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Breaking barriers: The impact of girls' education on poverty eradication in northern Nigeria – A Focus on Sokoto State

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Abstract

This research explores the critical role of girls' education in alleviating poverty in Sokoto State, Nigeria. It highlights the significant gender disparities in educational access, driven by cultural norms that prioritize boys' education, which impede both individual potential and broader economic growth. The research underscores that educated women contribute to workforce participation and family income, thereby fostering community development and reducing poverty. Despite some progress, challenges such as socio-cultural attitudes, inadequate infrastructure, and economic constraints persist, necessitating a multi-faceted approach involving policy reforms and community engagement. The study employs a mixed-methods methodology, revealing that while enrolment rates have improved, gender inequities remain pronounced. It advocates for targeted interventions and community involvement to shift perceptions and enhance girls' educational opportunities, ultimately aiming for sustainable development goals in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: Girls' Education; Poverty Alleviation; Gender Disparities; Sokoto State; Northern Nigeria; Sustainable Development Goals

1. Introduction

Human capital development is a critical driver of national growth, surpassing the importance of mere gross national product (GNP), as economic output relies fundamentally on the capabilities of people. As Adedeji and Campbell (2013) emphasize, human capital development focuses on people rather than goods, asserting that a nation's wealth stems from its human resources. In addition to being a vital instrument for social and economic advancement, education is a basic human right. Gender differences in education are prevalent in Northern Nigeria, especially in Sokoto State, and have a substantial impact on the goal of ending poverty. Cultural norms that favour boys' education over girls' have historically presented difficulties for the area, which has resulted in low enrolment rates for female students (UNICEF, 2020). This gap not only restricts individual potential but also inhibits larger economic growth and cultural advancement.

Research shows that educating a girl/woman can lead to transformative changes within communities. For instance, educated women are more likely to participate in the workforce, contribute to household income, and invest in their children's education (World Bank, 2018). Furthermore, studies show that each additional year of schooling for girls can increase their future earnings significantly, thereby reducing poverty levels in their communities (Duflo, 2012). This relationship underscores the importance of addressing barriers to girls' education in Sokoto State.

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Despite the known benefits of girls' education, numerous complications persist. These include socio-cultural attitudes that devalue female education, inadequate educational infrastructure, and economic constraints faced by families (Ogunyemi & Olatunji, 2019). Addressing these barriers entails a multi-faceted approach involving government policy reforms, community engagement, and targeted intervention by non-governmental organizations.

The study will examine how girls' education affects Sokoto State's efforts to eradicate poverty, highlighting the potential and problems that the area faces. This work intends to provide insights into effective ways for boosting girls' education as a means of accomplishing sustainable development goals in Northern Nigeria through an examination of the material that has already been published and case studies.

1.1. Contextual Background

Sokoto State, located in the northwestern area of Nigeria, has a rich historical and cultural history that substantially influences its educational landscape. Sokoto was once a part of the larger North-Western State before becoming a state in 1996. Being the epicentre of the Sokoto Caliphate, founded in the early 1800s by Usman Dan Fodio, it is well known for its historical significance (Sokoto State Government, n.d.). This caliphate was essential in introducing Islamic culture and education to the area, establishing the groundwork for modern educational methods.

1.2. Location of the Study Area

Sokoto State, located in north-western Nigeria, has one of the highest rates of poverty and illiteracy among women and girls in the country. Only 15% of girls in Sokoto are enrolled in school, compared to 59% of boys. Despite several programs by organizations like UNICEF, UKAID, and DFID to increase girls' school enrolment, these efforts have had limited success due to religious and cultural barriers and population growth. A 2013 Brookings Institute study revealed that over half of Sokoto's primary school-aged children are out of school, with one of the widest gender gaps in education globally.

Research indicates that societal norms in Sokoto, influenced by religious and cultural values, view girls primarily as wives and mothers, discouraging formal education. Many girls in Northern Nigeria, including Sokoto, are taught from a young age that their primary role is domestic, and they are often married off as early as eleven years old (Akunjobi, 2011).

1.3. Demographics and Educational Landscape

According to current estimations, about 4 million people are living in Sokoto State, mostly members of the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups. With 1.1 million people of primary school age living in the state, primary enrolment in primary education has a net enrolment rate of 55.5% (Global Partnership for Education, 2011). Significant gender gaps still exist despite these numbers; the gross enrolment rate for girls is still lower than that of boys, which reflects broader societal attitudes on female education.

Sokoto's educational system follows the 1-6-3-3-4 format, with one year of pre-primary education, six years of primary school, three years of junior-level education, and three years of senior secondary education (USAID, 2018). However, obstacles like as poor infrastructure, a lack of competent teachers, and socio-cultural hurdles continue to inhibit educational advancement. For example, only about 33% of Sokoto's teachers are competent (Global Partnership for Education, 2011), resulting in a teacher-pupil ratio of up to 1:144 in some regions.

1.4. Historical Initiatives

Efforts to promote female education in Sokoto are ongoing but face major hurdles. The establishment of colleges like as the Shehu Shagari College of Education in 1970 aimed to address the shortage of skilled instructors while simultaneously boosting educational possibilities for both genders. Sokoto State University was established in 2009 to provide local students with higher education possibilities while also contributing to regional development.

The government has implemented programs to expand access to basic education and promote gender equality. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act prioritises free and compulsory education for all children through junior secondary school. However, as noted by USAID (2018), implementation remains unclear due to funding constraints and local opposition to girls' education.

