
Intersecting Barriers to Girl-Child Education in Northern Nigeria: A Critical and Feminist Assessment of Sustainable Development Goal 4

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Abstract: Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting opportunities for lifelong learning for all by 2030 are the objectives of Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The driving principle of SDG 4 is to provide a transformative, inclusive, and equitable education that serves as a foundation for personal and societal development. However, the intersection of religion and culture complicates the realisation of the SDG 4 goals in Northern Nigeria, where religious and cultural beliefs are intertwined, reinforcing each other and creating barriers to education. Using critical discourse analysis, this study examines how language and power dynamics shape the discourse around education in the region. Through the lens of intersectional feminism, the investigation seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of how different forms of marginalisation can exacerbate and magnify one another, creating unique vulnerabilities that cannot be addressed with generic solutions for girl-children in Northern Nigeria. Findings highlight significant obstacles to girls' education in the area, including religious and cultural customs like early marriage, religious fanaticism, religious practices like *purdah*, and gender inequalities. The study emphasises the need for a multifaceted approach that includes national orientation, curriculum development, and compulsory education to improve girl-child education in the region.

Keywords: culture; education; girl-child; religion; sustainable development goal

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Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 aims to “ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes” by 2030 (UNESCO, 2019, para. 4.1). The United Nations (UN) created the SDGs, commonly referred to as the Global Goals, in 2015 as a worldwide call to action to eradicate poverty, safeguard the environment, and ensure that everyone lives in freedom and harmony by 2030 (Saini et al., 2023). There are 17 goals and 167 objectives in the United Nations (UN) SDGs. SDG 4, which aims to provide children between the ages of 6 and 18 with equal, high-quality education and opportunities for lifelong learning, is the subject of this study. Education is widely regarded as a crucial

element of human advancement and growth, and the Nigerian government has made the education of women and girls a top priority. However, there are still persistent gender inequalities, and girls typically encounter considerable obstacles when it comes to acquiring education in Northern Nigeria. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2022b) reports that annually, a total of 5.9 million children enrol in elementary school, but only 2.4 million remain until the completion of their junior secondary education. Most of the students who do not complete their junior secondary education are girls hailing from the northern regions of Nigeria. The country's sustainable education has been further undermined by poverty, instability, abduction, child marriage, and religious fanaticism ("Nigeria's literacy rate", 2023).

The implementation of Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2004) was a significant measure in enhancing access to basic education. In the same year, Nigeria enacted the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act (2004), which mandated free and mandatory basic education. However, it is worth noting that over 12.7 million children in Nigeria are still out of school according to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS, 2016–17), and there are still significant differences between genders when it comes to access to basic education, which remains a pressing issue (MICS, 2016–17; Universal Basic Education Commission 2019). Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, with around 20 million internationally (UNICEF, 2018). According to the 2016 MICS report, only 61% of children in Nigeria aged 6 to 11 regularly attend primary school, and only 36% of children aged 3 to 5 participate in organised early childhood education initiatives. Approximately 50% of children attending school do not meet the anticipated learning standards, resulting in their inability to read or write. Approximately 63% of children residing in rural regions are illiterate, whereas a comparable statistic of roughly 84% applies to children in the lowest economic quartile (UNICEF, 2022a). The intersection of religion, culture, and education is a complex and crucial issue, particularly when considering the education of girls in Northern Nigeria (Amzat, 2017). The education of girls in this region has been significantly impacted by deeply ingrained religious and cultural customs, resulting in a challenging environment for achieving equitable educational opportunities for everyone (Yewande & Olawunmi, 2023). Northern Nigeria, characterised by its predominantly Muslim population, harbours a plurality of cultures and traditions that have frequently coalesced with Islamic customs (Osagiobare et al., 2015). Islam is a prominent influence on the lives of people in this area, but cultural norms and practices have also had a substantial impact on social views towards the girl-children's education (Idabawa, 2004). Education is widely regarded as a vital component of human advancement and growth. However, there are still persistent gender inequalities, and girls typically encounter substantial obstacles when it comes to obtaining an education (Enyioko, 2021).

