

## Education and Skill Development: Need for Gender Equity in Nigeria

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**Article DOI:**

10.48028/iiprds/esjprcd.v13.i1.11

### **Keywords:**

Education, Skill  
Development,  
Gender Equity

Nigeria's socio-economic development is intricately linked to harnessing its citizens' potential, especially women, who constitute over half the population. Despite progress in education access, gender disparities persist. This paper argued that gender equity in education and skills is crucial for national progress, requiring concerted efforts to close gaps. This study examined education and skill development in Nigeria, with a focus on the challenges faced by women. It examined societal norms, cultural practices, policy impacts on women's education. Benefits included better economic outcomes, health, and political participation. The study advocated a multi-faceted approach, including policy reforms, funding, and community-based initiatives. It also emphasized the need for a shift in societal attitudes and norms that perpetuate gender inequality. Achieving gender equity is both a social justice issue, and a critical component of Nigeria's development.

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## **Background to the Study**

Education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of economic growth, social mobility, and individual empowerment. Education involves investment in human capital, and it is a labour-intensive industry. It helps to develop the full potentials of an individual and also prepares him for useful living. Okeke and Igbokwe (2018); Osegbue, (2025); World Bank, (2018) opined that education is the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and values that enable individuals to participate fully in society and contribute to the development of their communities. In the context of this study, education is critical for promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, and improving health outcomes for everyone, irrespective of gender.

Nigeria stands at a pivotal moment in its development, with a growing recognition that education is a key driver of social and economic progress. Over the past few decades, Nigeria has made strides in expanding educational access. However, persistent gender disparities, especially in education and skill development, continue to limit the country's full potential (Adegoke, 2018). Despite efforts, women and girls still face significant barriers rooted in social norms, cultural practices, and uneven policy decisions (Nkuna, 2024). This research addresses this gap by examining how gender equity in education influences Nigeria's development. The paper will first provide a contextual overview, and current state of women's education and skill development in Nigeria, then explore the challenges faced by women and girls, followed by an analysis of societal norms and cultural practices. Ultimately, this study aimed to identify actionable strategies to promote gender equity in education as a cornerstone of Nigeria's future growth.

## **Contextual Overview of Nigeria Education**

Nigeria's education system has evolved significantly since independence in 1960. Historically, the country inherited a fragmented education model, with disparities between regions and gender. In western Nigeria, girls were initially educated mainly for domestic and religious roles (Ogunboyede, 2024). Missionaries and even early Yoruba elites saw female schooling as a way to produce literate Christian wives, mothers, and helpers who could manage homes and support their husbands' work. Boys were trained for leadership, clergy, clerical jobs, and professionals, while girls received more instructions in sewing, cooking, and moral training than in subjects that led to public careers. Even when girls attended school, families often withdraw them earlier than boys because a girl's bride price and marriage were seen as more important than prolong schooling (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023). So, while the West had more schools, equality was lacking because the purpose and length of education were tied to domestic roles, not equal opportunity.

In eastern Nigeria, the Igbo economic system already gave women strong roles in trade and farming, and this shaped how girls' education was viewed. Girls were schooled largely to become better mothers and Christian homemakers who could still support family trade (Ezegwu & Okoye, 2024). On the contrary, boys were pushed towards teaching catechism, and later civil service to head households and represent the family publicly. Mission schools

reinforced this by offering boys academic and technical tracks, while girls got heavier doses of domestic science. Many families also invested more in sons, because sons inherited land and carried the family name, while daughters were expected to marry out (Ezegwu & Okoye, 2024). The result was that girls' education was permitted but designed to keep them subordinate, not to compete with men in leadership or formal employment (Orisadare, 2019).

In furtherance, in northern Nigeria, women's roles were strongly defined by Islamic tradition and practices like "Purdah", which emphasized seclusion, early marriage, and management of the household (Usman, 2024). Qur'anic education for girls existed, but was usually limited to religious recitation at home, not literacy or subjects that led to public roles. When western education eventually came, it was resisted because it was seen as Christianity and a threat to women's modesty and family honour (Abubakar et al. 2024). Boys were educated to become clerks, teachers, and administrators under indirect rule, while girls were largely excluded on the grounds that public schooling would take them out of seclusion and delay marriage (Usman, 2024). Thus, girls were deprived of equality not only by lack of schools, but by cultural and religious expectations that tied their value to marriage and domesticity rather than public participation. Across all three regions, the common pattern was that men's education was linked to power, income, and public life, while women's education was linked to marriage, motherhood, and support roles. This difference in purpose, content, and duration of schooling is how girls were systematically deprived of equal education with men.

