

Research article

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Cite this article

Dakroury, A., & Ibeji, V. (2025). Unfolding Gender Discrimination in Education: The Case of Female Children in Northern Nigeria. *Journal of Global Perspectives in Communication and Media*, 1(1), 141–166. <https://jgpcm.org/articles/v1i1-gender-education-northern-nigeria/>

Published

March 2025

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Article page

<https://jgpcm.org/articles/v1i1-gender-education-northern-nigeria/>

This file was reissued on 22 September 2026. The article text and page numbers are unchanged from the issue as first published. This cover page was added, and a running production footer printed on every page of the original issue file was removed. See <https://jgpcm.org/corrections/> for details.



Unfolding Gender Discrimination in Education: The Case of Female Children in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

Gender discrimination is a significant issue affecting women and young girls worldwide. This article examines the causes of gender discrimination within the Gbagyi community in Abuja, Northern Nigeria, and its impact on the education of female children. Using focus group discussions, the main finding reveals the extent to which women and girls in this region face various forms of discrimination, including limited access to education and cultural practices that perpetuate gender-based stereotypes. The research also highlights the role of family, cultural, and societal norms in prioritizing the education of boys over girls, leading to gender disparities in education within the Gbagyi community. Challenges faced by female children in accessing education include early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and household responsibilities. These obstacles limit their educational opportunities, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and inequality. In conclusion, addressing the underlying causes of gender discrimination and promoting education for all can create a more equitable and just society that values the contributions of all its members, regardless of gender.

Keywords: Nigeria, Gender, Discrimination, Gbagyi, Abuja, Education, Inequality

Introduction

Scholars argue that gender encompasses more than merely classifying individuals as male or female; it is a learned set of behaviors that influence actions on individual, communal, and institutional levels. A gendered mentality involves recognizing and accepting societal limitations imposed on individuals due to their gender. Kuehnast & Robertson (2018) contend that as communities gain new knowledge and adapt to changing norms, their attitudes towards gender roles can evolve. Gender analysis is a powerful tool for identifying power imbalances within society and facilitating structural changes, leading to improvements in governance institutions overall.

A core tenet of gender ideology in many societies is the belief in distinct societal roles for men and women, each with different social responsibilities and rights. This model perpetuates the stereotype that men should financially provide for their families, while women are expected to manage the home through domestic duties. More broadly, gender ideology refers to the beliefs and practices that justify and sustain gender inequality in influential settings such as the home, schools, and workplaces. Research maintains that people's experiences are directly shaped by ideologies and choices based on their gender (Davis & Greenstein, 2009). Attitudes and actions



in the home, workplace, and wider community are influenced by gender ideology, and whenever these roles evolve, it signals a shift in gender ideology.

As gender ideology shapes various aspects of society, one of its most profound impacts is on access to education. In many developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, gender-based segregation is often reinforced by informal policies that prioritize male education. As a result, male children are far more likely to enroll in and complete their education compared to their female counterparts, as Jayachandran (2015) confirms. This unequal access to education, supported by societal norms and expectations surrounding gender roles, further influences broader social patterns such as marriage, family structure, and socioeconomic status (Philipose, Toure, & Verhuist, 2018).

Female children who are denied equal educational opportunities often face the consequences of early marriages. A report jointly published by the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) and the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) identifies child marriage as one of the most pressing issues in West and Central Africa (2021). This practice has a severely detrimental effect on education, sexual and reproductive health, as well as the overall development of young girls and adolescents. The report reveals that nearly 60 million girls and young women, or 41% of the population, were married before the age of 18 in the region. Additionally, Nigeria, the most populous country in West and Central Africa, has the highest rate of child marriage. Of the estimated 42 million child brides across Africa, 40% reside in Nigeria (Philipose, Toure, & Verhuist, 2018).

Extensive research in West and Central Africa demonstrates that poverty and rural living are major factors influencing the prevalence of child marriage. Researchers document that child marriage is three times more common among the impoverished than among the wealthiest in the region. Evidently, according to the 2018 UNICEF and UNFPA report, over 80% of young women living in poverty in Nigeria were married as children, compared to only 10% of those from wealthier backgrounds (2019). Child marriage presents numerous challenges, particularly for young girls, as it often leads to the end of their education and prevents them from obtaining the qualifications necessary for their desired careers. These statistics underscore the urgent need for significant investment in girls' education to combat child marriage. Building on this understanding, the study examines gender discrimination within the Gbagyi community in Abuja, Northern Nigeria, and its impact on girls' education. It finds that cultural norms and societal beliefs place greater value on boys' education, resulting in lower school enrollment for girls. Challenges such as early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and domestic responsibilities further limit girls' educational opportunities, reinforcing cycles of poverty and inequality. The study also recommends changing cultural attitudes, promoting education for all, and implementing policies that ensure gender equality. Additionally, it highlights the need for financial support and incentives for families to educate their daughters, as well as addressing broader issues like poverty and gender-based violence. Tackling these challenges can help create a more equitable and just society.

Education & gender inequality in Africa: A Necessary background



Linking gender ideology to education, the Global Education Monitoring Report highlights that access to quality and sustainable education is one of the world's most pressing challenges, both now and in the future. Therefore, every society's goal should ensure that all children have the opportunity to attend school and continue learning throughout their lives, equipping them with the necessary skills to contribute to the growth of their communities. As quality education is a key tool for achieving sustainable development and global peace, UNESCO continues to prioritize gender equality in and through education, ensuring that the fundamental right to education is upheld for girls and women in the world (UNESCO, 2019).

Yet, poverty, inequality, and disparity are arguably one of the major impediments to schooling and education. Out of 796 million uneducated people globally, women make up over two-thirds of them (UNESCO, 2019). The central obstruction and limiting factor to women getting out of poverty is social constructs that deny them access to education. b. School enrollment clearly shows this gender disparity. Hurt (2019) argues that the gender enrollment gap in schools begins in elementary school and persists through high school. The number of girls who were not in school increased from 10 to 23 million in western Africa by 2019.

The female-to-male ratio for school enrollment in Africa is 0.76, the lowest Gender Parity Score (GPS) of any region globally. There is significant variation in country performance regarding women's education across the continent, with Southern African nations performing relatively well, while countries in West and Central Africa lag behind (UNDP, 2020). These statistics clearly show that a child's educational opportunities in Africa are influenced by both gender and location. Without focused efforts to support the most disadvantaged girls, achieving universal primary education in many sub-Saharan African countries will not be realized in this generation.

Achieving gender equality in education requires more than just equal school enrollment; it also involves providing opportunities for girls and women after graduation. To promote global development and peace, countries must develop strategies, educational policies, and plans to eliminate this inequality. Additionally, girls and women must have access to fields like science and technology, where they remain underrepresented. Unfortunately, gender disparities in education, economic and digital inclusion, and political participation have worsened over the past four years (The Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2019). This affected girls' education as will be seen in the following section.

