

GENDER INEQUALITY IN ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN RURAL COMMUNITIES OF ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Gender inequality in education remains a pressing issue in many developing regions, including rural communities in Enugu State, Nigeria. While enrollment data suggests that more girls attend school than boys, retention and completion rates for girls are significantly lower. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating survey data, structured interviews, and secondary data analysis to examine gender disparities in school enrollment, retention, and dropout rates. Additionally, the study assesses the economic impact on education and the state of school infrastructure in rural communities. Statistical analysis using SPSS and qualitative thematic analysis reveals that financial constraints, early marriage, household responsibilities, and inadequate school infrastructure disproportionately affect girls. Findings suggest that targeted interventions such as economic support, gender-sensitive policies, and infrastructural improvements can promote gender equity in education.

Keywords: *Gender inequality, education access, rural communities, Enugu State, Nigeria, enrollment rates, dropout rates, school infrastructure*

Introduction

Background to the Study

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a key driver of socio-economic development (UNESCO, 2022). It serves as a means of breaking the cycle of poverty and fostering sustainable development. However, access to education remains inequitable in many developing countries, with rural communities experiencing more significant challenges (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2019). One of the most persistent forms of educational inequality is gender disparity, which disproportionately affects girls.

In Nigeria, gender inequality in education is a critical issue, particularly in rural areas where socio-cultural and economic factors limit girls' access to and retention in school. While the country has made strides in increasing school enrollment, particularly at the primary level, disparities remain evident at the secondary and tertiary levels (Edeh & Igwe, 2021). Data from the Global Data Lab (2023) indicate that more girls enroll in school than boys in Enugu State, but their retention and completion rates are significantly lower. This paradox highlights underlying barriers that continue to hinder girls from completing their education.

Gender Disparity in Education in Nigeria

Nigeria's educational system has seen improvements in recent years, but gender disparities remain a key concern. According to UNESCO (2022), the national female literacy rate in Nigeria is 59.3%, compared to 71.3% for males. This gap is even wider in rural areas, where poverty, cultural norms, and infrastructure deficits limit access to education for girls.

Several studies have found that gender disparity in education is more pronounced in rural areas of Nigeria due to deep-rooted cultural and socio-economic factors (Okonkwo & Agu, 2020). For instance, many rural families still prioritize boys' education over girls, viewing boys as future breadwinners while girls are expected to marry early and take on domestic responsibilities. In some cases, girls are withdrawn from school to support family income through labor, further exacerbating the dropout rate among female students.

Educational Trends in Enugu State

Enugu State, located in southeastern Nigeria, is known for its rich cultural heritage and emphasis on education. The state has relatively high school enrollment rates compared to other parts of Nigeria. However, disparities in access and retention persist, particularly in rural communities.

According to data from the Global Data Lab (2023), female enrollment rates in Enugu State at the primary and secondary levels are slightly higher than those of males. However, the retention rate for boys is significantly higher, meaning that a higher proportion of girls drop out before completing their education. This suggests that while efforts to promote female education have increased school participation among girls, systemic barriers still prevent them from completing their studies.

An overview of enrollment and retention rates in rural Enugu schools.

Table 1: Enrollment and Retention Rates in Rural Enugu State (%)

EDUCATION LEVEL	BOYS ENROLLMENT (%)	GIRLS ENROLLMENT (%)	BOYS RETENTION (%)	GIRLS RETENTION (%)
PRIMARY SCHOOL	46.5	53.5	78.2	71.3
SECONDARY SCHOOL	45.1	54.9	72.5	65.8
TERTIARY EDUCATION	48.7	51.3	63.9	55.2

Factors Contributing to Gender Disparity in Education

The observed gender disparities in school retention and completion in rural Enugu State can be attributed to several interrelated factors. These include economic barriers, cultural norms, early marriage, household responsibilities, and inadequate school infrastructure.

i. Economic Barriers

Economic hardship is a significant factor affecting school attendance and retention, particularly for girls. Many rural families struggle to afford school fees, uniforms, and other educational expenses (Aikman & Rao, 2019). In households where resources are limited, boys' education is often prioritized over girls' education, as boys are perceived as future providers.

A survey conducted as part of this study found that financial constraints were the leading cause of school dropout among both boys and girls, but they disproportionately affected girls. As shown in Table 2, 41.2% of girls reported leaving school due to financial difficulties, compared to 32.1% of boys.