### **Current State of Education and Skill Development in Nigeria**

The state of education and skill development in Nigeria, though evolving, still faces critical challenges. The United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF (2024); United Nations (2025) clearly pointed out that Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children globally, with over 10.5 million children not attending school - most of them girls. Similarly, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO (2014) confirmed Nigeria as having the largest number of out-of-school children, with estimates exceeding 10 million not enrolled in formal education (Inusa et al., 2025).

Despite these daunting challenges, women's education and skills development in Nigeria occupy a complex and evolving landscape. Over the past two decades, significant progress has been made. Onipede and Akilade (2025) observed that more girls are enrolling into primary and secondary schools, driven by both public policies and initiatives like Malala Fund, Girl Child Education Project such as Safe School Program, Nigerian Youth Academy (NiYA), Youth Empowerment and Innovation Development Programme (YEIDEP) and ICT training empowerment programme (focusing on female entrepreneurs), aimed at transforming youths through skills, entrepreneurship, and empowerment (OECD, 2018).

However, despite these strides, disparities remain entrenched. Women still face barriers such as early marriage, low participation in politics, and limited access to infrastructure. Furthermore, even when education is achieved, women often lack the same opportunities for

advanced skills training and leadership roles (Itojong et al., 2024; Adegoke, 2018). On the positive side, digital literacy and vocational training programs are expanding. Initiatives in coding, agriculture, and business entrepreneurship are giving women practical, income-generating skills. Universities, like University of Lagos and Obafemi Awolowo University, are increasingly offering women-focused scholarships in STEM (Muoghalu & Eboiyehi, 2018; Lawanson & Umar, 2019). These shifts signal a gradual but important transformation, which if sustained, could unlock women's full potential, fostering a more equitable and innovative economy in Nigeria.

### **Challenges Faced by Women and Girls**

While progress is being made, women and girls in Nigeria still face a range of persistent challenges that limit their access to equal education and skill development. According to UNESCO (2022) girls are more likely to be out of school than boys, with 36% of girls aged 5-14 years not attending school compared to 32% of boys. Women-who constitute almost half of Nigeria's population has been subject to discrimination, exploitation, and domination by men that has resulted in gender disparity in almost all walks of social life. Momoh (2017) noted that men became dominant figures, controlling wealth, politics, and power, ensuring that properties are passed on to their sons. Women are yet to fully gain recognition in the society due to entrenched patriarchal societal structures and traditional practices against women. Similarly, Okonkwo and Obineli (2011) opined that despite advancement from international women's conferences – such as the one in Beijing in 1995 – women still lag behind. The challenges faced by women and girls in accessing education are complex, rooted in societal norms, cultural practices, and uneven policy decisions that prioritize boys' education over girls' (Okojie, 2017).

### **Societal Norms and Cultural Practices**

Societal norms and cultural practices play a significant role in limiting women's and girls' access to education and skills training in Nigeria. In many parts of the country, girls are socialized to prioritize domestic work and childbearing over education (Nweze, 2018). This is reflected in the fact that many girls are married off at a young age, which can result in early pregnancy and childbirth, making it difficult for them to continue their education (UNICEF, 2018). In many parts of the country, traditional and cultural norms prioritize boys' education over girls' education. This can limit their ability to attend school and pursue their educational and career goals. The patriarchal nature of Nigerian society also perpetuates gender inequality and limits women's access to education and economic opportunities. Women are often expected to prioritize their roles as wives and mothers over their personal and professional development, which can limit their ability to pursue education and skills development.

Cultural attitudes towards women's roles in society can also influence their access to certain subjects, such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Many girls are discouraged from pursuing STEM subjects due to societal, cultural, and educational factors. Stereotypes and biases often suggest STEM fields are male-dominated, and girls are naturally less inclined towards mathematics and science. This is compounded by a lack of

female role models in STEM, making it harder for girls to envision themselves in these careers. Societal pressure to prioritize traditional feminine roles, limited access to STEM resources and unlimited teacher bias, can also steer girls away. Cultural expectations and a lack of encouragement further limit their opportunities and perpetuate the existing gender gap in these fields. Sutherland (2002) noted that efforts to promote girls STEM programs, showcase role models, and raise awareness, aim to change this narrative and create a more inclusive environment where girls can thrive in STEM subjects

