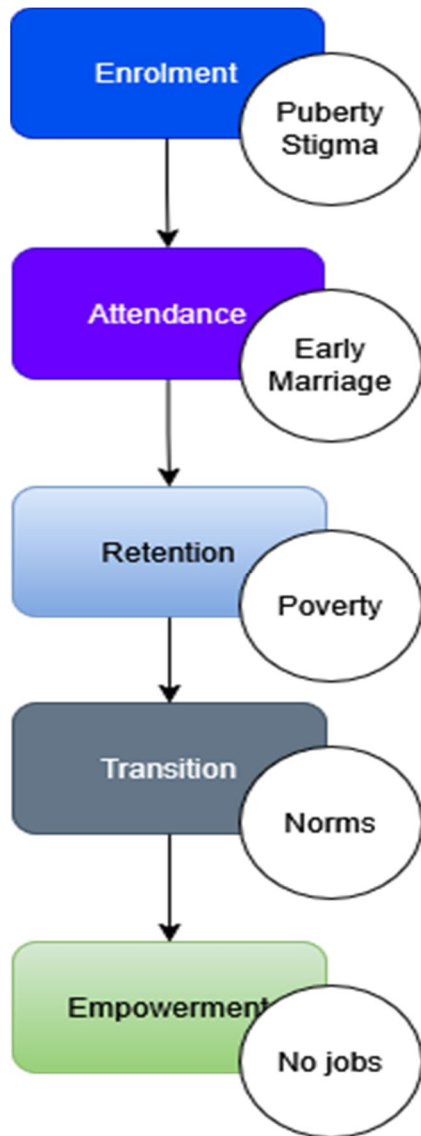


Figure 8. From enrolment to empowerment: Bottlenecks along the girls' education pathway.

Scaling community-based interventions

Another issue concerns scale. Community-led initiatives often work precisely because they are locally embedded. Their effectiveness depends on relationships of trust, cultural familiarity, and social credibility. National education systems operate very differently. They prioritize standardization, administrative efficiency, and measurable outcomes. These priorities sometimes clash with the relational processes that sustain community engagement. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model provides a useful way to interpret this tension (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Educational outcomes emerge through interactions across multiple social levels. Household expectations shape decisions about schooling. Community norms influence

how education is interpreted. National policies determine resource allocation and institutional frameworks.

Community initiatives occupy an intermediate space within this system. They connect household realities with broader policy structures. When this connection functions effectively, community programs can translate national education policies into practices that make sense within local contexts.

Scaling such initiatives, therefore, requires caution. Expanding programs too rapidly may weaken the very relationships that make them effective. Policymakers may need to treat community education models less as standardized interventions and more as locally adaptable frameworks.

Cultural legitimacy and educational reform

The final insight emerging from the findings concerns cultural legitimacy. Programs that align with local cultural and religious narratives tend to achieve greater acceptance than those perceived as externally imposed. Several successful initiatives incorporated Islamic educational traditions into program design. Qur'anic school structures were adapted to include literacy and numeracy components while preserving familiar teaching formats. This approach allowed communities to view girls' schooling as compatible with religious values rather than as a threat to them. This observation challenges a common assumption in development policy. Educational reform is sometimes framed as a process of replacing traditional norms with modern institutions. Evidence from Nigeria suggests a different dynamic. Reform often proceeds more smoothly when it works through existing cultural frameworks rather than attempting to bypass them.

Such strategies do not imply cultural relativism. Instead, they reflect a pragmatic recognition that educational change is most sustainable when communities perceive it as legitimate.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of community-led education in expanding girls' access to schooling in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the country's northern regions, where cultural, historical, and socio-economic factors have converged to entrench gendered educational exclusion. Drawing on documentary evidence, policy analyses, and a layered theoretical framework, the analysis confirms that community-based approaches have played a vital role in advancing gender equity in education. Although it is often underrecognized. From SBMCs and mothers' associations to peer-led clubs and faith-integrated learning centers, these initiatives have helped reshape norms, rebuild trust in public schooling, and lower

the structural and symbolic costs of girls' education. Yet these gains are fragile. Retention and transition remain uneven, dropout persists at key educational thresholds, and the post-school trajectories of girls (especially in rural and conflict-affected areas) remain constrained by marriage norms, economic precarity, and weak institutional follow-through. More critically, even where girls gain education, they do not always gain agency, as aspirations are too often stifled by enduring gender scripts that limit what is considered "appropriate" for a girl to imagine or pursue.

At a theoretical level, this study reaffirms that educational exclusion is best understood through an intersectional ecological lens. This lens recognizes how gendered outcomes are shaped by a constellation of factors like family structure, religion, geography, income, and policy architecture. Community-led initiatives have proven capable of engaging these factors in ways national systems often cannot. This may be precisely because of their embeddedness in local logics. But they require more than goodwill. They need structured support, long-term investment, and policy integration.

