



SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS TO GIRLS' QUALITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA AND THEIR PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This article gives a careful look at the social and cultural barriers that stop young women from getting a good education in Nigeria. These involve problems like male-dominated attitudes, child marriages, faith-based views, financial challenges, duties in the home, and long-held ideas that see girls' education as a smaller bet than sons' education. Also, the present dangers from instability and violence focused on gender, play a big part in the higher rates of missing class and leaving school in some regions. The investigation used important and logical methods to look into the profound thinking effects of these difficulties within the setting of the nation's push for Sustainable Development. From the philosophical perspective, these difficulties show a structural failure to uphold the core ideas of fairness, equity, and human rights. The work claims that the steady exclusion of females from top-level schooling presents a major roadblock to the Nigerian government's commitment to human development and financial progress. A community cannot reach real long-term stability if its progress is built upon an unjust and lopsided sharing of learning chances. Therefore, the paper advocates for interventions that move beyond mere policy to include critical social dialogue and cultural reorientation. This shift is necessary to align traditional values with the ethical imperatives of equity required for Nigeria to realise its full sustainable development potential.

Keywords: Girl-Child, Education, Equality, Philosophy

Introduction

Education is seen as a fundamental means for societal, governmental, and financial progress in every community. Women make up well over fifty percent of the planet's working population. Even with this fact, they encounter various hardships that restrict their capacity for advancing individual and group growth. The female child has endured much from the actions of extremists, and in other areas like abduction, destitution, sexual assault, forced servitude, illicit sex work, illegal trade, and mistreatment, because of a lack of education. (Tanko, B.A., & Tanko, L., 2023).

Even with the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act, a notable difference between genders remains in Nigeria. This report examines how societal frameworks, spanning from male dominance to incorrect religious readings, function as 'epistemic barriers' preventing quality schooling for girls.



Before moving on to the intended discussions, it is important to pose the question, who is a girl-child or female child? A female child might be described as a young female or an adult woman. It might also describe a young, single female below eighteen years old. Based upon this essay's main point, the girl-child means females from six to seventeen years old who have not entered into marriage.

Besides the above-mentioned age, who else qualifies as a girl-child? The researcher explained this by relating a tale about her deceased mother, who entered the medical facility while unwell. She ultimately succumbed to the sickness. Right when she was passing away, she remarked that should she return to this earth, she would wish to have girl babies again. For what reason did she speak those words? Owing to the attention and affection she received from her daughters throughout her sickness. This brief story is one of the stories that show the importance of the girl-child, especially when a girl-child is well-trained. The essence of training a child is to empower that child to be holistically equipped for life.

Education is acknowledged worldwide as a basic human entitlement and a vital force for long-term progress (UNESCO, 2015). Education represents the method by which people become useful members of their community (Onyeansi, T. U., 2019). It might take place in school or outside school. Learning without a set curriculum describes the broad societal way through which people gain the understanding and abilities needed to operate well within their specific society. Structured learning describes the process where instructors teach pupils subjects within an established building. Educating a young female involves a system where the young girl gains information and abilities, sees what she can achieve, and applies those for personal fulfilment, financial or economic gains, and contributing positively to her community and others. (Onyeansi, T. U., 2019). Therefore, education remains an essential means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate in the development process. It remains the cornerstone of human agency. Sustainable development is only possible when men and women, or rather boys and girls, enjoy equal opportunities to reach their potential. It was Francis Bacon who submitted several centuries ago that knowledge is power. (Eche, W.G., 2014).

Without doubt, educating girls specifically has been proven to help greatly with financial progress, better health results, and community stability (World Bank, 2018). Notwithstanding these advantages, Nigeria continues to record significant gender disparities in educational access and attainment, especially in rural and conflict-affected regions (UNICEF, 2021). From a philosophical perspective, education is not merely an instrumental good but a condition for human flourishing and moral agency (Nussbaum, 2011). Furthermore, the exclusion of women is not merely a social loss but a philosophical failure to recognise the full 'beingness' of the Nigerian female. Moreover, keeping women out is not just a drawback for society but a moral failing to acknowledge the complete 'beingness' of Nigerian women. This paper thus argues that the persistent exclusion of the girl-child from quality education in Nigeria represents a failure of justice and equity, with serious implications for the country's sustainable development agenda.