Policy decisions are also a significant challenge in promoting women's access to education and skills training in Nigeria. While the country has made significant progress in developing policies aimed at promoting girls' education, the implementation of these policies is often hampered by inadequate funding, corruption, and a lack of political will (Adegoke, 2018). Furthermore, policies aimed at promoting women's empowerment often focus on economic empowerment rather than addressing the underlying social and cultural barriers that limit women's access to education and skills training (Okeke, 2017; Osegbue et al., 2021). The Nigerian government has introduced several policies aimed at promoting girls' education, including the Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment (AGILE) (2020-2025), the National Policy on Gender in Basic Education (2021), and the Girls' Education Project (GEP3) (2012-2022) (World Bank, 2020). These efforts are supported by the Child Rights Act and the Safe Schools Declaration to reduce barriers like child marriage and school insecurity. However, the implementation of these policies has been slow and affected by corruption, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and a lack of accountability.

Similarly, in Nigeria's politics, women's participation is hindered by cultural expectations and traditional roles. Women involvement in politics in Nigeria has come a long way through the formation of the National Council of Women's Society (NCWS) in 1959 (Okonkwo & Obineli, 2010). The main goals of this organization included the improvement of welfare, progress and standard of living of women and increasing the role of women in political life for more access in decision making (Olojede in Okonkwo et al., 2021; Ohamobi et al., 2021). There were other significant roles played by women in anti-colonial struggles. Many women have shown interest in politics and have been exceptional in their contributions, women like Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Sambo Gambo, Margret Ekpo, and Sarah Jubrin (first female presidential candidate), whose contributions to Nigerian politics are notable but, whose efforts are not being recognized by Nigerians because of her gender (Olojede, 2021; Okonkwo et al., 2021; Momoh, 2017).

Ajakaiye (2025) affirmed that the current state of women representation in Nigeria politics is relatively quite low. She noted that in the 10<sup>th</sup> National assembly, there are only 3 women in Senate (2.7%) and 17 women in the House of Representatives (4.7%). These numbers are a far cry from the recommended 35% affirmative action policy which are being considered in other African counties. This evidence is a clear indication that women are not being given equal opportunities in Nigerian politics. This underrepresentation means diverse perspectives are missing in governance, potentially leading to policies that does not address women's needs effectively as well as disenfranchising them from political participation.

### **Benefits of promoting Gender Equity**

Gender equity refers to the process of ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their gender, have equal access to opportunities, rights, and resources. Gender equity is about creating a level playing field where everyone can thrive without discrimination, bias, or societal expectations that limit their potential (O'Neil & Domingo, 2016). Achieving gender equality requires more than just equal representation or legal protections- it calls for a fundamental shift in attitudes, behaviours, and systems. Systemic barriers, such as unequal pay, limited access to leadership roles, and rigid gender norms, must be addressed. Yusuf et al. (2025) affirmed that harmful stereotypes, which often confines individuals to narrow roles based on traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity, need to be dismantled. Gender equality also involves recognizing the intersectionality of identity. Gender equity in this study, refers to the fair distribution of opportunities, resources, and privileges between individuals of all genders, to ensure equal chances for growth and success. Factors such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation can compound the effects of gender inequality.

Similarly, Nkuna, (2024); Osegbue & Ohamobi, (2025) opined that gender equality is not just about balancing opportunities for men and women, but that it also includes breaking down stigmas surrounding gender identity and expression. Creating spaces where individuals can express themselves freely without fear of discrimination or judgement. Such spaces include allowing women to participate in politics. This inclusion leads to more inclusive decision-making. Studies have shown that women leaders often prioritize issues like education, healthcare, and social welfare, benefiting society as a whole (Yusuf et al., 2025). Okojie (2017) clearly pointed out that by supporting policies and practices that value diversity and equity, societies can move closer to ensuring that everyone is valued for their unique contributions, not limited by outdated norms or biases.

In furtherance, gender equity can boost economic growth by increasing women's participation in workforce. When women have equal access to education, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities, they contribute significantly to national economies. Studies have shown that closing the gap in labour force participation could increase Nigeria's GDP by up to 23% (UNICEF, 2024). Similarly, gender equality is essential for upholding human rights and fostering societal progress. It ensures that every individual, regardless of gender, can participate fully in society and realize their potential. Promoting gender equity fosters a more inclusive and participatory democracy. When women are empowered, they are more likely to engage in civic activities, vote, and hold leaders accountable. This leads to more responsive governance and better representation of citizens' needs. Societies that prioritize gender equality consistently see higher levels of economic prosperity, innovation, and social stability (OECD, 2025). Finally, when women and men have equal opportunities, the benefits ripple through communities, household income rises, children gain greater access to education, and civic engagement flourishes. Aderinoye (2007); NCA (2025) maintained that recognizing the importance of gender equality is the first step towards creating a world where opportunities are universal, and progress benefits everyone.