As Nigeria continues to grapple with a growing youth population, uneven development, and intensifying demands for equity, the question is no longer whether community-led education matters. Instead, the challenge is how to institutionalize its gains, adapt its models, and scale its insights without eroding its local credibility.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are grounded in the study's findings and are aimed at policymakers, donors, education practitioners, and community stakeholders seeking to create sustainable and transformative outcomes for girls' education in Nigeria.

1. Mainstream community structures into formal education governance

- Integrate SBMCs and mothers' associations into school accountability frameworks, including budget planning, staff recruitment, and monitoring of safety protocols. This requires not just recognition but legal and financial mandate.
- Fund training programs for local education stakeholders, particularly women. This is to enable them to participate meaningfully in decision-making and governance.
- Establish incentive structures (e.g., micro-grants, literacy-linked stipends) to sustain local committee activity after donor withdrawal.

Rationale: Without institutional legitimacy, community education actors remain peripheral, vulnerable to burnout or co-optation. Mainstreaming them bridges the relational gaps between policy and lived reality.

2. Prioritize adolescent retention and re-entry through gender-sensitive infrastructure

- Introduce safe space mechanisms, including school-based counselling, menstruation support, and GBV reporting systems.
- Develop and disseminate clear re-entry guidelines for young mothers and married girls, ensuring schools are equipped to receive them without stigma.
- Improve WASH infrastructure with gender-specific designs, particularly in rural and northern schools.

Rationale: Most dropouts occur during adolescence. This is where reproductive, safety, and social pressures intensify. Retention cannot be achieved without structural adaptations that respond to these pressures.

3. Link education to livelihoods through integrated empowerment pathways

- Expand school-based skills training modules in areas such as digital literacy, agro-processing, tailoring, and sustainable enterprise. And they should be tailored to local economies.
- Create pathways from informal to formal education, including certification of community learning outcomes and connections to vocational institutions.
- Partner with local businesses, cooperatives, and women's networks to develop employment pipelines for female graduates.

Rationale: Without economic opportunity, education becomes a holding space rather than a launchpad. Empowerment must move beyond symbolic inclusion toward structural capability.

4. Embed cultural legitimacy into program design and pedagogy

- Actively involve religious and traditional leaders in program design, messaging, and curriculum adaptation. It should be ensured that interventions are perceived as complementary rather than oppositional to cultural values.
- Develop locally grounded curriculum materials that celebrate girls' agency while respecting communal norms.
- Use Islamic education frameworks (e.g., Islamiyya models) where appropriate to gain community trust while preserving academic rigour.

Rationale: Change must resonate. Interventions that ignore cultural legitimacy risk being rejected or reversed. Those that work within shared values tend to last.

5. Improve monitoring, disaggregation and program learning

- Mandate that all education programs collect and publish

gender-disaggregated data, including enrollment, retention, completion, learning outcomes, and employment trajectories.

- Support district-level education audits in underserved regions to map real-time out-of-school girl (OOSG) populations and intervention gaps.
- Develop impact tracking frameworks for community-based education. It should blend quantitative indicators with qualitative insights.

Rationale: What cannot be tracked cannot be improved. Better data enables adaptive learning, more equitable resource allocation, and a clearer picture of what works where. And why they do.

6. Scale strategically, not uniformly

- Support replication hubs: select communities where successful models are expanded to nearby districts with similar contexts, rather than applying one-size-fits-all solutions nationwide.
- Invest in cross-learning platforms among state ministries, NGOs, and community groups. They should share what works without diluting local nuance.
- Ensure scale-up plans include exit strategies, resource

transitions, and community leadership training to maintain momentum post-project.

Rationale: Scaling is not about size, but about sustainability. Expansion must preserve the integrity of what makes community-led models effective: trust, relevance, and adaptability.

7. Reform legal and policy architecture to align with inclusion goals

- Enforce universal adoption and implementation of the Child Rights Act, including firm penalties for child marriage.
- Reform the UBE framework to include free senior secondary education and a clear prohibition of informal school fees.
- Provide legal protection and incentives for female teachers, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas.

Rationale: Policy without enforcement is rhetoric. Girls' education needs enabling laws, protective infrastructure, and a system that aligns with the community-based work on the ground. None should undermine the other.

Table 5. Stakeholder-specific policy recommendations.

Recommendation	Government	NGOs	Community	Donors
SBMC integration	✓		✓	
Female teacher recruitment	✓	✓		✓
Safe school infrastructure	✓			✓
Re-entry for young mothers	✓	✓	✓	
Vocational-skills-to-jobs pipelines		✓	✓	✓

Final reflection

Nigeria stands at a critical juncture. Its demographic realities, regional disparities, and social tensions converge most clearly in the domain of girls' education. Yet its communities, especially the rural, religious, and often marginalized, have shown themselves capable of profound innovation and care. The challenge now is to support these communities not just as beneficiaries but as co-authors of educational change. Community-led education in Nigeria is not a footnote in policy. Instead, it is the beating heart of any real solution. It represents not just access to schooling, but a collective reimagining of what girls can be, do, and become. This paper has argued that with proper support, such re-imaginings can become policy. And progressively from there, endless possibilities.

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