



Breaking Barriers to Inclusive Education for Adolescent Girls in Nigeria

Oluwafunmilayo J. Para-Mallam, mni
Oluwaseun Ayomipo
Susan Gichuna
Martin Kapchanga
Sam Oando

Executive Summary

In Nigeria, the interplay of historical, political, socio-cultural and economic factors contributes to the construction of gender norms hinder many adolescent girls' access to education. Of the country's 18.5 million out-of-school children, 60% are girls (UNICEF, 2022). Political economy analysis (PEA) revealed wide gender disparities in girl-child enrolment and educational attainment across regions and urban/rural areas.

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This brief highlights critical pathways to overcoming barriers to adolescent girls' access to inclusive and transformative education in Nigeria. It recommends mainstreaming gender equality and social inclusion approaches in education sector planning,

financing and practice. This involves strengthening local governments, building a community of practice around gender-responsive budgeting, amplifying the voices of adolescent on matters that concern their education and general wellbeing, strengthening feminist CSOs in education sector policy advocacy and capacity building, and dismantling harmful cultural norms and practices that inhibit girls' access to quality education.

Key Messages

The gross under-representation of women in political leadership and decision making reinforces gender discriminatory perceptions and practices that de-prioritize girls' education compared to that of boys.

- Nigeria has numerous education policies and laws that support girls' education. Yet, systemic corruption, institutional weakness and other governance challenges, undermine their effectiveness.
- A multi-stakeholder strategy is required involving whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches in the design and delivery of education policies, plans, and projects.

When provided with opportunities for empowerment, adolescent girls can be powerful agents of grassroots activism, in some instances, leading to significant policy shifts.

Background

The global community identified access to inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning as a critical pathway to building democratic and viable societies (SDG 4). It is also a globally acknowledged human right. Nigeria's education governance system includes a robust regulatory framework with provisions that guarantee universal access to education. Nevertheless, there is weak and uneven enforcement of the fundamental right to education as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution and various laws (Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning, 2021).

The country ranks low on all social development indicators, particularly those related to female education.

Gender stats

Indicator/Year	Ranking OR Number	No. of Countries Ranked
World Economic Forum (WEF) Gender Parity Index (2024)	125 th	146
World Economic Forum (WEF) Gender Parity Index (2024)	29 th	52 (Africa)
No. of out-of-school children (OOSC) (UNICEF, 2024)	Highest (18.5 million)	Globally
Proportion of OOSC in Nigeria who are girls	11.1 million (60%)	Nigeria

The 2024 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report ranked Nigeria 125th out of 146 countries globally and 29th in Africa on its Gender Parity Index in relation to four measurement parameters, including educational attainment¹. More specifically, gender

¹ The three other parameters are economic participation and opportunity, health and survival, political empowerment.

disparities are stark and consistent across all levels of educational achievement. With approximately 235 million people, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and has the highest number of out-of-school children (OOSC), which UNICEF (2023) estimates to be 18.5 million, among whom girls comprise 60%.

Adolescent girls' education in Nigeria is a crucial issue that intersects gender with politics, culture, and economics. According to the World Bank, adolescent girls in Nigeria experience greater barriers to accessing education and are more prone to dropping out of school, especially at senior secondary and tertiary levels.² The 2019 UNICEF Gender Disparity Index (GDI) on education reveals that gross enrolment and transition rates for girls from primary to junior secondary school in Nigeria remain low. While Nigeria has made significant

strides in improving girls' access to education, challenges such as inadequate policies, insufficient funding, socio-cultural barriers, and ineffective implementation of programs continue to hinder progress.

This brief is based on the findings of the Political Economy Analysis (PEA) conducted in Nigeria which examined the political, economic, and social factors shaping adolescent girls' access to quality education in Nigeria. PEA provided a framework for understanding regulatory and institutional structures, key actors, and the power dynamics that influence education policies. By exploring barriers, incentives, and decision-making processes, the analysis identified challenges and opportunities for advancing gender-transformative education.

Key Findings

Barriers to Girls' Education in Nigeria: An Overarching Issue

Barriers to adolescent girls' education in Nigeria are complex and multifaceted, stemming from deep-rooted socio-culturally embedded social/gender norms, political, and environmental factors, widespread poverty, poor infrastructure, insecurity, and institutional weaknesses. The PEA revealed important barriers to adolescent girls' education. These include:

- **Infrastructural deficits:** Many communities lack sufficient schools and basic school infrastructure, especially in rural and urban poor areas where available schools are often poorly constructed and overcrowded. In many states, especially in northern region, schools are scarce and sparsely located, requiring long travel distances with attendant security risks. Also, many schools lack gender-sensitive facilities such as separate toilets for boys and girls, water supply, and sanitary disposal options. These deficits are especially problematic for adolescent girls during menstruation, leading to absenteeism and eventual dropout.
- **Human resource gaps:** In urban and densely populated areas, with teacher-student ratios exceeding recommended standards. The shortage of qualified teachers, particularly female teachers, limits the quality of education for adolescent girls.