Interpreting the state of Girls' Education in Africa

Article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that everyone has the right to free education, especially in early development stages, and access to professional education. Parents or guardians can choose the early skills and knowledge their children should learn. In the context of Africa, a girl's education typically consists of three stages: early childhood (0-5 years), primary education (6-12 years), and secondary education (12-18 years). During these years, the girl-child is usually under the care of her parents or guardians, who help her develop her



character and behaviors. In this section, let us overview the main challenges imposed on girl education and share some of the potential ways to improve these obstacles.

a. Major obstacles to girl education in Africa

There are some significant challenges to educating girls in Africa in general. Some of these obstacles are as follows: *1. Access to education:* Some research suggests that education accessibility means that female children have the opportunity and ability to receive training and acquire knowledge. However, many Nigerian girls, as we will discuss later in the article, lack access to education due to factors such as child labor, poverty, lack of funds, truancy, broken homes, and parental death (Okeke, Nzewi, & Njoku, 2008). Additionally, more than half of the African population lives below the poverty line, resulting in many female children being excluded from education due to a lack of resources (Offorma, 2009).

In countries like Ethiopia, many girls are forced into marriage as early as the age eight. In West African nations such as Nigeria, females often work as domestic servants in poor rural households. Social and cultural factors are the main barriers to girls' education in African countries. For example, due to widespread poverty, families typically choose to educate boys over girls, who are expected to stay home, work, or marry wealthy men (Okeke, Nzewi, & Njoku, 2008). The patriarchal structure of African society prioritizes male children for the family's growth, leading to the neglect of girls' education.

Despite having strong regional and international programs to promote education, both male and female youngsters in Sub-Saharan Africa are poorly educated (Series, 2005). Initiatives like the Forum for African Women's Education (FAWE) network have not significantly improved the situation, with female students attending school for only about 2.82 years out of their first sixteen. Only 46% of female pupils typically complete their primary education (Forum for African Women's Education, 2024). In contrast, some nations, such as South Africa, Namibia, and Botswana, have achieved a Gender Equality in Education Index (GEEI) of 60 out of 100, which is impressive. Unfortunately, other African nations, including Ghana, Uganda, and Tanzania, have a GEEI score below 60, which has remained steady over the years. There are also significant gender enrollment disparities in African nations, such as Guinea Bissau, where only 60% of girls attend school compared to 100% of boys. In Mali's rural areas, the enrollment of female students is approximately 29%, indicating severe gender discrimination in these regions (Johannes, 2020).

2. Retention/Dropout: By the end of 2002, approximately 24 million girls in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, Chad, Tanzania, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and DRC, have dropped out of school. The South Sudan region had the highest proportion of female dropouts due to ongoing civil conflicts. According to Offorma (2009), only 15% of school-age children were enrolled, with just 1% being female students. Social and cultural views have significantly contributed to the high dropout rate among female students in Sub-Saharan Africa. Komora (2016) adds that inadequate counseling, parental decisions, lack of job opportunities for educated women, preference for money, and the lengthy education process are primary factors for the high dropout rate among girls.



3. *Quality of Education*: The Jomtien Conference in 1990 aimed to ensure that all female children were enrolled in school during their first ten years at least to receive a decent education. The main issue was whether the education provided to girls was adequate to ensure their success in a male-dominated society. Ideally, Offorma stated that quality education enhances the general well-being of the girl-child but does not necessarily ensure her academic success. Consequently, we see child labor, sexual oppression, and corporal punishment hindering the development of young girls and the provision of proper education (2009).

4. *Child marriage*: In its 2019 report titled “Child Marriage in West and Central Africa: A Statistical Overview and Reflections on Ending the Practice,” UNICEF discusses the prevalence of child marriage and its severe impact on education, health and the overall development of young girls, especially in West and Central Africa. It was documented that approximately 41% of females under 18 in this region are married, equating to nearly 60 million child brides, with many of them younger than 15 years (Nigeria alone has about 22 million child brides). Poverty, rural living, and lack of education are strongly linked to the prevalence of child marriage, while wealth, urban living, and access to quality education reduce its incidence (Philipose, Toure, & Verhuist, 2018).

b. Ways to improve girl-child education in Africa

On the other hand, scholars maintained that improving girls’ education in Africa is not impossible, in fact, some argue that there are some methods already implemented over the years to ensure girls have equal education rights. For example, Kenya enacted the *Children Act* in 2001 to increase access to education for all children. The Kenyan government would arrest parents who neglected or failed to send their children to school; and if parents are found guilty of denying their child's right to education, they could be sentenced to up to five years in prison Offorma (2009). Additionally, several NGOs have emerged to combat child marriages in African society, educating parents about the importance of schooling for their daughters instead of pressuring them to marry older men. There has also been an increase in school-based nutrition programs, which help reduce the cost of enrolling girls in school.

Further, observers argue that some strategies could be also implemented to ensure every African girl receives an education. For example, governments can provide equal growth opportunities for boys and girls by addressing gender disparities in schools, aiming for equal enrollment. Series documented that after Uganda established universal primary education policy in 1997, 93% of boys and 90% of girls were enrolled in school (Series, 2005). Additionally, nations can focus on reducing the costs associated with enrolling and retaining girls in school. Series adds that these costs include direct expenses like tuition and indirect expenses like construction fees, shoes, and uniforms (2005). Eliminating indirect school fees can increase girls' participation in formal education.

United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) highlight in their report that indirect costs, such as school uniforms, safety, and transportation, are often higher for girls than for boys. Reducing these costs would increase the number of girls attending school (2021). Additionally,



society should be prepared to bear the opportunity costs when girls are sent to school. These costs include the free services girls provide at home, such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, and water collection. In African cultures, girls are more likely than boys to care for sick parents or family members, which can hinder their ability to attend school. Society must be willing to bear these costs to ensure girls receive the education they need to improve their lives (UNGEI, 2021).

Indeed, improving the quality of education in Africa is crucial for ensuring girls' right to education. Series (2005) argues that reducing the cost of education alone is insufficient; enhancing the quality of education is also necessary. This includes employing effective teaching strategies, providing academic materials, updating curricula, involving the community, and improving school facilities. Several African nations have initiated projects to improve the quality of girls' education. For example, some of them require girls to enroll in school, and to include their retention in both the school and teacher's performance and evaluations. As well, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) asserts the role of schools which offer gender awareness training for teachers to help them understand the role of educated women in society. Communities have also developed guidelines to address gender-based violence and oppression, particularly in early marriages, and to support the education of pregnant girls. Assigning more female instructors to rural schools to serve as role models for young girls is another step to enhance girls' education in Africa (UNICEF, 2021).

Focus on Nigeria & Gender Discrimination

Here, the focus of analysis is Nigeria where gender discrimination is quite prevalent, especially in the northern regions. Cultural and religious traditions contribute to gender inequality, with women often viewed as subordinate to men (Adeosun & Owolabi, 2021). Researchers add that Nigeria's patriarchal society allows men to dominate and discriminate against women, treating them as second-class citizens, particularly in rural areas (Ejumudo, 2013 & Makama, 2013). The 2012 "Gender Equality in Nigeria" report ranked the country 118th out of 134 countries (British Council, 2012). There is a common belief that women's roles are confined to domestic duties such as cooking, farming, managing the home, and caring for men. Women are often treated as property and subjected to mistreatment and abuse both at home and in the community (Makama, 2013). In many households, female children bear the heavy burden of household chores, while boys are given more opportunities for formal education or learning a trade (Adeosun & Owolabi, 2021).