Statement of the Problem

Education involves passing down beliefs and ways of life between different generations. The issue of education for girls is worldwide and dates back to the beginning of human history. Therefore, the education of women has often been pushed to the side (Onyeansi, T. U., 2019). Even though Nigeria has agreed to world agreements about learning and equal standing for genders, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Socio-cultural barriers continue to undermine girls' education (United Nations, 2015). Patriarchal norms, early marriage, gendered domestic labour, selective religious interpretations, and economic constraints collectively reinforce the perception that investing in girls' education is less valuable than educating boys (Aderinto, 2020; Okeke, 2019).

Furthermore, lack of safety and violence tied to gender have made girls miss school more often and drop out, especially in the country's northern areas (UNICEF, 2021). The issue stems from a set of cultural values that see female education as a 'lost chance' since girls are expected to later marry into different homes (Onyebuchi-Igbokwe, 2025). This creates a cycle of poverty and high maternal mortality, directly impeding the nation's pursuit of sustainable development. These conditions raise a critical ethical question: can sustainable development be achieved where educational opportunities are distributed unjustly?

Research Questions

1. What are the primary socio-cultural factors limiting girls' access to quality education in Nigeria?
2. In what ways do instability and violence against women impact girls' involvement in school?
3. What moral consequences do these obstacles present for fairness and human rights doctrines?
4. To what degree does favouring one gender affect the standard of education for the girl-child?
5. How does girls' educational exclusion undermine sustainable development?

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study aims to critically analyse socio-cultural barriers to girls' education in Nigeria and their philosophical implications for justice and sustainable development. While the objectives are to:

- Investigate the societal and systemic difficulties facing girls' schooling within Nigeria
- Break down the moral aspects related to shutting people out from learning
- Determine the connection between educating girls and maintaining progress over time
- Suggest helpful actions based upon sound philosophical reasoning.



Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with girls' education in Nigeria spans education studies, gender theory, development economics, and philosophy. This section critically examines key contributors whose works illuminate the socio-cultural and ethical dimensions of girls' educational exclusion, while identifying the conceptual gaps this study addresses.

Julius Nyerere (1968) on Education and Human Development

Julius Nyerere's view on Education for Self-Reliance highlights schooling as the base for human growth and active involvement as citizens (Nyerere, 1968). Nyerere strongly states that learning must free people so they can add value to their local areas. Nyerere's Ujamaa rested upon three main supports: fairness, giving, and labour. (Gbadegesin, 1994). He claimed that any structure exempting some from working or denying others fairness is fundamentally draining. (Gbadegesin, 1994)

Rawls (1971) on Justice as Fairness and Equal Educational Opportunity

Rawls' (1971) concept of justice further strengthens the moral judgment against unequal education. His rule about fair chances for opportunity requires that societal structures be set up so that people with similar abilities and drive possess similar odds for achieving, without regard for sex or family origin. In the Nigerian context, the systematic exclusion of girls from education represents a clear violation of this principle. Rawls's work underscores that educational inequality is not merely unfortunate but unjust. Nonetheless, Rawls' abstract framework requires contextual grounding, which this study seeks to provide by engaging Nigeria's socio-cultural realities.

Kwasi Wiredu (1996) on Rationality, Culture, and Social Reform

Kwasi Wiredu's thoughtful discussions supply an African groundwork for carefully judging cultural habits. Wiredu (1996) maintains that no inherited custom is safe from clear-headed examination and that logic must serve to improve damaging cultural parts. When applied to educating girls, Wiredu's ideas question the automatic holding onto practices that lessen human respect. His focus on agreement-based reasoning offers a principled basis for doubting male-dominated standards that keep exclusion going in the name of what is customary.

Kwame Gyekye (1997) on Communalism and Individual Flourishing

Kwame Gyekye (1997) presents a balanced view of African communitarianism, which pairs community ideals with personal freedoms. For Gyekye, the community's goal should be to support the success of everyone in it; any local custom that lessens individual growth undercuts true community peace. Excluding female education, consequently, goes against the African belief in relying on each other and growing together.