Girls are 213 times more likely to be out of school than boys at secondary school and 90% more likely to be out of school at all levels.

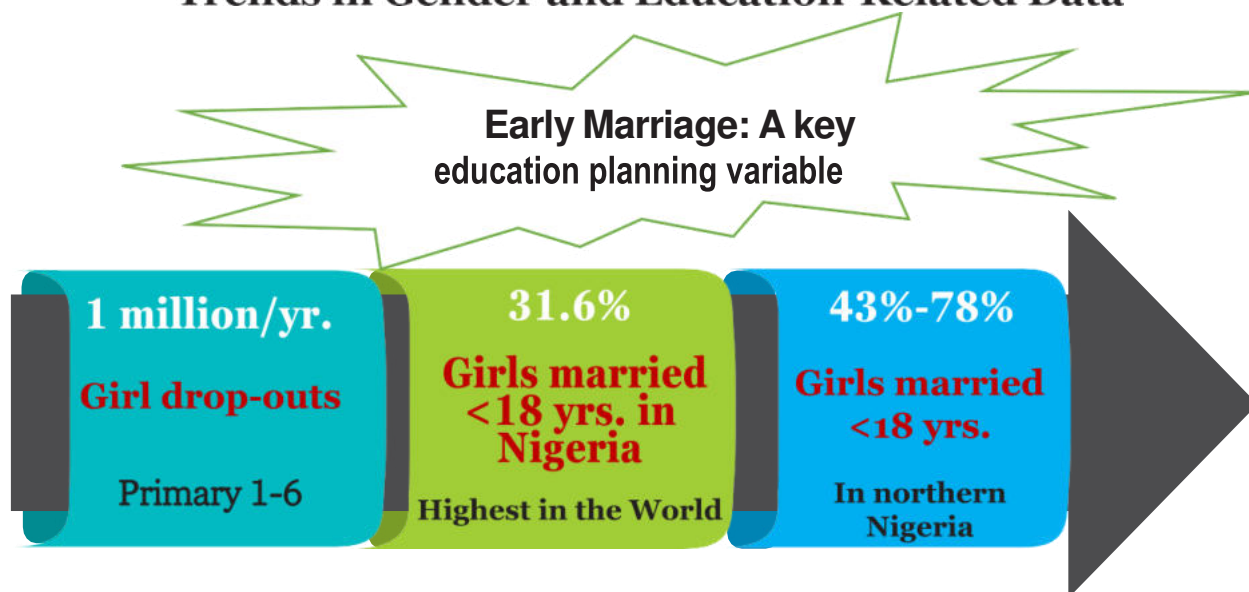
- **Deeply entrenched patriarchal values and harmful traditional practices (HTPs):** Informal and formal institutions and social governance structures in general are permeated with patriarchal ideologies that hinder adolescent girls' access to inclusive and transformative education. While some activists and religious leaders use religion as a platform to advocate for girls' education, others resist initiatives that challenge conservative religious and traditional gender norms, similarly within a patriarchal worldview.
- **Environmental factors:** Harsh and changing climatic conditions, such as desertification in the north and flooding in the south, exacerbate educational challenges, disrupting schooling and making access to schools difficult for displaced children, especially adolescent girls living with disabilities.
- **Conflict and insecurity:** Nigeria is adjudged a country with fragility, conflict and violence (FCV) where girls are 213 times more likely to be out of school than boys at secondary school and 90% more likely to be out of school at all

² <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/nasikiliza/changing-lives-adolescent-girls-through-learning-and-empowerment>