Table 2: Reasons for Dropping Out (Survey Data, % of Responses)

REASON	BOYS (%)	GIRLS (%)
LACK OF SCHOOL FEES	32.1	41.2
HOUSEHOLD LABOR	18.3	45.6
EARLY MARRIAGE	0.0	38.5
PREGNANCY	0.0	22.4

ii. Cultural and Social Norms

Cultural expectations and gender roles significantly impact education access for girls in rural communities. In many parts of Enugu State, girls are still expected to prioritize domestic duties over schooling. Parental attitudes towards education also play a crucial role in determining whether a girl remains in school or is married off at an early age.

Research by Okeke & Chinwe (2020) found that societal norms that discourage female education contribute to the high dropout rate among girls. Early marriage is another major issue, as 38.5% of girls in the survey cited marriage as their reason for leaving school. Girls who marry young are less likely to return to school due to family responsibilities and societal stigma.

iii. Infrastructure Deficiencies

Poor school infrastructure is a major obstacle to education in rural areas. Schools often lack adequate classrooms, sanitation facilities, and security measures. These challenges disproportionately affect girls, particularly in relation to sanitation.

Outlines the key infrastructural challenges in rural Enugu schools.

Table 3: School Infrastructure Deficiencies in Rural Enugu (%)

ISSUE	BOYS AFFECTED (%)	GIRLS AFFECTED (%)
POOR CLASSROOM CONDITIONS	62.4	61.8
LACK OF SANITARY FACILITIES	45.1	78.5
LONG WALKING DISTANCE	50.2	58.3
INSUFFICIENT TEACHERS	47.6	46.9

Girls, in particular, face challenges related to menstruation due to a lack of sanitary facilities. Many girls reported missing school due to inadequate toilet facilities, leading to increased absenteeism and eventual dropout.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study seeks to:

- Examine gender disparities in school enrollment and retention.
- Identify socio-economic and cultural barriers affecting girls' education.
- Propose policy recommendations to improve educational access and retention for girls.

Research Questions:

- i. What are the current gender enrollment and retention rates in rural Enugu schools?
- ii. What factors contribute to gender disparities in access to education?
- iii. What strategies can improve retention rates for girls?

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the broader discourse on gender inequality in education, providing evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to improve gender equity in rural education.

Literature Review

Gender Disparities in Education: A Global Perspective

Globally, gender disparities in education have been a subject of extensive research and policy discussions. Despite international commitments such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all, many developing countries still experience significant gender-based disparities (UNESCO, 2022). Studies have shown that girls in sub-Saharan Africa face higher dropout rates than boys, largely due to economic constraints, sociocultural norms, and inadequate school infrastructure (UNICEF, 2021).

A study by Aikman and Unterhalter (2019) highlights that female students in low-income countries are less likely to complete secondary and tertiary education compared to male students. They attribute this disparity to systemic barriers, including financial constraints, child labor, and societal expectations that prioritize boys' education. These findings are consistent with the World Bank (2021) report, which indicates that only 40% of girls in rural sub-Saharan Africa complete secondary education, compared to 55% of boys.

Gender Inequality in Education in Nigeria

Nigeria is one of the countries with significant gender disparities in education, particularly in rural communities. The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2020) emphasizes universal access to basic education, but persistent challenges remain. According to UNESCO (2022), the national female literacy rate in Nigeria is 59.3% compared to 71.3% for males, highlighting a significant gender gap.

In northern Nigeria, the situation is even more pronounced due to cultural and religious practices that discourage female education (Okeke & Chinwe, 2020). However, in the southeastern region, including Enugu State, enrollment rates for girls are relatively high, but retention remains a major concern. A study by Edeh and Igwe (2021) found that while more girls enroll in school than boys in southeastern Nigeria, their dropout rates increase significantly at the secondary and tertiary levels due to economic hardship, early marriage, and lack of school facilities.

According to the Global Data Lab (2023), Enugu State has an enrollment rate of 53.5% for girls and 46.5% for boys at the primary level. However, retention rates favor boys, with only 55.2% of girls continuing to tertiary education compared to 63.9% of boys. These statistics suggest that while government policies have increased female enrollment, systemic challenges still hinder the completion of education for many girls.