This study focuses on Northern Nigeria as the area strives to meet the UN SDG 4. Northern Nigeria comprises 19 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Abuja,¹ which encompasses the three geopolitical zones: North Central, Northeast, and Northwest. This study maintains that acquiring essential educational foundations is crucial for all children in the region, as it will enable them to lead more prosperous and fulfilling lives while fostering peace and harmony. Notwithstanding these aspirations, this study argues that several obstacles hinder governments' efforts to achieve Goal 4 by 2030. This investigation aims to employ critical discourse analysis to examine how language and power dynamics influence the discourse surrounding education in Northern Nigeria. By examining how religious and cultural narratives are constructed and perpetuated, the study aims to identify the implicit and explicit barriers that hinder the attainment of inclusive and equitable education. Through the lens of intersectional feminism, the investigation seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of how different forms of marginalisation can exacerbate and magnify one another, creating unique vulnerabilities that cannot be addressed with generic solutions for the girl-child in Northern Nigeria. This approach acknowledges that gender, religion, culture, and socio-economic status intersect to create complex layers of disadvantage and is used to analyse these challenges critically and make recommendations for ways to mitigate them.

Literature review: Education in Northern Nigeria

The dilemma faced by education in Northern Nigeria has been attributed to various factors, ranging from poverty, religion, culture, insecurity, and misguided priorities on the part of the region's political elites (Agbormbai, 2021; Obafunso, 2014). The Northern elites are excessively focused on maintaining political power, manipulating religious sentiments while disregarding the need for education. For this reason, there is a prevalence of underdevelopment, terrorism, banditry, and sectarian conflict in that area (Sarkinfa, 2023). The primary

¹ The federal republic of Nigeria consists of 36 states and the FCT. Nineteen of these states are in the northern region of the country, the location of this study.

duty of educating the population resides with the states, whereas the federal government is tasked with providing financing, national policies, and intervention programmes to support them. The Federal Government has implemented several support programs to achieve this, but their effectiveness is hindered by state inefficiency, corruption, and a lack of commitment.

Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the states in Northern Nigeria have consistently fallen behind in terms of education compared to the other 36 states in the federation (Mbara & Gopal, 2021; Mbara et al., 2019). However, this disparity cannot be attributed to insufficient funding (Amzat 2017). The literacy index data published by the National Bureau of Statistics (National Bureau of Statistics – Nigeria 2017) indicates that the significant disparity in educational advancement between Northern and Southern Nigeria has not been bridged, even after over six decades of independence. Based on the data published by the National Bureau of Statistics – Nigeria 2017, the states in the Northeast, Northwest, and North-Central regions have the highest proportion of illiterate individuals. According to the report, Yobe State has a literacy level of only 7.23% which is the lowest in the country. The abysmally poor performance of Yobe is followed by Zamfara (19.16%), Katsina (10.36%), Sokoto (15.01%), Bauchi (19.26%), Kebbi (20.51%), and Niger (22.88%). Taraba is the only state that deviates from the norm, boasting a literacy rate of 72%. It is important to note that, except for Taraba, which has a larger Christian population, these are Muslim-dominated states. Is there a link between religion and illiteracy? Or are the elites manipulating religion to keep the people perpetually subjugated?

The highest literacy rate in the country by states is 96.43% in Imo State, followed by 96.30% in Lagos, 95.79% in Ekiti, 95.76% in Rivers, 94.24% in Abia, 92.11% in Anambra, 90.57% in Osun, 90.53% in Edo, 89.46% in Enugu, and 89% in Cross River. Most of these states are Christian-dominated. Although the northern regions have a lower education profile compared to other areas in the South, they are not at a disadvantage in terms of the Federal Government's monthly statutory allocations (National Bureau of Statistics – Nigeria 2017). According to figures obtained from the Office of the Accountant-General of the Federation, the 19 states in Northern Nigeria, along with their 413 local government areas (excluding the Federal Capital Territory), have collectively received almost 12 trillion Naira in federal allocations during the past decade under the leadership of various governors. The analysis of the distribution of funds from 2007 to 2016 reveals that the states in the Northwest, Northeast, and North-Central regions have collectively received sums of 3 trillion Naira, 2.5 trillion Naira, and 2.2 trillion Naira, respectively. More than 50% of the cash, amounting to nearly 10 trillion Naira, has been awarded to the northern states out of the total allocation for the 774 local governments (Amzat, 2017).