### **Overcoming Barriers of Gender Equity – Way Forward**

Despite growing awareness about gender equality, substantial obstacles persist, hindering true parity. Deep-seated societal norms and systemic inequalities continue to block the path to genuine equality, making it essential to tackle these challenges head-on to create a more inclusive and equitable world. To propagate the need for gender equity in Nigeria the following measures should be upheld:

1. Patriarchal society and media stereotypes should be discouraged- Patriarchal systems often place rigid expectations on individuals based on gender, reinforcing power imbalances and limiting opportunities. These patterns highlight the importance of gender equality because they show how unequal structures can hold entire communities back. Media representations add to the problem by frequently portraying women in subordinate roles, while promoting narrow ideals of masculinity and femininity. This reinforces outdated views and further distances society from a true gender equality meaning rooted in fairness and shared opportunity. To overcome these challenges, schools can teach subjects that promotes gender inclusiveness, individuals and other stakeholders in the education industry, must also confront their own biases and support inclusive policies.
2. Peer pressure and societal Norms- Gender norms are deeply woven into the fabric of our society, shaping how individuals are expected to think, act, and even dream. From a young age, people often face pressure to conform to rigid gender roles that limit their choices and stifle their true selves. Men are meant to adhere to hyper-masculine ideals that value toughness over vulnerability. Women on the other hand are navigating discouragement or outright barriers when pursuing careers in traditionally male-dominated industries like engineering or technology. Understanding the true gender equality meaning, helps reveal how these expectations restrict everyone and highlights the need for greater egalitarianism in homes, schools, and workplaces. These entrenched expectations can be isolating and damaging, thereby shoving people into roles that fail to reflect their individuality. The weight of societal norms often makes it difficult for individuals to step outside these predefined boundaries, leaving many unable to fully embrace their potential. To overcome these norms is a collective responsibility. Encouraging open conversations about gender expectations is a powerful starting point. Communities can amplify the voices of role models who have defied stereotypes. People like Prof. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (former Minister of Finance), Late Prof, Dora Akunyili (Former Director General of NAFDAC), Dr. Uche Ekwunife (Member of the Senate), Lynda Chuba Ikpeazu (former member House of Representative, representing Onitsha North and South), Mrs Virginia Etiaba (first and only female governor of Anambra State), Aisha Yesufu (Nigerian youth female activists). All these remarkable women have performed excellently and their achievement should be used to encourage and inspire others. Grassroots movements and social campaigns also play a vital role in dismantling harmful norms and creating a culture the values diversity and inclusivity.
3. Legislative Reforms: The government should ensure 35% representation of women in government and appointive position as acclaimed. These reforms should not only be

in blue prints, but should be enforced. Countries like India has allocated over 90,859.54 crore towards schemes benefiting women and girls, focusing on welfare, education, health, housing, transport, and safety (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023). Gender budgeting is a key policy reform in most advanced countries of the world, which prioritizes women-centric schemes. Nigeria needs to adopt and implement gender-responsive budgeting, allocating specific funds to address the unique need and challenges of women.

4. **Community-based Initiatives:** This is also crucial for promoting gender equity. This is achieved by organizing women's leadership programs, promoting women economic empowerment programmes, organizing local groups like women's foundation for skill development to support vulnerable women.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine how gender equity in education and skill development influences Nigeria's social and economic development. The findings of the study indicated that, despite progress in school enrolment, entrenched gender disparities persist, shaped by cultural norms, early marriage, and weak policy implementation. The study provided a deeper understanding of how historical inequalities and societal expectations continue to shape educational access for women and girls. In practical terms, this study informed policy makers of the need for legal reforms, community-based incentives, and a shift in cultural attitudes towards girls' education.

The study acknowledged limitations, including its focus on specific regions, which may not capture the full national picture. This study recommended strengthening policy implementation, offering targeted STEM programs for girls, and promoting family and community awareness. The study suggested that Further research could be conducted to explore policy impact across diverse ethnic groups or states and investigate innovative community models. Finally, the study proved highly relevant as it underscored that gender equity in education was not merely a moral imperative, but a strategic cornerstone for Nigeria's long-term prosperity and innovation.

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