Aderinto (2001) on Subordinated by Culture: Constraints of Women in a Rural Yoruba Community, Nigeria

Aderinto (2001) moves the conversation forward by placing the lack of education for girls within Nigeria's male-dominated cultural systems. He claims that cultural habits like marrying young, separating work by sex, and favouring certain religious interpretations deliberately limit girls' chances for education. Aderinto's input is important because it shows how culture acts not just as a setting but as a direct power influencing what happens with education. Still, even though the cultural details are deep, the work does not fully examine whether these actions can be morally defended under the rules of fairness and human entitlements.

Nussbaum (2011) on the Capabilities Approach and Girls' Education

From a philosophical viewpoint, Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach gives a standard way for judging educational disadvantage. Nussbaum claims that education is key to building the main human abilities, like sound judgment, self-rule, and group involvement. When used in the Nigerian setting, her model shows that stopping girls from getting a good education is a major type of capability loss. Though Nussbaum avoids direct discussion of Nigeria, her concept offers a strong technique for judging the ethical failure of customs that limit girls' learning progress. Ogueri1, E. O. et al., (2017) on Women's Education and Sustainable Development in Nigeria.

Ogueri1, E. O. et al. (2017) believe that quality in education can be interpreted as having three strands: efficiency in meeting set goals, relevance to human and environmental needs and conditions, and something more related to the pursuit of excellence and human betterment. He states that quality education is relevant and adapted to society's needs. He argued that such needs must meet the standards in health, growth and physical survival in a complex and globalised world. It implies that quality education is worthwhile, which empowers the recipients with relevant skills, knowledge, ideas, values and attitudes needed for him/her to make informed decisions and live a self-sustained life. Ogueri1, E. O. et al. (2017) further buttressed the view that sustainable development could be more accurately described as equitable and balanced, meaning that, for development to continue indefinitely, it should balance the interests of different groups of people within the same generation and across generations.

Okeke (2019) on Gender Disparities in Nigerian Education

Okeke and his co-authors point out that gender inequality in Nigeria comes from ingrained social norms (like male preference, early marriage, economic factors, prioritising boys' education, and institutional barriers, lack of gender-sensitive policies, and female role models, resulting in unequal access to education, government roles, and chances, even though women contribute greatly. They emphasise dismantling patriarchal traditions, creating supportive policies, and promoting awareness to achieve equitable development and unlock women's full potential. Okeke (2019) provides an empirical analysis of gender disparities in educational access and attainment in Nigeria, identifying poverty, cultural expectations, and regional inequality as major contributing factors. According to Okeke, the persistent preference for male education is rooted in socio-economic calculations that frame boys as future breadwinners, while



girls are perceived primarily through their domestic and reproductive roles. Although Okeke's work offers valuable statistical insights, it largely treats educational exclusion as a socio-economic problem, leaving unexplored the deeper ethical implications of normalising such disparities.

UNICEF (2022) ON Education Opportunities for Girls in Nigeria

International development agencies, particularly UNICEF (2022), have drawn attention to the role of insecurity and gender-based violence in exacerbating girls' educational exclusion in Nigeria. Their reports document how fear of abduction, sexual violence, and attacks on schools disproportionately affect girls' attendance and retention. While these studies provide crucial evidence of structural vulnerability, they tend to adopt a policy-oriented approach, focusing on mitigation strategies rather than interrogating the ethical responsibility of the state to protect girls' right to education as a matter of justice.