In 2016, the Federal Government (FG) granted a total net statutory sum of 29.85 billion Naira to Imo State, which has the highest literacy level. Yobe State, which has the lowest literacy level, received 30.95 billion Naira (UNESCO, 2021). However, the population of Imo is approximately double that of Yobe. Based on the 2014 population estimates, the population of Imo is around 5,073,440, whereas Yobe has an estimated population of 3,071,433 (NBS, 2014). Furthermore, the Federal Government, via the Universal Basic Education Programme, has allocated a total of 153 billion to the 19 states in the North and 115 billion to the 17 states in the South from 2005 to 2016. Over the past decade, every state in the Northern region has utilised its UBE intervention cash, except for Adamawa, Plateau, Kogi, and Niger. These governments did not apply for the funds, specifically in 2015 and 2016 (Amzat, 2017). Moreover, in 2016, most states did not utilise the cash; however, Borno accessed their allocated 1.04 billion Naira, and Nasarawa only obtained 607.85 million Naira (Ugwoke et al., 2022). The Ministerial Committee on Madrasah has shown that despite the allocation of funds and other interventions aimed at improving education in the northern region, there are still more than nine million *alimajiris* (UBEC, 2010). *Alimajiris* are nomadic learners attending Qur'anic schools, and they make up the most significant population of out-of-school children or children who are not enrolled in formal education in Nigeria.

Usman Shamsudeen, the former Minister of Finance, asserts that the situation in the North is much more dismal. During the 2011 Northern Nigeria Economic and Investment Summit, Shamsudeen, addressing the World Bank Statistics, revealed that the northern region of Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children, surpassing not only other regions in Nigeria but also the rest of the world (Ujah & Binniyat, 2011). According to data from the World Bank, in the same year, the enrolment of girls in schools in the Northeast and Northwest regions was 20 and 25% respectively. In the Southeast and Southwest regions, the enrolment rate was 85%, while in the South-South region it was 75%. Shamsudeen criticised the Northern leaders for displaying insufficient dedication to improving education in the area and asked them to change their approach. As indicated by the National Bureau of Statistics – Nigeria 2017 statistics, the literacy level in the North continues to be hindered, six years after it was warned about. During a visit to the Kaduna National Library, Senator Shehu Sani,

who represents Kaduna Central, also addressed the problem of low literacy levels in the region. Senator Sani expressed strong disapproval of the noticeable disparity in educational enthusiasm between the North and the South. He attributed this issue to insufficient funding for education and the devastating impact of insurgency in the Northeast over the past eight years. Therefore, “There is no doubt that insurgency in the north-eastern part of the country has seriously undermined the educational progress of Northern Nigeria. And the image of the North and Northern people nationally and internationally is an image of people that are opposed or resistant to Western education” (Amzat, 2017, para. 15).