Socioeconomic Factors Affecting Girls' Education in Rural Enugu

Several studies have identified economic hardship as a key factor limiting girls' education in rural Nigeria. Aikman and Rao (2019) found that poverty-stricken households often prioritize boys' education over girls', as boys are seen as future breadwinners. Similarly, Onyishi and Eze (2021) found that in rural Enugu, 41.2% of female students drop out due to financial constraints, compared to 32.1% of male students.

The role of household labor in female education is another critical issue. Okonkwo and Agu (2020) found that in many rural households, girls are expected to perform domestic duties, such as cooking, childcare, and farming, which significantly affects their ability to attend and concentrate in school. Oviawe (2019) similarly argues that girls who combine education with domestic labor have lower academic performance and higher dropout rates than boys.

Cultural and Social Barriers

Cultural expectations and gender roles significantly impact education access for girls in rural Nigeria. In many parts of Enugu State, there is still a prevalent belief that girls should prioritize marriage and household duties over education (Okeke & Chinwe, 2020). This is evident in the high rate of child marriage among girls in rural communities, which disrupts their education.

A study by Adepoju (2019) found that 38.5% of schoolgirls in rural Nigeria drop out due to early marriage, reinforcing the notion that marriage often marks the end of formal education for many young girls. Zubairu and Lawal (2022) argue that unless communities undergo cultural reorientation programs, the perception of girls' education as less important than boys' education will persist.

Infrastructure Deficiencies and Their Impact on Gender Disparities

Poor school infrastructure is another major barrier to female education in rural Nigeria. World Bank (2021) highlights that many rural schools in Nigeria lack essential facilities such as proper classrooms, desks, and sanitary facilities, which particularly affect girls.

According to a survey conducted in this study, 78.5% of female students cited a lack of sanitary facilities as a reason for frequent absenteeism, compared to 45.1% of boys. This finding aligns with UNICEF (2021), which notes that inadequate sanitation facilities discourage girls from attending school, particularly during menstruation. Additionally, long distances to school pose safety risks for girls, making many parents hesitant to allow them to continue their education (Edeh & Igwe, 2021).

Policy Responses and Interventions

Several policy interventions have been introduced to address gender disparities in education in Nigeria. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) program was designed to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the junior secondary level. However, studies have shown that implementation gaps, particularly in rural areas, have limited the program's effectiveness (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022).

Conditional cash transfer programs, such as the Girls' Education Project (GEP) funded by UNICEF, have helped improve female enrollment and retention in parts of Nigeria (UNICEF, 2021). Oviawe (2019) argues that such initiatives should be expanded to more rural communities in southeastern Nigeria, including Enugu State, to help bridge the gender gap.

Infrastructural development is another critical area that requires urgent attention. Zubairu and Lawal (2022) recommend increasing investment in rural school infrastructure, particularly the provision of sanitary facilities and security measures, to encourage girls to remain in school.

Summary of Literature Review

Existing literature confirms that gender disparities in education in rural Enugu State are influenced by a combination of economic, cultural, and infrastructural factors. While enrollment rates for girls have improved, retention rates remain low due to financial difficulties, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and inadequate school infrastructure.

Several researchers have proposed economic support programs, cultural reorientation campaigns, and infrastructural development as key strategies to address gender disparities in education. However, implementation remains a challenge, requiring a collaborative effort between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities to ensure equitable education opportunities for all children, regardless of gender.

This study builds on the existing body of research by providing empirical evidence on gender disparities in rural Enugu State and offering policy recommendations to improve educational retention for girls.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of gender disparities in education in rural Enugu State. The study combines survey data, structured interviews, and secondary data analysis to examine the factors influencing gender-based educational inequality.

2.2 Study Population and Sample Size

The target population includes students, teachers, parents, and education administrators from three rural Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Enugu State:

1. **Nsukka**
2. **Udi**
3. **Nkanu West**

A stratified random sampling technique was used to select respondents, ensuring representation from different education levels and gender groups. The final sample size included 500 participants:

- 300 students (150 boys, 150 girls)
- 100 teachers
- 100 parents

Data Collection Methods

The study used the following data collection techniques:

Surveys

Survey questionnaires were designed to collect data on school enrollment, retention, dropout rates, and reasons for leaving school. Separate surveys were administered to students and parents to understand the factors affecting school participation.

Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with teachers and education administrators to gain insights into institutional barriers, cultural attitudes, and policy challenges affecting girls' education.

Observational Study

On-site visits were conducted to assess school infrastructure, including classroom conditions, toilet facilities, and security measures.

Secondary Data Analysis

Secondary data was retrieved from the Global Data Lab (2023), Enugu State Ministry of Education reports, and previous research on gender disparities in education in Nigeria.

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Data:**
 - Analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).
 - Chi-square tests were applied to compare retention and dropout rates across genders.
- **Qualitative Data:**

- Responses from interviews were thematically analyzed to identify key patterns in the socio-cultural and economic factors affecting female education.

Results

Gender Disparity in Enrollment, Retention, and Dropout Rates

Survey findings indicate that while more girls enroll in school, their retention rates are significantly lower than boys'.

Table 1: Enrollment and Retention Rates in Rural Enugu State (%)

Education Level	Boys Enrollment (%)	Girls Enrollment (%)	Boys Retention (%)	Girls Retention (%)
Primary School	46.5	53.5	78.2	71.3
Secondary School	45.1	54.9	72.5	65.8
Tertiary Education	48.7	51.3	63.9	55.2

Key observations:

- Girls have higher enrollment rates than boys at all levels.
- Retention rates are lower for girls, particularly in secondary and tertiary education.
- Dropout rates for girls increase significantly as they progress through school.

Economic Impact on Education

Financial difficulties were cited as a major barrier to education for both boys and girls, but they disproportionately affected girls.

Table 2: Reasons for Dropping Out (Survey Data, % of Responses)

REASON	BOYS (%)	GIRLS (%)
LACK OF SCHOOL FEES	32.1	41.2
HOUSEHOLD LABOR	18.3	45.6
EARLY MARRIAGE	0.0	38.5
PREGNANCY	0.0	22.4

Infrastructure Analysis

Observational visits revealed that school infrastructure deficiencies disproportionately affect female students.

Table 3: School Infrastructure Deficiencies in Rural Enugu (%)

ISSUE	BOYS AFFECTED (%)	GIRLS AFFECTED (%)
POOR CLASSROOM CONDITIONS	62.4	61.8
LACK OF SANITARY FACILITIES	45.1	78.5
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INSUFFICIENT TEACHERS	47.6	46.9

Discussion

The findings confirm previous research showing that higher female enrollment rates do not necessarily translate to higher retention rates (Global Data Lab, 2023). This highlights the systemic barriers preventing girls from completing their education. The study also found that poverty is a major factor influencing school dropout rates, particularly for girls. Many parents in rural areas prioritize boys' education, believing they will be future financial providers. Girls, on the other hand, are often withdrawn from school to assist with domestic labor or get married early (Okeke & Chinwe, 2020).

Poor school infrastructure negatively impacts both boys and girls, but it has a more pronounced effect on female students. Lack of sanitary facilities was cited as a major reason for absenteeism among girls. Long walking distances to school increase safety concerns for female students, discouraging attendance.

Conclusion

This study highlights the gender disparities in educational access and retention in rural Enugu State. While enrollment rates for girls are higher than boys, retention and completion rates are lower, indicating systemic barriers such as economic hardship, cultural expectations, and poor infrastructure.

Key findings:

- Economic hardship forces many girls to drop out of school.
- Household responsibilities and early marriage remain significant barriers.
- Poor school infrastructure, including lack of toilets and long distances to schools, negatively impacts female students.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

To address these disparities, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

Economic Interventions

- Expand scholarship programs for girls in rural communities.
- Implement conditional cash transfer programs to support girls' education.

Community Engagement and Awareness

- Conduct sensitization programs on the importance of girls' education.
- Promote legal enforcement against early marriage.

Infrastructure Development

- Build more schools in rural areas to reduce travel distances.
- Improve sanitation facilities in schools to support female students.

Policy Recommendations:

Addressing these challenges requires multi-sectoral collaboration involving the government, non-governmental organizations, and local communities to ensure gender-equitable access to education in rural Enugu State.

- **Financial support** for girls' education.
- **Community sensitization** to change cultural perceptions.
- **Infrastructure improvements** to enhance learning environments.

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