Despite the Nigerian Constitution's guarantees of gender equality and condemnation of discrimination, many women still face discrimination and marginalization. This inequality is often rooted in discriminatory laws, religious and cultural traditions, gender stereotypes, low education levels, and the disproportionate impact of poverty on women (Okafor & Akokuwebe, 2015). Gender inequality in Nigeria is influenced by various cultural and religious factors. In many parts of the country, especially in Northern Nigeria, women are often seen as second-class citizens or, in some cases, as the property of men.



A survey by the Department for International Development (DFID) in Nigeria revealed that both men and women uphold restrictive norms about gender roles within the home. About 91% of men and 94% of women agreed that a woman's primary role revolves around domestic responsibilities, including child and family care. Abuse and assault of females, including young girls, were often viewed as normal or commonplace. Conversely, traits such as toughness, sexual performance, and the ability to earn an income were considered masculine (British Council, 2012).

To promote the growth and development of any society, nation, or government, gender-based discrimination and inequality must be eliminated. Practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, and violence against women and girls must be actively opposed. The rights of girls, including their sexual and reproductive health, must be protected. Ensuring access to quality education and opportunities to reach their full potential is essential for the development of every girl. To achieve development that benefits everyone, the root causes of poverty must be addressed. Ensuring equal treatment of women and men is crucial for this goal. While gender equality is significant in tackling global poverty, it is not the only factor. Other systems of oppression, such as colonialism and capitalism, also contribute to poverty in various parts of the world. Therefore, a comprehensive and effective approach to combating poverty must consider all potential causes (Mbah & Oti, 2015).

Sustainable development is unattainable if half of the population is prevented from reaching their full potential due to gender-based barriers. The future of any nation depends on the advancement of gender equality, making it essential for everyone to actively pursue this goal. Providing opportunities for girls and women to access their rights, contribute to economic growth, and shape their communities is crucial for building a prosperous and equitable future for all. Achieving gender equality is not just a matter of fairness; it is a vital step toward a more sustainable and inclusive world (DFID, 2018).

Gender Education & Literacy Levels in Nigeria

Nigeria's education system is not performing as well, as expected, for such a large and economically strong country. Despite having a high per capita income and being Africa's biggest economy, Nigeria ranks 161 out of 189 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). This index measures how well people can live the lives they want. Nigeria's low ranking shows it has issues with poverty, inequality, and gender gaps. For example, Nigeria's 2019 HDI score was 0.539, but it drops to 0.348 when inequality is considered, a 35.4% decrease. This puts Nigeria in the category of countries with low human development and high inequality. The HDI looks at progress in life expectancy, health, education (average years of schooling), and living standards (UNDP, 2020).

A UNESCO report on Nigeria reveals that the primary school Net Registration Rate is 56% for girls and 61% for boys, with over 5.5 million girls not attending school (UNESCO, 2014a). The National Population Commission reports that 40% of women and 28% of men have never attended school, with the highest dropout rates occurring in the sixth grade, especially among



girls (UNESCO, 2014b). In the Northwest and Northeast regions, more than two-thirds of women have no schooling, while in the South-South, less than 15% percent of women are uneducated.

In Nigeria, particularly in the northern regions, girls and women are often excluded from education. Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children globally, with this figure increasing daily. Most of these 10.5 million out-of-school children are girls. Girls from the poorest families in rural areas of the North-West and North-East are the least likely to attend school. For example, 70.8% of women aged 20-29 in the Northwest are illiterate, compared to just 9.7% in the Southeast (British Council, 2014). Despite some efforts by the government and NGOs to improve educational access for girls, significant challenges remain.

According to the latest UNESCO Institute for Statistics data, about 10.1 million children in Nigeria are out of school, most of whom are girls. Girls from rural and poor communities face significant educational barriers, such as inadequate infrastructure, poverty, child marriage, and gender discrimination (UNESCO, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues, with school closures and economic hardships disproportionately affecting girls' education (UNESCO, 2020). The 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report warned that up to 20 million girls might not return to school after the pandemic, with Nigeria being at high risk (Global Partnership for Education, 2021). Literacy rates vary widely across regions, socioeconomic levels, gender, and age, with the southern regions having the highest literacy rates and the smallest gender gap, while the northern regions have lower literacy rates and a larger gender disparity.

As seen, gender disparities in literacy rates highlight both historical and ongoing inequalities in school enrollment and completion. Girls are more likely to drop out of elementary school and less likely to transition to or complete secondary education compared to boys. Factors like poverty, gender norms, and early marriage contribute significantly to school dropouts. Additionally, inequalities based on socioeconomic status, race, location, and disability worsen these gender disparities in education (Koissy-Kpein, 2020). Children from the poorest households are much less likely to enroll in school, with young women from the wealthiest 20% being four times more likely to be literate than those from the poorest 20% (UNESCO, 2015). Low literacy levels are also due to insufficient school facilities, poor sanitation, lack of textbooks, and a shortage of trained teachers. Rural living, combined with poverty and traditional practices, further increases the risk of educational exclusion. Therefore, addressing these educational barriers and bridging gender and socioeconomic disparities is crucial to ensure all children, especially girls, can reach their full potential and contribute to a more equitable and prosperous future.

Gbagyi People: Gender Inequality Case study

Africa hosts some of the world's fastest-growing economies, yet gender disparity continues to impede its full potential (African Development Bank, 2014). Research indicates that gender discrimination against female children and women is prevalent across Africa. This discrimination



stems from social institutions that impose restrictions, preventing women from achieving their full potential. These institutions enforce various laws, norms, traditions, and codes of conduct that limit women's rights. Such limitations are often embedded in customs and rituals, including female genital mutilation, child marriages, polygamy, and patriarchal authority, which restrict women's freedom of movement, personal choices, education, and inheritance (Jayachandran, 2015).

In many African countries, women lack basic rights and opportunities to escape poverty. While men can own land and property, women face restricted access to ownership, hindering their ability to build wealth and financial security. Additionally, African women are often denied education, a fundamental human right that could help them break free from poverty. Without education, women are less likely to secure well-paying jobs, exacerbating their economic challenges (Mutume, 2005).

Gender inequality has resulted in low female participation in economic activities and limited access to education and health resources for women. Efforts to improve women's conditions will have minimal impact if social institutions continue to discriminate against them (Jayachandran, 2015). Despite significant progress in some African countries towards gender parity, inequality remains widespread across the continent (Signe & Gurib-Fakim, 2019). While some women have managed to overcome these barriers, millions remain constrained. This persistent gender inequality hinders the social and economic development of women and prevents Africa from achieving its full economic potential. For instance, in 2018, women contributed only 33 percent of Africa's total GDP, despite making up more than half of the population (Moodley et al., 2019). This imbalance perpetuates inequality and threatens Africa's long-term economic health.