1.5. Cultural Influences

In Sokoto, cultural influences have a big impact on girls' educational success. Because of the anticipated financial benefits of schooling, traditional norms frequently give preference to males. Families may opt to invest in males' education while restricting girls' access to schooling (Ogunyemi & Olatunji, 2019). To create an environment where girls can pursue education without facing discrimination, these cultural hurdles must be addressed.

1.6. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis for assessing the impact of girls' education on poverty eradication in Sokoto State can be based on two major perspectives: modernisation theory and human development theory. According to modernisation theory, economic development causes societal changes, such as alterations in gender roles and more educational possibilities for women. As cultures industrialise and urbanise, old conventions typically give way to more progressive views on gender equality, allowing females to have greater access to school (Lipset, 1959; Rostow, 1960). In the context of Sokoto State, this theory implies that when economic conditions improve, communities may begin to recognise the importance of girls' education, ultimately contributing to poverty reduction. The correlation between educational attainment and economic growth highlights the importance of investing in girls' education as a strategic approach to foster broader socioeconomic development (Duflo, 2012).

In contrast, human development theory emphasises the importance of cultural and social elements in moulding educational achievements. This viewpoint contends that shifts in public attitudes towards gender equality are critical for empowering women and improving their educational opportunities. In Sokoto State, ingrained cultural attitudes frequently favour boys' education over girls', limiting female participation in school. Human development theory implies that cultivating gender-egalitarian attitudes and supporting self-expression values within communities can help to establish an atmosphere conducive to girls' education (Welzel, 2003). This approach underlines the need for wide-ranging strategies that not only improve access to education but also challenge and transform the social norms that hinder young girls' educational attainment. Thus, joining both human development and modernization theories offers a robust framework for analyzing the multi-faceted relationship between poverty eradication and girls' education in Sokoto State.

2. Method of Research

The methodology employed in this study utilized a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively examine girls' education in Sokoto State. Data collection involved both quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys administered to parents, teachers, and students to gather statistical insights on enrolment rates and educational experiences. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with key stakeholders such as educators, community leaders, and NGOs to capture nuanced perspectives.

3. Findings

The findings on girls' education in Sokoto State reveal a landscape of both success and major problems. According to recent figures, basic education attendance rates increased by 8% across all levels between 2015 and 2016. Notably, pre-primary school enrolment increased by 44% for both boys and girls throughout this period (USAID, 2017). However, these numbers conceal ongoing gender inequities. For example, whereas female elementary school enrolment increased by only 2%, male enrolment increased by 5%, demonstrating that boys continue to dominate educational settings (Sokoto State Education Accounts, 2017). This trend is particularly concerning at the junior secondary school level, where females' enrolment has fluctuated, revealing systemic barriers that prevent sustained educational participation for females (Humangle Media, 2023).

Moreover, cultural obstacles and socio-economic factors play a critical role in shaping these educational outcomes. Research highlights that early marriage practices significantly hinder girls' access to education, as families often prioritize boys' education due to entrenched gender norms (Oraegbuna, 2012). The lack of female teachers further exacerbates the issue; with female teachers constituting only about 8% of the teaching workforce in Sokoto, girls may feel less encouraged to pursue their education (RM Times, 2023). Furthermore, the pupil-teacher ratio remains unacceptably high, with over 90 students per trained teacher in some places, lowering educational quality and discouraging families from enrolling their daughters (USAID, 2017). As a result, while there are initiatives aimed at improving access and retention for girls in Sokoto State, such as the Girls Education Project (GEP), significant efforts are still needed to address the underlying cultural and structural barriers that perpetuate gender inequality in education.

3.1. Challenges Facing Girls' Education in Sokoto State

- **Cultural and Religious Barriers:** Cultural conventions and religious beliefs frequently favour males' schooling over girls', resulting in considerable gender discrepancies. Early marriage customs also lead to females dropping out of school since families may see marriage as a more pressing issue (Oraegbuna, 2012; Haruna & Nafisa, 2021).
- **Economic Constraints:** Poverty is a significant impediment to girls' education, as many families are unable to finance educational fees. As a result, parents frequently prioritise their sons' education above their girls', seeing it as a more worthwhile investment (ActionAid Nigeria, 2021; Blueprint Newspapers Limited, 2023).
- **Inadequate Infrastructure and Resources:** The absence of adequate school facilities and funding limits girls' educational possibilities. Overcrowded classrooms and insufficient teaching resources deter parents from enrolling their daughters, since they believe the education quality is substandard (USAID, 2017; Sokoto State Education Accounts).
- **Government Policy and Implementation Issues:** Although the government has efforts in place to boost girls' education, execution is frequently hampered by corruption and policy inconsistency. These challenges impede effective resource allocation and limit the impact of educational programs designed to help girls (Blueprint Newspapers Limited, 2023).

3.2. Community Engagement and Advocacy

Community involvement initiatives have demonstrated the ability to promote girls' education by enlisting local leaders and parents in advocacy activities. These programs attempt to enhance awareness about the importance of females' education while also addressing cultural biases, resulting in a more inclusive educational environment (RM Times, 2023).

4. Conclusion

Community participation initiatives have proved the ability to promote girls' education by involving local leaders and parents in advocacy efforts. These programs aim to raise awareness about the importance of female education while simultaneously eliminating cultural biases, leading to a more inclusive educational environment

Furthermore, targeted intervention and community engagement are crucial for overcoming these barriers. Involving community leaders and parents in advocacy can help shift cultural perceptions and prioritize girls' education. Consolidation of government policies to ensure consistent funding and resource allocation is also vital. By creating an inclusive educational environment that values girls' learning, Sokoto State can make significant strides toward poverty eradication and overall socio-economic development.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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