However, Muhammadu Sanusi, the former Emir of Kano, who has been outspoken about the issue of underdevelopment, particularly in the Northern region, has partially attributed the deplorable condition of education in the area to the British colonialists. He attributes the poor literacy level in the North to the anti-North British colonial education policy that was in place during pre-independence Nigeria. According to the monarch’s statement at an education conference in Kaduna, the British intentionally prevented the people of the North from showing any inclination towards Western education, “The purpose of the British administration in Northern Nigeria is not to promote education and material development” (Amzat, 2017, para. 18). Nonetheless, the lack of a significant rise in literacy in the area since the colonial forces left more than 60 years ago calls into question the Emir’s logic. Emir Sanusi also criticised the traditional northern authorities who prohibit actions and initiatives that may have contributed to the development of education in the area. The *Global Education Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2020) assessment reveals that several schools in the Northern region suffer from insufficient classroom capacity, a lack of appropriate furniture and equipment, and are frequently situated in isolated areas. The availability of water, health services, and sanitation facilities is often inadequate, while the pupil-to-teacher ratio is poor (UNESCO, 2020). The international organisation has furthermore associated early marriage with limited educational attainment, increased rates of violence and mistreatment, social seclusion, and significant health hazards. UNESCO (2020) maintains that teenage pregnancy and early marriage hinder the girl-children’s access to education, resulting in a significant number of girls discontinuing their schooling before completing basic class six. The following section examines the impact of the intersection of religion and culture on the education of girl children in Northern Nigeria.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in intersectionality, a central concept in contemporary feminist discourse. Intersectionality examines the complex relationships between various types of identity, oppression, and power structures. Intersectional feminism opines that because of simultaneous, overlapping aspects of identity such as race, sexual orientation, gender, disability, nationality, class, and other social categories, people are unequally impacted by oppressive institutions. The idea developed over several decades of thought and struggle by Black and Indigenous feminists, as well as other women of colour. It became a theoretical framework in the late 1980s because of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s catalytic essays (Runyan, 2018). According to Human Rights Careers (n.d.), “Intersectional feminism is a type of feminism focused on the fact that systems of oppression impact people differently based on their race, class, ability, sexuality, and other characteristics. While ‘mainstream feminism’ may focus only (or primarily) on gender or sex, intersectional feminism understands that oppression is an interlocking system” (para. 2). The idea is crucial, yet it can be challenging to comprehend fully, especially because its meaning can vary across individuals and in different situations.

Gender exerts a substantial influence on women’s educational opportunities in Northern Nigeria. Conventional gender norms often prescribe that women’s primary duties lie within the domestic sphere, thereby restricting their access to educational opportunities. Kabeer (2005) asserts that gender norms and expectations influence women’s access to education, and any initiatives aimed at enhancing women’s education must confront deeply entrenched cultural attitudes. Equally, cultural factors in Northern Nigeria can both enable and impede women’s education and the realisation of SDG 4. Certain cultural traditions may promote the pursuit of education, whilst others may prioritise early marriage and domestic responsibilities. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) emphasises the significance of understanding local cultural dynamics in formulating effective approaches for advancing women’s education in Nigeria. Analogously, religion, namely Islam, significantly influences opinions on women’s education in Northern Nigeria. Islam promotes the pursuit of knowledge for all genders; however, interpretations of Islamic precepts may vary. Certain conservative views may deter women from pursuing education beyond a specific threshold. Nevertheless, experts such as Oloyede (2010) contend that Islam promotes women’s education, and the primary objective should be to eliminate misunderstandings.

Through intersectional feminism, we may see the world beyond our personal experiences and gain a deeper understanding of how different forms of marginalisation can exacerbate and magnify one another, creating unique vulnerabilities that cannot be addressed with general fixes. By acknowledging this, we may develop a more discerning perspective on the power structures we aim to transform and adopt a more focused approach in our efforts to promote gender equality. Intersectionality is a comprehensive idea that continues to be a subject of intense scrutiny within feminist pedagogy. Hence, this study does not aim to deal exhaustively with the tenets of feminism, but it seeks to explore how various types of discrimination intersect with and intensify gender-based discrimination in Northern Nigeria. The intersection of gender, culture, social conventions, insecurity, poverty, and religion engenders intricate obstacles to the advancement of women's education in Nigeria. An example of this is the practice of *pardah* or the isolation of women in certain Northern Nigerian societies, which restricts their ability to pursue educational opportunities. Kabeer (2005) emphasises the importance of acknowledging these intersections and tailoring educational interventions to address various levels of disadvantage. It is essential to consider the intersectionality of gender, culture, and religion to advance women's education in Northern Nigeria. This study emphasises the importance of implementing solutions tailored to the region's unique environment, taking into account the diverse cultural and religious dynamics present. Conducting this research is crucial for facilitating significant transformation in the educational options available to women in the area.