A study by the McKinsey Global Institute shows that progress toward gender equality in Africa has largely stalled between 2017 and 2021. If the current rate of progress continues, it will take over 140 years for the continent to achieve gender parity. In 2019, Africa's Gender Parity Score (GPS) was 0.58, indicating significant gender inequality across the 15 indicators of workplace and societal gender equality used to measure this score. The GPS, developed by McKinsey, tracks progress toward gender equality. South Africa's GPS of 0.76 reflects moderate gender inequality, while countries such as Mauritania, Mali, and Niger have some of the lowest scores in the region. However, accelerating efforts to close the gender gap could bring substantial economic benefits to Africa, potentially increasing the continent's total GDP by \$316 billion, or 10 percent, by 2025 (Moodley et al., 2019).

The Gbagyi people of Abuja are selected as the case study for several reasons. Firstly, their cultural and socioeconomic characteristics closely mirror those of other groups in Northern Nigeria. Additionally, the Bwari region of Abuja is home to followers of all major religions practiced in Nigeria, offering a unique opportunity to distinguish between religious and customary practices. The subjugation of women within Gbagyi culture reflects longstanding traditions, making it essential to study the impact of patriarchy on Gbagyi women. The Gbagyi have a deeply ingrained cultural and belief system that places women in subordinate roles to men, more so than in other tribes, thereby reinforcing patriarchal dominance (Ayuba, 2016). Moreover, the Gbagyi's cultural practices and belief system are intriguing and warrant closer examination. For instance, traditional beliefs dictate that only women are permitted to carry



heavy loads, as their God forbid men from doing so. Consequently, women bear the physical burden of carrying heavy weights on their shoulders and backs (Abiola, 2020).

Since this research aims to explore the cultural practices and social norms of the Gbagyi people, it will shades more light on understanding the experiences of Gbagyi women and assessing the potential for gender equality within the community.

Gbagyi or Agbari (plural: Agbagyi/Agbari) refers to the people and their language, primarily located in Central Nigeria, with a population of about 5 million. They are spread across Niger, the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja, Kogi, Kaduna, and Nasarawa regions. In Nigeria's central belt and the Federal Capital Territory, the Gbagyi/Gbari are the largest indigenous and ethnic communities (Orisaremi, 2020). While the Gbagyi/Gbari are mainly farmers, some are skilled in clay sculpting and pottery. They create decorative household items like vases and traditional arts and crafts, including ceramic and wooden mortar and pestles (Abiola, 2020).

While Gbagyi people in towns and cities are relatively modernized, most Gbagyi in rural areas remain deeply rooted in tradition, including male leadership. The Gbagyi/Gbari follow a patrilineal kinship structure, still prevalent today. Authority starts at the extended family compound, led by the eldest male, and extends to the Esu/Osu (king), supported by a council of elders. Although the Gbagyi are increasingly adopting modern clothing, medical care, and livelihoods, many rural Gbagyi still undervalue education, as evidenced by low high school graduation rates (Ayuba, 2016).

Patriarchy is the dominant social order among the Gbagyi people, as it is in much of Nigeria, where males are considered superior to females. Educational opportunities hold little importance for the Gbagyi, who are primarily farmers and view education as a waste of time and resources (The Joshua Project, 2016). Consequently, if Gbagyi boys struggle to attend school, marginalized Gbagyi girls have even less access to education.

Research Methodology

Since the aim is to analyze gender inequality in Nigeria, how society views gender, and how this perception affects the country's economic growth and social progress, this study examines power dynamics in social groupings, institutions, and representation systems from both socio-historical and current perspectives. Furthermore, to fully grasp the significance of gender in power and socioeconomic advancement, the study also examines the intersections of privilege and oppression based on gender and ethnicity, with a focus on the Northern regions of Nigeria.

Methodologically, a case study research design aims to use several data sources and usually includes either quantitative methods, such as questionnaires, or qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups (Crowe et al., 2011). Here, interviews were used to collect the data: 21 participants aged between 15 and 65 years were selected from the target population; 15 females and 6 males. Ideally, this design aims to source data from different people, especially in a qualitative study, to boost the internal validity of the research. The central assumption in this method is that the responses given by the participants will result in the same findings. At the



same time, the use of several sources ensures that the researcher develops a holistic view of the research phenomena.

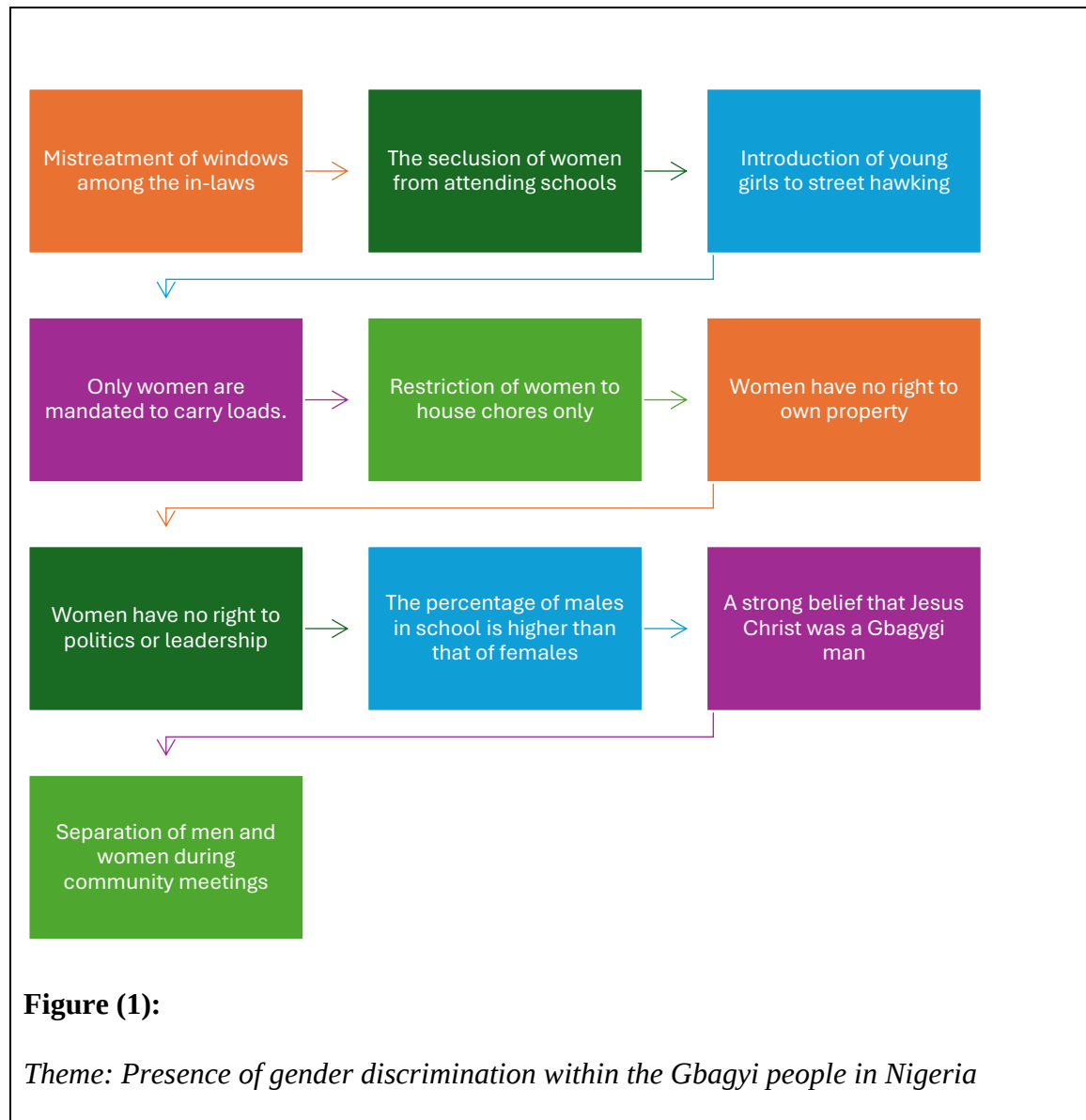
Interviews are common approaches to gathering data for research purposes. They are methods of data collection used by researchers to garner various information to help them arrive at their objective outcomes. Interviews can be structured or unstructured, also known as formal or informal. Structured interviews consist of standardized and premeditated questions, which apply to the quantitative research approach. In contrast, unstructured interviews are spontaneous and not calculated and are usually used for qualitative data collection (Formplus, 2021).