Girl-child Education (Tanko & Tanko, 2023)

When a country shuns the education of any section of its population, progress and development appear to be reduced. Female illiteracy has been identified as one of the major obstacles to social, political, religious and economic development in most countries of the world, particularly Nigeria. From the Rights approach as espoused in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 2009), it is the right of every girl-child to be educated. Over 120 million children (the majority girls) are denied access to basic education. This is a challenge of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) goals. Failure to achieve results in this area will perpetuate entrenched inequalities and condemn yet another generation of children (girls) to a life of ignorance, poverty and misery. There can be no significant or sustainable change in society and no significant reduction in poverty until girls receive a basic quality education. They need to take their rightful place as equal partners in development. (Tanko & Tanko, 2023)

While existing literature offers rich empirical data and valuable theoretical insights, it remains fragmented across disciplines. Empirical studies tend to emphasise socio-economic and cultural determinants, while philosophical works articulate universal principles of justice and human flourishing without sufficient contextual application. This study bridges that gap by integrating socio-cultural analysis with philosophical critique, arguing that girls' educational exclusion in Nigeria represents a systemic ethical failure that undermines both justice and sustainable development. By foregrounding ethical evaluation alongside social analysis, the paper contributes a normative depth largely absent in existing discussions.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative philosophical approach, utilising critical and analytical methods. Conceptual analysis was used to examine the notions of justice, equity, and human flourishing, while critical reflection was also applied to socio-cultural practices affecting girls' education.



Secondary data from academic literature, policy reports, and international development frameworks are analysed.

Discussions

The researcher of this paper often presents related topics on gender during conferences and other academic gatherings. And most often, the hot argument lies in the denial of the claim that there is no marginalisation in the ratio of boys and girls being allowed the opportunity to attend quality education. This obviously implies that many Nigerians live in denial of the truth. Is Northern Nigeria not part of the nation? More so, other parts of Nigeria are struggling to overcome this injustice. A case was recently addressed in November 2025 in Makurdi, where a girl presented a story of her father refusing her the opportunity to be trained at the University. She was asked what offence she committed. And her response was a shocking revelation, which indicates that even in this 21st century, female children are still denied access to quality education because they will be married out of the family.

Another experience is that of violence/rape of the girl child. There is a case where a female child was on her way to school. She travels about an hour or two by bicycle; sometimes she may pick up a motorbike. On this faithful day, she left home and took the usual route, which is shorter than the major road. As she moved for a while, she felt a bit cold and afraid. It was unusual for her. She turned back and took the longer route. As she approached one of the villages, someone stopped her to ask why she had changed her route that day. She explained to the person what she felt. The man said, You are a very lucky girl. Your God is alive. Some boys are on that road waiting for you to rape you. This is because the route can be lonely sometimes. What would have happened to her and her career if the boys had succeeded? This type of case is rampant in our villages and streets. The girl-child suffers insecurity of this sort constantly. People tend to deny the existence of this menace because they are ignorant of the things happening to the female child. A lot happens.

This section, therefore, critically examines socio-cultural barriers to girls' education in Nigeria and evaluates their philosophical implications for justice, human flourishing, and sustainable development. It argues that these barriers are not morally neutral social facts but ethically problematic practices that undermine both individual dignity and collective well-being (Rawls, 1971; Nussbaum, 2011; Wiredu, 1996).

Socio-Cultural Practices and the Normalisation of Educational Exclusion

Societal and cultural obstacles, including male-dominated gender standards, early marriage, and assigning too much housework to young women, act as ways to keep children out of school in Nigeria (Aderinto, 2020; Okeke, 2019). Chizoma and Grace affirmed that customs and cultural rules greatly affect the chances for girls to get an education in Nigeria's Northeast region. They further maintained that studies indicate that patriarchal beliefs and gender roles dictate that women should prioritise domestic responsibilities over formal education. Early marriage remains a prevalent practice, with many families withdrawing girls from school at a young age to prepare them for marriage. They report that in some communities, over 50% of girls are married before



the age of 18, significantly reducing their chances of completing secondary education. Religious beliefs also influence attitudes toward female education. While Islam and Christianity both encourage education, conservative interpretations often result in restrictions on girls' schooling. Some communities perceive Western-style education as conflicting with religious teachings, leading to resistance against formal schooling for girls. Such cultural factors contribute to persistent gender disparities in education (Chizoma, O. I., & Grace, C., 2025). These practices are often justified as expressions of tradition or cultural continuity. However, as Wiredu (1996) argues, the appeal to tradition does not exempt cultural practices from rational and moral scrutiny. When tradition systematically disadvantages a particular group, it becomes ethically indefensible.