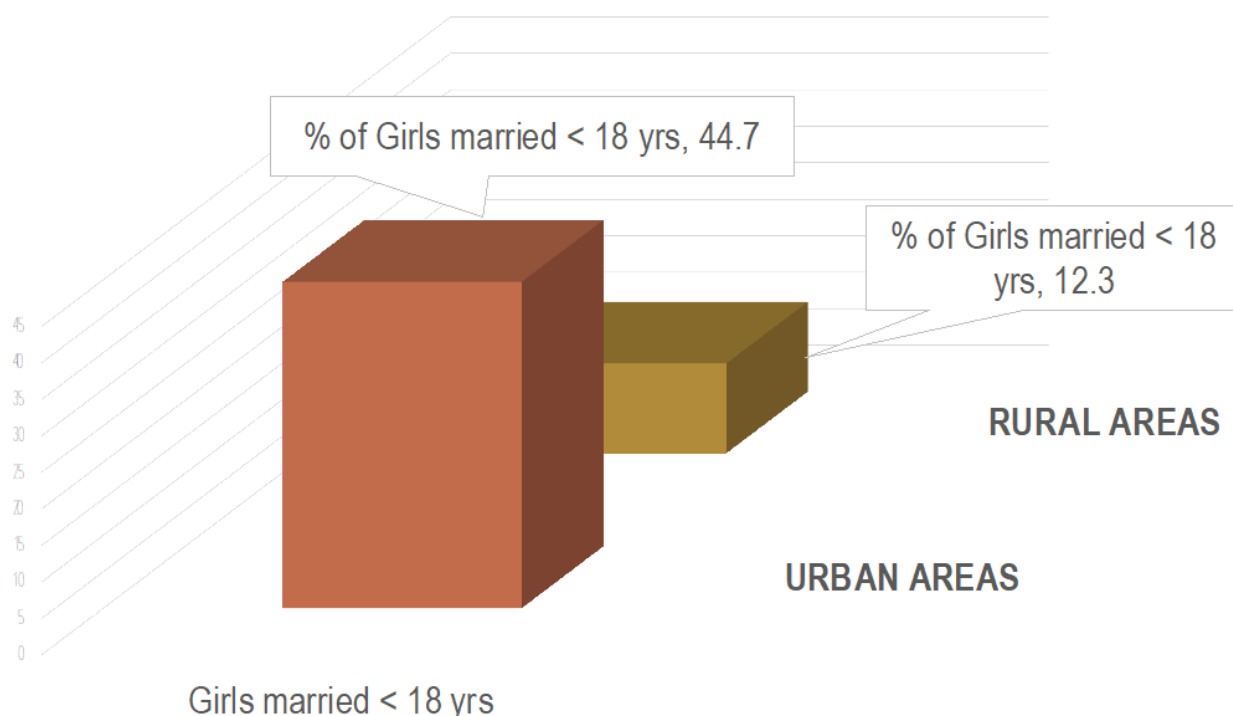
levels. Pervasive societal and sectoral insecurity caused by insurgency, militancy, ethnoreligious violence, kidnapping, banditry, and high levels of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in both public and private spaces significantly undercuts adolescent girls' access to education due to frequent school closures, human displacement and resettlement.

- **Child labour, early marriage and early childbearing:** Many families, especially in rural areas, often rely on adolescent girls to contribute to household income through child labour or assist with domestic chores. Child marriage forces many girls to drop out of school, limiting their educational attainment and perpetuating cycles of poverty.

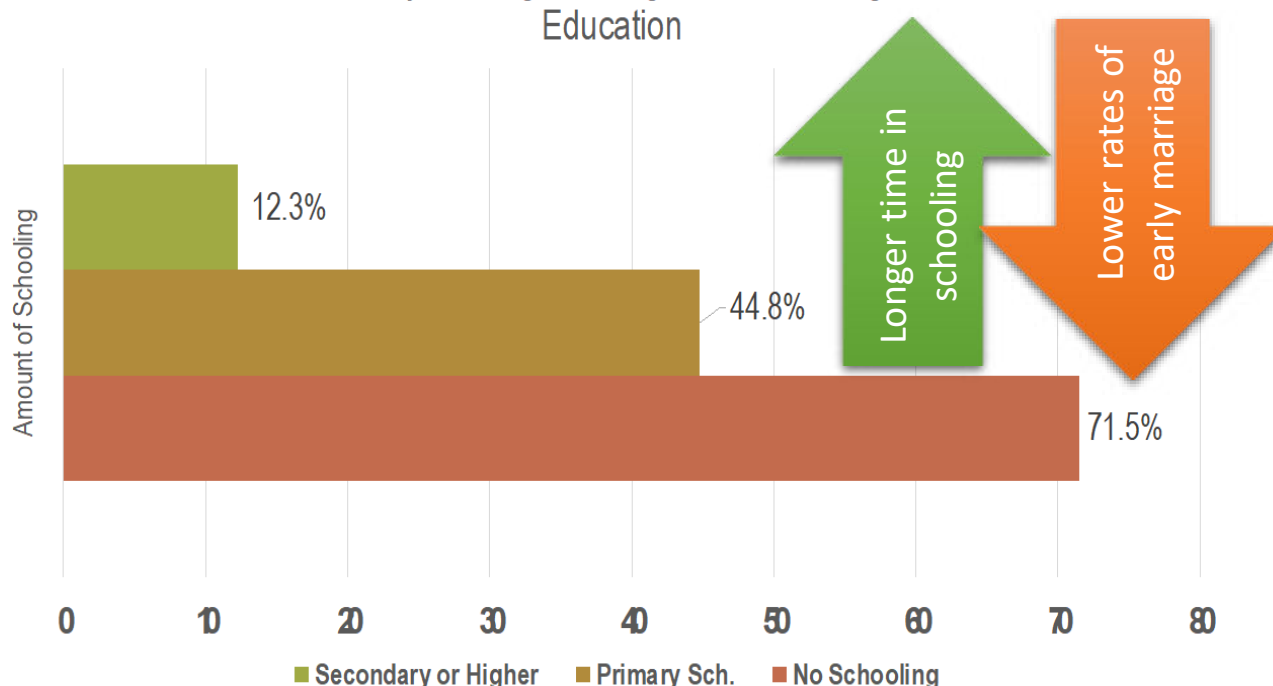
Trends in Gender and Education-Related Data