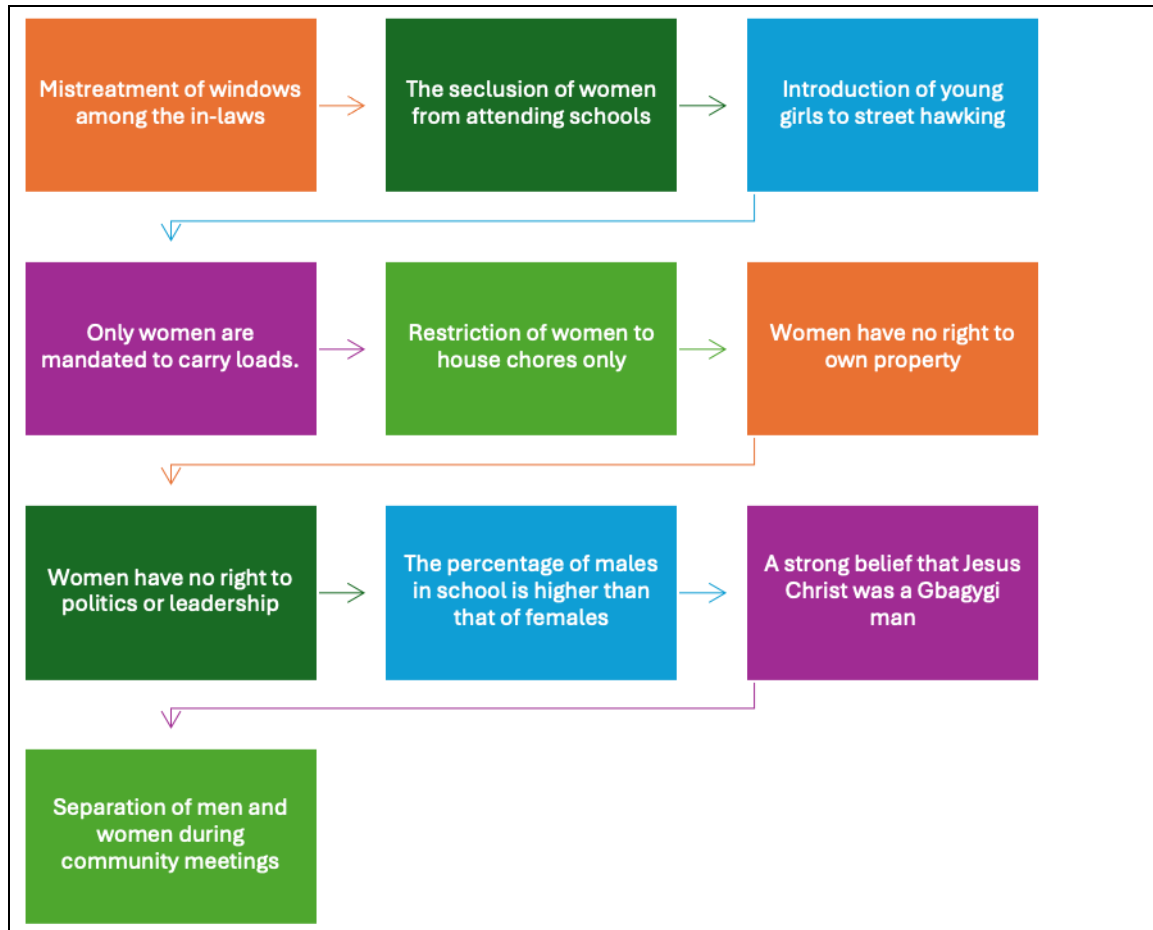
Since this research is qualitative, the paper adopted unstructured interviews as a critical instrument for primary data collection. In unstructured interviews, the approach is in-depth and detailed. No standardized questions are followed, rather, different research questions are developed for each participant. These questions leave room for observation; they are open-ended and allow the respondent to be as detailed and descriptive as possible. This interview format is more of an informal conversation with the respondents being interviewed. It allows for rapport, revealing vital information, thoughts, and ideas on complex issues like gender discrimination among the Gbagyi people. In addition, unstructured interviews allow for flexibility and qualitative observation. They give the respondent room to explore different perspectives, which aids in a rich array of data gathering for the interviewer (Formplus, 2021).

Data analysis was conducted using a mix of *Nvivo* and emergent coding, where coding is used to arrange and assemble the data based on the actual words of the interview respondents. Emergent coding classifies and categorizes the information and concepts emerging from the data according to themes in the best-suited way (Saldaña, 2013). As a result, data was labeled under four broad categories and subcategories, as detailed in the following section. All respondents have been coded anonymously and were given a title to correspond to their role in the research (for example: *Government employee, high school student, ...etc*). All interviews are conducted after obtaining the ethical approval of the Ethics Committee at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Canada.