The widespread belief that girls' education constitutes a poor investment compared to boys' reflects a value system that reduces girls to domestic and reproductive roles (Okeke, 2019). From a philosophical standpoint, this reduction violates the principle of equal moral worth. Gyekye's (1997) account of African communitarianism rejects such exclusion, emphasising that the community exists to promote the flourishing of *all* its members. Educational exclusion, therefore, represents not an authentic African value but a distortion of communal ethics.

Early marriage further entrenches injustice by prematurely terminating girls' educational trajectories and restricting their autonomy (Aderinto, 2020). Such practices conflict with both African philosophical ideals of communal responsibility (Gyekye, 1997) and universal principles of justice (Rawls, 1971).

Insecurity, Gender-Based Violence, and Structural Injustice

Lack of safety and violence directed at one gender creates systemic obstacles that hurt girls' chances to get an education more than others in Nigeria. UNICEF (2022) records that taking students from schools by force, sexual assault, and worry about being attacked greatly increases how often girls miss school and quit, especially in conflict-affected regions. While parents' decisions to withdraw girls from school may appear protective, they reflect a deeper failure of state institutions to guarantee security and educational access. In rural areas, girls often walk many miles to reach their schools. The journey can take over an hour, which makes their parents concerned for their child's safety on the way to school (Madu, C. O. & Obi, J.S.C., 2021).

From a Rawlsian viewpoint, the government has a moral duty to guarantee fair chances for everyone (Rawls, 1971). If instability consistently stops young women from going to school, the government is not meeting its obligation of justice. This failing is tied to gender because girls face greater danger from aggression, which strengthens current education gaps (UNICEF, 2021). Ideas about personhood from African philosophy further show the moral outcomes of this shortcoming. Mbiti's (1969) view of personhood, which stresses connections, highlights shared duty within the group. When young women are kept from safe schooling, the group breaks this ethical reliance, weakening its own moral groundwork.



Educational Exclusion as a Violation of Justice and Human Flourishing

Education is a basic requirement for building moral ability, rational thought, and taking part in society (Nussbaum, 2011). Keeping young women out of school regularly acts like taking away their potential, limiting their chance to live lives with self-respect and options. In the Nigerian context, such deprivation is socially produced and culturally sustained (Okeke, 2019; Aderinto, 2020). Rawls' (1971) principle of fair equality of opportunity further exposes the injustice of gendered educational exclusion. When access to education is determined by gender rather than merit or aspiration, social institutions fail to meet basic standards of justice. Importantly, African philosophers such as Wiredu (1996) and Gyekye (1997) provide internal cultural resources for critiquing such injustice, demonstrating that justice and rational reform are not external impositions but integral to African moral thought.

Implications for Sustainable Development

The exclusion of girls from education has profound implications for sustainable development. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that girls' education contributes to economic productivity, improved health outcomes, and intergenerational well-being (World Bank, 2018). However, reducing girls' education to its instrumental value risks obscuring its ethical significance. Nyerere's (1968) philosophy of *Education for Self-Reliance* emphasises that development must enhance human dignity and social responsibility. Development that tolerates educational exclusion contradicts this vision by perpetuating dependency and inequality. Sustainable development, therefore, requires not only policy effectiveness but moral legitimacy grounded in justice and inclusion (Nussbaum, 2011).

Toward Cultural Reorientation and Ethical Transformation

Meaningful change must extend beyond policy reforms to include critical social dialogue and cultural reorientation. Wiredu's (1996) emphasis on rational consensus supports the view that cultural practices should be continuously evaluated in light of their impact on human well-being. Cultural reorientation does not entail cultural rejection but ethical renewal. Education itself can facilitate this transformation by fostering critical reflection on gender roles, justice, and communal responsibility (Gyekye, 1997; Nyerere, 1968). When cultural values are aligned with ethical principles of equity, girls' education becomes not a threat to tradition but its moral fulfilment.