Methodology

The study aimed to investigate the intersecting barriers to girl-child education in Northern Nigeria, with a key focus on how religion and culture complicate the realisation of SDG 4 in the area. To achieve this, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was employed as a methodological approach. Discourse in CDA refers to the "social practices, processes, and products" that comprise everything "from language use to statements that assign meanings to an institution, to social identities, relationships, practices, and categories" (Rogers 2011). Although CDA might have many applications, the "approaches to CDA share a set of core assumptions. Those assumptions include an interest in uncovering and transforming conditions of inequality; analyses ... transcend the interpretation of language and, instead, aim to explain the work that language performs in society" (Mullet, 2018, p. 118). Various primary and secondary sources were utilised to capture the multifaceted nature of the discourse surrounding religion, culture, and education in Northern Nigeria. These sources included the following:

- Religious texts: Selected verses from the *Quran* and Hadiths that pertain to education, gender roles, and societal duties.
- Policy documents: Government and non-governmental organisation (NGO) reports and policy documents related to education in Northern Nigeria, including the UBE policy and related educational framework documents.
- Media articles: Articles from local newspapers and online media platforms discussing issues of education, religion, and culture.

Specific criteria guided the selection of data sources to ensure relevance and representativeness. Data sources were chosen based on their direct relevance to the intersection of religion, culture, and education. This selection included materials that discuss educational practices, religious teachings, and cultural norms. Data was selected from a recent 10 year period to ensure the analysis reflected current discourse. This time frame was chosen to strike a balance between historical context and contemporary relevance. The study focused on materials specifically from Northern Nigeria to capture the regional nuances and specific challenges faced in this area. The analysis followed the principles of CDA, focusing on the relationship between language, power, and ideology. Data were systematically collected according to the specified selection criteria. Religious texts were transcribed where necessary, and policy documents and media articles were downloaded and organised for analysis. The collected data were coded to facilitate the organisation and identification of key themes and patterns. Codes were developed both inductively (emerging from the data) and deductively (based on the research questions and theoretical framework).

Textual analysis involved close reading and interpretation of the selected texts. This step focused on identifying discursive strategies, such as framing, metaphors, and rhetorical devices, used to construct and reinforce the nexus between religion, culture, and education. The texts were analysed within their socio-political and cultural contexts. Analysis involved understanding the broader societal discourses and power structures that influence and are influenced by the texts. Contextual analysis helped to uncover the underlying ideologies and power relations

embedded in the discourse. The final step involved interpreting the findings in light of CDA principles. This step included synthesising the patterns and themes identified in the textual and contextual analyses to provide a comprehensive understanding of how religion and culture intersect to create barriers to education in Northern Nigeria.

Presentation of findings

Like in other developing countries, schools play a crucial role in socialising their citizens and shaping a ‘modern’ society (Terziev, 2022). Regrettably, the impact of education is not evenly experienced by half of Nigeria’s school-age population, as the female students remain marginalised. Typically, there is a lower presence of females in schools nationwide, and areas with the lowest enrollment rates for girls also have the lowest overall child enrollment rates (Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2016–17). A much smaller proportion of girls in the northern region, compared to school-age girls in the southern region, avail themselves of the option to attend school (NBS & UNICEF, 2022). Women in Northern Nigeria are seen as subordinate citizens, resulting in their education being given lower importance compared to that of boys (Sani, 2019). Some parents exhibit hesitancy in sending their daughters to school, and those who do attend generally discontinue their education prematurely due to religious and cultural concerns, as discussed below.

Religious and cultural concerns impeding the education of girls in Northern Nigeria

Patoari (2019) notes that parental misinterpretation of the Islamic perspective on women’s education is a major concern in Northern Nigeria, while Enyioko (2021) examines the role of women in Muslim culture. The intersection of these variables within the cultural fabric of Hausa Muslim Society is critically discussed below, as they are still prevalent in the area.