Analysis & Discussion

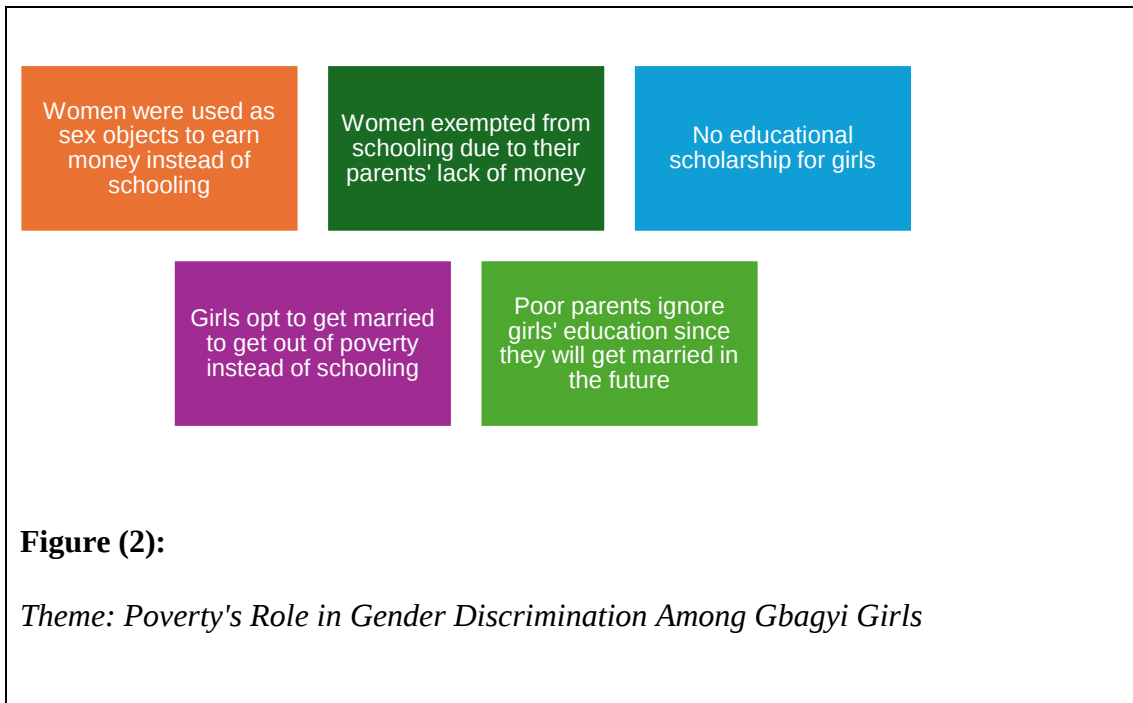
One prominent manifestation of gender discrimination is that women are forced to stay home and perform domestic duties, as indicated in the document below. According to Harris (2016), Nigerian men did not need as high wages as the British because it was believed that Nigerian wives contributed significantly to household finances; however, contributing to the family finances was made as difficult as possible by denying women waged employment because their place was in the home. These sentiments are evident in the interview with a *high school graduate*; the graduate says the Gbagyi community prefers women to stay at home while men should go to school. Figure (1) explains the themes detected in the analysis in relation to gender ideology and codes of discrimination.





High levels of control over spouses and widows are further indications of gender discrimination against women in the Gbagyi community of Nigeria. In gerontocratic societies like Nigeria, age and gender-based hierarchies intersect, with older men representing the ideal masculine position (in control of wives and offspring) and older women holding a secondary position (above young people of both sexes but below their husbands) (Harris, 2016). An interview with *government employee1* emphasizes this issue by saying that widows often suffer significantly at the hands of their husband's family. This is because widows are expected to support their husband's family, ranging from protecting the family home and property (if applicable) to fighting for their husbands' rights at work. However, *government employee1* assures us that no widows in the Gbagyi community will be taken advantage of or abused thanks to the precautions being taken.

Another central point that showcases gender discrimination in the Gbagyi community is that women are seen as inferior to men. Makama (2013) states that females are viewed as infidels and treated as second-class citizens in Nigeria. As a result, there is a widespread perception that women belong in the kitchen at home. Additionally, the author says that the average Nigerian woman is seen as an accessible object for prostitution, forced marriage, street hawking, an instrument of wide-range trafficking, and a misfit in society.

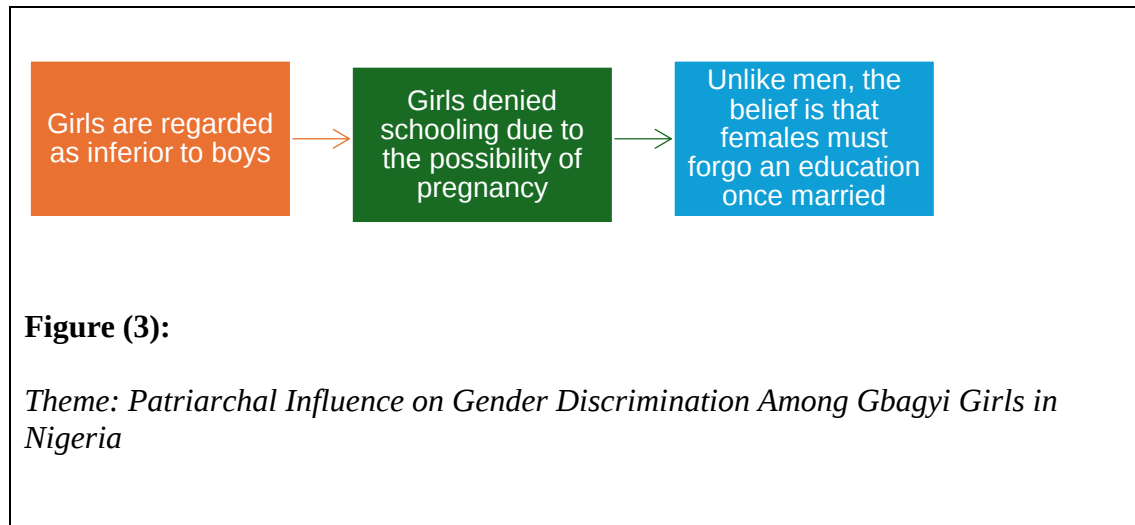


Furthermore, the girl-child's educational opportunities tend to be restricted by patriarchal attitudes about gender roles, which results in some parents attaching greater importance to boys' education than girls, see Figure (2). At the same time, Ejukonemu (2018) asserts that historically, in the traditional African society prevalent in Nigeria, women are not only perceived as inferior to men but are also marginalized and denied equal opportunities. Furthermore, as in most parts of Africa, women in Nigeria live in a male-dominated society where males continuously and persistently relegate females to the background because society has endorsed this view. While the male child is encouraged to learn a trade or go to school, the female child is given out in marriage at an early age.