Findings

The research presents these main conclusions:

Socio-cultural barriers to girls' education in Nigeria are structurally embedded and culturally normalised, rather than incidental or temporary (Aderinto, 2020; Okeke, 2019).

Insecurity and gender-based violence disproportionately disrupt girls' educational access, revealing a gendered failure of state protection (UNICEF, 2021).



Girls' educational exclusion constitutes an ethical failure that violates principles of justice, equal moral worth, and fair opportunity (Rawls, 1971).

From the perspective of human flourishing, educational exclusion represents a form of capability deprivation that limits girls' autonomy and social participation (Nussbaum, 2011).

Exclusionary practices contradict authentic African philosophical values that emphasise communal responsibility, rational cultural critique, and individual flourishing (Wiredu, 1996; Gyekye, 1997).

Sustainable development in Nigeria is undermined by the unjust distribution of educational opportunities (World Bank, 2018).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the persistent exclusion of the girl-child from quality education in Nigeria represents a profound moral and developmental failure. Socio-cultural practices, compounded by insecurity and gender-based violence, continue to undermine girls' educational access despite policy commitments (Aderinto, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). Philosophically, the study affirms that educational exclusion violates principles of justice and fair equality of opportunity (Rawls, 1971) and deprives girls of essential capabilities necessary for human flourishing (Nussbaum, 2011). The justification of exclusion in the name of culture reflects a misreading of African values, which, as African philosophers argue, prioritise communal responsibility and the well-being of all members (Wiredu, 1996; Gyekye, 1997). In relation to sustainable development, the study concludes that development initiatives lacking an ethical foundation in justice and inclusion are inherently fragile. As Nyerere (1968) emphasises, genuine development must enhance human dignity and social responsibility. Nigeria's sustainable development aspirations cannot be realised without a fundamental commitment to girls' education as a moral imperative and a condition for collective flourishing.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the socio-cultural, ethical, and structural barriers undermining girls' quality education in Nigeria.

Promote Critical Social Dialogue and Cultural Reorientation

There is a need for sustained, community-based dialogue aimed at critically examining cultural practices that disadvantage girls' education. Drawing on Wiredu's (1996) emphasis on rational critique and consensual reform of culture, traditional leaders, religious authorities, educators, and civil society actors should engage communities in reflective conversations that distinguish between cultural values that promote human dignity and those that perpetuate injustice. Such dialogue can facilitate cultural reorientation without cultural alienation.

Integrate Ethical Education on Justice and Gender Equity



Educational curricula at all levels should incorporate ethical education that emphasises justice, equity, and shared moral responsibility. Teaching the ethical foundations of gender equality can help challenge internalised stereotypes and promote respect for the equal moral worth of boys and girls (Rawls, 1971; Gyekye, 1997). Education should not only transmit knowledge but also cultivate moral consciousness and critical reasoning.

Strengthen State Responsibility for Security and Protection

The Nigerian state must prioritise the protection of girls in educational settings, particularly in regions affected by insecurity and gender-based violence. Effective security measures, safe-school initiatives, and accountability mechanisms are essential to safeguarding girls' right to education (UNICEF, 2021). Without such protection, educational access remains fragile and unequal, regardless of policy intentions.

Align Educational Policies with Ethical and Cultural Contexts

Educational policies should be designed and implemented in ways that are culturally sensitive and ethically grounded. Policymakers should draw on African philosophical insights that balance communal values with individual rights, ensuring that cultural considerations do not override principles of justice and inclusion (Gyekye, 1997; Nyerere, 1968). Ethical evaluation should be part of policy assessment frameworks.

Foster Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Addressing girls' educational exclusion requires collaboration among philosophers, educators, policymakers, sociologists, and development practitioners. Such interdisciplinary engagement can ensure that educational reforms are not only technically effective but also ethically legitimate and culturally resonant (Nussbaum, 2011; World Bank, 2018).

Finally, these recommendations underscore that achieving equitable access to girls' education in Nigeria demands more than policy reform; it requires a moral commitment to justice, human flourishing, and inclusive development. When cultural values, ethical principles, and institutional practices are aligned, girls' education becomes both a reflection and a driver of genuine sustainable development.

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