Northern Muslims and opposition to Western education

Islam in Nigeria predates Christianity by more than 300 years (Fafunwa, 1974). In the early 15th century, the Emir of Kano embraced the Islamic faith. The trading connections between Northern Africa and Western Sudan facilitated the dissemination of the Islamic religion across Hausaland. In the 1840s, Christian missionaries arrived in Nigeria with the explicit aim of proselytising Muslims and pagans to embrace Christianity. Consequently, Western education and schools were closely associated with Christianity (Dubey et al., 1979). Some Muslim parents suspect that if they enrolled their children in Christian schools, there was a high likelihood that the children would adopt the Christian faith upon their return (Chineke, 2016; Fafunwa, 1974). Due to the flourishing of Quranic schools in the northern region, it was challenging for Christian schools and Western education to establish a strong presence. The presence of Quranic schools in Northern Nigeria indicates a strong inclination towards education, but not of the Western variant (Csapo, 1981). Presently, some parents in the North refrain from sending their children to school due to concerns that Western education may interfere with their preference for the Hausa language and the Islamic way of life (Nuhu, 2020). In addition, parents express a reluctance for their daughters to socialise with male students who are not of the Muslim faith in educational institutions (Edwin, 2016). Generally, Muslim parents express doubts about the merits of Western education and perceive it as a detrimental influence on the traditional Hausa way of life (Pew Research Centre, 2016). The introduction of Western education by Europeans, with its distinct cultural, historical, and linguistic traditions, is perceived as having the potential to erode the Islamic heritage. Missionary schools have been seen as vocation-oriented, with the understanding that women’s primary occupation is marriage, thus rendering their education unnecessary. Western education for females is perceived as a subversive influence that challenges Hausa-Muslim customs and parental authority.

Marriage traditions and the subjugation of women

Islam does not establish any specific age boundaries for marriage, and it is legally permissible for young children to marry (Moore, 2006). Child marriage is prevalent in most areas of Hausaland. In urban areas, girls often marry by the age of 12, while in rural areas, marriages sometimes occur at much younger ages (Nwozor & Okhillu, 2021). According to Robson (2004), in some localities, girls are married at the age of five or six and are raised by their husbands. Under Maliki law, the father has the power to arrange a marriage for his unmarried daughter, regardless of her desires, and without involving the mother in the decision-making process (Ghazali, 2010). The father has full responsibility for his daughter’s marriage, regardless of whether it is her first, second, third, or fourth marriage. Robson (2004) maintains that some fathers marry off their daughters to older men for

financial gain. In situations of divorce, if the father refuses to grant his daughter permission to divorce her chosen spouse, typically due to the father's desire to be reimbursed for the bride's price, the daughter frequently flees and sustains herself by engaging in prostitution in an urban area. After the marriage is contracted, many Muslim families enforce *pardah*, which involves confining the wife indoors (Kulle), to safeguard her from interacting with other males. *Purdah* is a customary tradition observed among the Hausa-Muslim community. In Muslim West Africa, Nigerian Hausaland stands out for its rigorous adherence to isolation (Islam in West Africa, 2013). However, it is important to note that women do not refrain from going out altogether, especially in cases of justifiable necessity such as attending a relative's funeral, wedding, or naming ceremony (Islam in West Africa, 2013). The Prophet Mohammed allowed women to participate in evening prayers. Women who are confined within their homes abstain from venturing to the marketplace for trade; instead, they depend on their daughters as the primary intermediary with the outside world. The girl-child's career in hawking starts at the age of five and continues until she reaches puberty or marries.

Supporting the above assertion, a mother (a 54-year-old woman who is widowed and has not received any formal schooling) stated that "I am a widow; my husband died eight years ago. I had no formal education. I was involved in petty trading and subsistence farming. I could not continue trading as a result of a terminal illness that has rendered me unproductive. The only choice I had was to send my little girl (thirteen years of age) with me to hawk some petty products. Now, I exist on whatever she brings home. She withdrew from school when we discovered that hawking could bring us enough profit to live. If she does not hawk these products, there will be no money to eat, and we shall all die. So, what do you expect us to do? (Femi, 2011, p. 112)." The participant noted the passing of her spouse, and her terminal illness made her withdraw her child from school and take to hawking to sustain the family. The question is, why should a child be made to shoulder the responsibility of providing for the family? Most of these child hawkers are targets of unscrupulous men who rape and exploit them sexually. Further, some parents do not perceive post-primary education as important (Azeez et al., 2024). According to Yise (2020), some parents believe their daughters should marry rather than attend school, where they may be negatively influenced. Post-primary girls are deemed to be too sophisticated and ineligible for marriage, and there is a concern that they may develop a sense of equality with men, which goes against the customs of the Hausa-Muslim culture. According to Azeez et al. (2024), parents believe that a girl-child who discontinued her education at the elementary level or did not attend school was more compliant and obedient to her spouse and parents compared to those who pursued education beyond the elementary level. Enabling the girl-child to access secondary school is perceived as equating to informing her of her rights, which is considered to be harmful to the current social structure.