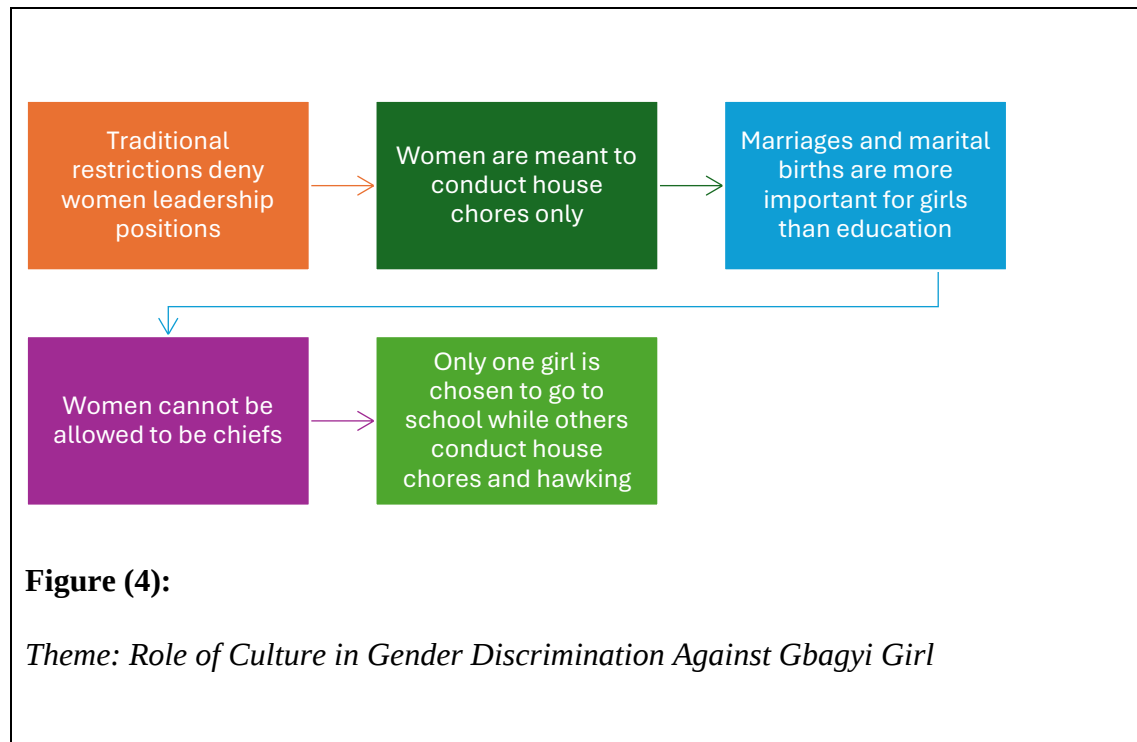
Moreover, Abdulhamid & Alhassan (2012) argue that gender disparity is a prominent feature of Nigeria's educational landscape, with girls and women being the most disadvantaged. The authors extend this argument, suggesting that mothers and wives are often accorded a low social status in many societies, especially in Nigeria, where they are treated as second-class citizens and, as a result, face discrimination, ostracism, and economic, cultural, and societal marginalization.

Figure (3) summarizes this dynamics, evidently, in an interview, *Teacher 2* echoed this view, stating that the girl-child is often perceived to have no real future beyond marriage and childbearing. Under this belief, bright female children may be overlooked or dismissed due to

their gender, particularly in the Gbagyi community. Similarly, an interview with *Government Employee 2* revealed that some men believe women exploit their willingness to help with housework, thereby expecting them to perform chores that they themselves, as women, should be doing. Consequently, these men tend to avoid household chores. Furthermore, *Government Employee 2* stated that in Nigeria, there is a widespread belief that women are inferior to men, a view that is evident in politics, decision-making, and property ownership.



Government employee3 stresses this point to illustrate their argument, stating, “If there is a meeting in the town square, both males and females attend, but the men will be seated in chairs while the women and children will be instructed to sit on the floor.” Moreover, a report from an interview with *high school dropout1* suggests that boys have more leeway than girls. Males are free to engage in sexual activity without fear of repercussion, while females who try to become sexually self-aware face ridicule and accusations that they were not adequately raised at home. In addition, an interview with *government employee4* showed that maternal healthcare is not a high priority for the Nigerian government. Women are expected to endure substandard maternal care and continue with their lives. The father of *high school graduate2* expressed concern in an interview that his daughter would be discriminated against because of her gender. The social norm for a Gbagyi woman, he says, is to get married and have children. To “empower” women, schools only offer vocational training.



The fact that women are frequently assigned to historically “soft, poorly paid positions” in Gbagyi Nigerian society is another important indicator of gender inequality; men, on the other hand, are given “challenging, well-paying employment” (Ejuronemu, 2018). The author argues that young women may be encouraged to pursue “soft” and generalist careers, such as teaching, nursing, and secretarial work, while male-dominated fields like law, engineering, and the military are seen as the exclusive domain of men. Harris (2016) also asserts that the colonial era's demand for skilled manufacturing labor attracted southern Nigerians to the cities, significantly increasing the Igbo and Yoruba populations. Many of their women were employed in peripheral workshops, which offered “softer” jobs, while men found work in the main facilities. As Figure (4) highlights, while girls were educated for domestic roles to avoid hard labor, educated men were given skilled jobs in the civil service and on the railroads. However, the interviews revealed that men are allowed to prosper in “soft, well-paying employment” facilitated by formal education, while women are relegated to “hard, low-paying jobs” in the Gbagyi community.

According to the discussion with *government employee2*, women in Gbagyi society often handle most household duties. In an interview, *high school graduate2* mentioned that Gbagyi women frequently sell groundnuts on the street, while the boys go to class. Additionally, *government employee3* revealed that women are expected to carry physical loads and place them on their shoulders, while men are prohibited from lifting heavy burdens—a taboo in Gbagyi culture. The issue of forced marriages for women is another sign of gender discrimination in Gbagyi society. Orisaremi (2020) reports that older and middle-aged participants were more likely to believe that, in the past, girls or women had no say in whom they married. This reflects discrimination, as girls were often pushed into marriage, while boys were allowed to pursue their studies. A



similar point was made in the interview with *high school dropout*², who claims that the Gbagyi community views it as parents' duty to ensure their children marry the people they have chosen for them. As a result, marriage is considered more valuable than education, with concerns that girls might get pregnant before marriage if they stay in school.

Gender Inequality in Gbagyi community: any possibility?

As explained earlier, the goal of this study is to explore how female education might contribute to eradicating gender inequality in the Gbagyi community. According to various interviewees, gender disparity is gradually being addressed in the Gbagyi village. The traditional role of women in Africa and Nigeria has undergone significant adjustments or transformations, as noted by Ekong & Ekong (2016). Key factors in these changes include the influence of Western civilization, urbanization, and industrialization. Additionally, globalization, human rights initiatives, and legislative reforms have played a crucial role. These forces have impacted traditional social institutions, particularly the family structure. As a result, economic activity has shifted from a subsistence to a commercial level, contributing to improvements in gender equality. For instance, the interviewees noted that an increasing number of women are relocating to urban areas in search of employment opportunities in industrial, commercial, and governmental sectors.

These changes have been driven by several factors. For example, families in Nigeria are experiencing difficult economic conditions, and the need for survival has become more urgent. The community has come to understand that the financial support provided by men alone is no longer enough to sustain the entire household. According to the interviewees, the traditional roles of men as the primary breadwinners and women as domestic caretakers have shifted in today's world. The prevailing belief now is that both men and women must contribute equally to supporting the family. In fact, men are no longer solely expected to provide for their wives and children, and women are no longer waiting for men to cover their expenses, largely due to the advances in girls' education. The interviewees also noted that female education has helped reduce gender discrimination, as educated mothers are more likely to ensure that both their sons and daughters receive an equal education. At the same time, educated women are becoming more aware of their rights and the legal avenues available to protect them. For instance, more Gbagyi women are now able to hire competent lawyers to assist with property inheritance matters and to challenge domestic abuse. Additionally, schools are increasingly offering the same courses to both boys and girls, and more girls are enrolling in technical programs at the college level. The interviewees emphasized that the world is changing, with more people becoming aware of the importance of personal development. The Bwari community is also being influenced by the developments in nearby Abuja, a hub for corporate growth. As a result, community members now recognize that educating their children is essential for ensuring their future relevance in the world.