Girls in Nigeria Married < 18 years: Urban and Rural Areas



Variations in Early Marriage Among Girls According to Levels of Education



Summary of Key Findings

1. The complex, multifaceted and interconnected barriers to adolescent girls' education in Nigeria require a coordinated approach among all relevant state and non-state actors and stakeholders. Such a whole-of-government plus whole-of-society approach could facilitate the design and delivery of relevant education policies, plans, and projects that leave no one behind.
2. Addressing barriers requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that integrates policy reform and community engagement particularly at the level of local government education authorities, supported by investments in gender-responsive education infrastructure, and other gender-transformative interventions,.
3. Comprehensive and integrated education sector reform requires gender mainstreaming strategies within Gender Equality, Empowerment of women, and Social Inclusion (GEESI) and gender-responsive budgeting frameworks at Federal, State, and Local Government levels. This is to ensure the delivery of quality education to adolescent girls, particularly in underserved rural and urban poor areas. Institutionalising these frameworks would engender the required coordinated action and synergy in policy implementation across education sector agencies as well as the three tiers of government.
4. Building the capacity of feminist CSOs to carry out education sector policy-engaged research and policy advocacy could significantly improve adolescent girls' access to inclusive and transformative education.
5. When provided with opportunities for empowerment, adolescent girls can be powerful agents of grassroots activism, in some instances, leading to significant policy shifts. Thus, underscoring the need for amplifying girls' voices in their own education journey.
6. More policy-oriented research is needed to drive gender-specific evidence-informed interventions towards improved education sector planning and outcomes as well as mitigating the diverse and complex barriers to adolescent girls' education that are widespread across Nigeria's multi-cultural landscape.

Policy Recommendations

- **Address Barriers to Adolescent Girls'**

Education: Education ministries should review curricular and collaborate with opinion molders (CSOs, traditional/religious leaders and media outfits) to entrench a mindset reset towards mitigating harmful social norms by enlightening the people, incentivizing efforts against harmful social norms, and raising gender warriors and champions within communities.

- **Carry Out Education Sector Reform:** The National Council on Education and the Federal Ministry of Education should institutionalize human rights-based gender mainstreaming perspectives and priorities using Gender Equality, Empowerment, and Social Inclusion GEESI and gender-responsive frameworks. To achieve this, it is important to strengthen regulatory frameworks through legal backing to enforce adolescent girl-related education policies, and develop a professional community of practice for gender-responsive budgeting, monitoring and evaluation.

- **Prioritize Community Engagement and Capacity Building:** Federal and State governments should adopt a bottom-up approach by building the capacity of Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs) to provide quality and standardized basic education across the

country. Increase budgetary releases to enable LGAs fulfil their constitutional responsibility of providing adequate education infrastructure, which should include girl-child education and health support funds for low-income families.

- **Capacity-Building for Feminist CSOs:**

International development partners should prioritize strengthening feminist CSOs for improved performance in result-oriented policy engagement. It is particularly important to strengthen them to play an oversight role in regards to the enforcement of laws that enshrine girls' right to education.

- **Amplify Adolescent Girls' Voices:** Education authorities in collaboration with Feminist CSOs should create platforms for adolescent girls to share experiences and express their opinions on matters involving their education and health. Such platforms would elicit vital information for improved education sector planning and outcomes.

- **Facilitate Gender-Specific Evidence-Informed Interventions:** Federal, state and local governments should develop a more robust, nationally-networked and easily accessible education management information system (EMIS) with comprehensive sex/gender-disaggregated data for improved gender-responsive policy making and resource allocation.

Further Reading

UNICEF (2022) "Educational Opportunities for Girls in Nigeria" UNICEF Nigeria Factsheet <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/media/7741/file/UNICEF%20Nigeria%20Heat%20Sheet%20-%20Girls%20Education.pdf> (accessed 13/ 12/ 2024)

UNICEF (2023) Girls' Education Project Phase 3 (GEP3) Programme Documents Highlights <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/reports/girls-education-project-phase-3-gep3>





**Partnership for African Social & Governance Research
(PASGR)**

6th Floor, I & M Building, 2nd Ngong Avenue, Upper Hill
P.O. Box 76418-00508, Nairobi, Kenya Email: info@pasgr.org
Tel: +254 (0)20 2985000; +254 (0)729 111031 or
+254 (0)731 000065