As Ejukonemu (2018) points out, women today are making significant strides and taking advantage of new opportunities across a wide range of fields, including those traditionally dominated by men. In countries like Nigeria, women are now found in professions such as



doctors, pharmacists, engineers, politicians, lawyers, bankers, vice-chancellors, military officers, pilots, wrestlers, and even commercial drivers. The interviewees noted that educated women tend to earn more respect from men compared to their uneducated counterparts, which suggests that female education is helping to reduce gender discrimination in the Gbagyi community. Educated women are often more confident and knowledgeable about issues impacting the community, which enhances their respectability among men.

This research aims to explore how educational programs and initiatives can contribute to the development of the Gbagyi community. According to the interviewees, many young women who had dropped out of school are now participating in vocational training, such as tailoring and knitting, to support their families financially. These programs have empowered women, enabling them to avoid early marriages as a means of survival. As a result, many of these women are now able to support both themselves and their parents, contributing to broader societal development. Additionally, educating girls has given women the opportunity to purchase land and property, improving their economic well-being.

Additionally, education programs, such as women's seminars, have provided women with knowledge on family planning and reproductive health, leading to a decrease in early and unwanted pregnancies among Gbagyi women. According to the interviewees, the inclusion of women in formal education and vocational training has brought noticeable societal development to the community. For instance, more men are sharing household responsibilities as women take on the role of breadwinners. Furthermore, globalization has expanded women's opportunities in the labor market, which has, in turn, increased parents' willingness to educate both their sons and daughters. As a result, educational and vocational training programs have played a key role in empowering women and enabling them to contribute to the overall growth of the community.

Concluding Reflection: Gender Equality through Education

Gender equality through education is a central focus of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the broader human rights agenda. Researchers argue that educating girls is widely recognized for its transformative impact on individuals, families, and communities, driving poverty reduction, economic growth, and social progress. Unterhalter, Howell, and Parkes (2019) emphasize that gender equality is crucial for achieving several SDGs, including SDG 1 (ending extreme poverty), SDG 4 (ensuring quality education for all), SDG 5 (empowering women and girls), and SDG 16 (promoting peaceful, inclusive societies). The authors further suggest that achieving gender equality in education requires systemic changes, such as the implementation of policies and long-term strategies that ensure equal opportunities for both men and women. By fostering equitable institutions and environments, both genders can thrive, leading to overall societal development.

Unfortunately, gender inequalities in many African nations contribute to higher dropout rates among female students. Political and cultural institutions within African societies, including traditions, customs, and practices, often present significant obstacles to the education of young girls. As explained, the patriarchal culture in the community reinforces male dominance, with a



strong emphasis on maintaining the male lineage. As a result, women who face discrimination often have lower levels of education, leading to limited knowledge of family planning issues. In some cases, low levels of education among women can contribute to unsafe abortions, which pose serious health risks and may lead to premature death. Moreover, the community's culture dictates that women should not participate in decision-making processes, based on the belief that they are mentally and emotionally weaker than men and prone to making irrational decisions. Additionally, a biased interpretation of religion has significantly contributed to gender discrimination in the Gbagyi community.

Unterhalter, Howell, & Parkes (2019) explain why gender equality is advantageous for all members of society, including both men and women. According to the authors, achieving gender equality through education requires systemic changes in institutions, particularly through the design of gender-sensitive policies and programs. Emphasizing girl-child education, especially in developing nations, is one way gender equality can be achieved. Notably, achieving gender equality through education is essential to the human rights agenda, the pursuit of social justice, and the realization of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. In the following section, we will overview the various global frameworks and initiatives support gender equality through education. This includes the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) interventions, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Education 2030, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action from the World Conference on Women, and the Commonwealth Platform for Girls' Education.

1. Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Interventions: Unterhalter, Howell, & Parkes (2019) report that GPE has provided over \$500,000 to support educational planning in several African nations, including the development of education sector plans based on current data. GPE plans to implement grants (ESPIGs) of at least \$100 million to promote gender equality through education. This involves a transformative approach that evaluates all aspects of the education system, addressing factors like access, participation, learning objectives, legislative frameworks, and planning procedures. GPE also collaborates with organizations such as the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative to build gender-sensitive education sectors. In addition to combating early marriages, which hinder girls' education, GPE and its partners address other significant challenges.

2. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Unterhalter, Howell, & Parkes (2019) highlight that the SDGs contain several goals and targets aimed at promoting gender equality through education. For example, SDG 4 includes seven targets to improve equality through education. The first three targets focus on ensuring access to education for all children and adults, from primary to tertiary levels. Another target emphasizes equipping young people and adults with skills to promote gender equality. Other SDG 4 targets include promoting education for people with disabilities, indigenous communities, and those in vulnerable regions; enhancing numeracy and literacy for all men and women; and upgrading education infrastructure to ensure gender and disability sensitivity in schools (Global Partnership for Education, n.d.).

3. Education 2030: Launched in 2015, Education 2030 aims to foster gender equality by addressing and eliminating gender-based discrimination in education, which is often driven by social, cultural, or economic factors (Unterhalter, Howell, & Parkes, 2019). The initiative



focuses on promoting the development of gender-sensitive policies and strategies to ensure equal educational opportunities for both boys and girls. At the same time, countries participating in the UNESCO meeting reaffirmed their commitment to combating gender-based violence and oppression, particularly in developing nations, marking a key milestone in advancing the Education 2030 agenda (UNESCO, 2015).

4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): The United Nations General Assembly held the CEDAW convention in 1979, where several resolutions were adopted to promote gender equality through education (Unterhalter, Howell, & Parkes, 2019). For example, countries pledged to prioritize gender issues, with the aim of empowering women through education. Additionally, CEDAW established a strategic review process to ensure that topics related to women's empowerment would be discussed annually at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York. The convention also called for countries to support the interventions of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), particularly in developing nations where girls have low enrollment rates in schools (United Nations, 1979).

5. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action from the World Conference on Women: The authors highlight that during the 1995 conference, nations acknowledged the importance of prioritizing women's rights as an integral part of universal human rights (Unterhalter, Howell, & Parkes, 2019). The conference also introduced the idea of international collaboration to promote gender equality through education. Key objectives included eliminating female illiteracy, addressing the educational needs of girls, and combating oppression. In 2020, the convention updated its goals by integrating elements of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a focus on increasing women's participation in global decision-making (United Nations, 1995).

6. Commonwealth Platform for Girls' Education: A final global initiative that support gender equality through education, and during the 2018 Commonwealth summit, the UK government launched the Platform for Girls' Education, committing over 200 million Euros to educate more than one million girls in Commonwealth countries. (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018). The funding is set to be distributed over a period of twelve years, with the goal of achieving gender equality in education by 2030. This initiative aims to promote gender equality and female education worldwide by increasing school enrollment for girls, particularly in developing nations.

In conclusion, this article examined gender inequality in Nigeria, focusing on societal perceptions of gender and how these views impact the country's economic growth and social development. It also emphasized the importance of female education in driving both economic and social progress in the Gbagyi community of Nigeria.



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