A participant in the study titled "Child's Rights and the Challenges of Educating the Girl-Child: Assessing the Contributions of UNICEF in Nigeria," by Nwozor and Okhillu (2021), identified ignorance on the part of the parents as a factor affecting girl-child education in Northern Nigeria. The participant noted that "It seems to me that our parents have not been fully made to understand why they should make the sacrifice of sending us, their daughters, to school instead of marrying us off. I know the tradition is quite strong in this regard and against the girls. But I believe that more discussions can open more doors of cooperation on this issue of girl-child education (p. 297)." This quote reveals a power dynamic, as her parents are deciding the future of the girl-child for parochial reasons. Parents have expressed dissatisfaction with the behaviour of female students in secondary education. Okorie (2017) states that marriage and pregnancy are the top reasons for dropping out of post-primary schools. He noted that students attributed their decision to leave school to factors such as marriage, pregnancy, and a preference for work. On the other hand, teachers identified a lack of interest in schoolwork, indiscipline, poor performance, truancy, and pregnancy as the main reasons for students dropping out. The limited space in schools often leads to a preference for boys over girls. Additionally, a limited number of post-primary institutions for women exist, and girls often do not gain admission to the ones that do (Yise, 2020).

Discussion

An erroneous belief commonly held by parents in the study area is that the education of girls goes against Islamic principles. According to Patoari (2019), parents who enrolled their daughters in school were seen to be violating the principles of the Islamic faith, as it was believed that women should solely focus on learning about their religion and preparing for marriage. The prevailing belief in the core North links an educated woman with a lack of moral values, with the degree of education inversely proportional to the level of morality (Chineke, 2016; Gaya, 1979). According to Chineke (2016), parents held the belief that Western education would expose daughters to the worst aspects and immoralities of modern society. Pregnancy elicits significant apprehension

among locals. When a girl falls pregnant before marriage, the parents are held responsible and burdened with the consequences of her actions. In the Kano region, there is a higher proportion of Muslim parents who have unfavourable views towards educating their children compared to Christian parents. In addition, parents residing in rural areas are more opposed to the education of women compared to those living in urban areas. Their primary reason against education is the perceived moral laxity of schools (Azeez et al., 2024; Chineke, 2016; Hake, 1970).

As a holistic lifestyle, Islam places a high value on education for all its followers, regardless of gender. The importance of knowledge and education is emphasised in Islamic teachings, which are based on the *Quran* and the Hadith (sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad). Islam's sacred text, the *Quran*, emphasises the value of education for both sexes. Several passages emphasise the importance of knowledge and Muslims' duty to pursue it. For example, the *Quran* (96:1-5) states, "Read in the name of your Lord who created. He created man from a clinging substance. Read, and your Lord is the most Generous - who taught by the pen - taught man that which he knew not." This passage is an explicit instruction to seek knowledge and marks the start of the revelation to Prophet Muhammad. Considering that the order to "read" is not gender specific, indicates that all Muslims are obliged to seek knowledge. Another significant verse in the *Quran* (39:9) declares, "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" Regardless of a person's gender, this rhetorical question suggests that knowledge improves their status as humans.

The significance of education for women is further supported by the Hadith literature, which documents the deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet is reported to have said, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (*Sunan Ibn Majah*). This Hadith makes it abundantly clear that all Muslims, both male and female, have a duty to seek knowledge. Further, the Prophet Muhammad emphasised the importance of this pursuit by stating, "He who goes forth in search of knowledge is striving hard in the way of Allah till he returns" (Book 12, Hadith 10). This Hadith from Anas ibn Malik emphasises the importance of pursuing knowledge as a means to honour Allah and fight for His cause. Since seeking knowledge is regarded as an action that pleases Allah, it inspires Muslims to do so. This Hadith also emphasises the importance of continuous learning, suggesting that it should not cease until one has completed one's journey, which means that even after acquiring some knowledge, one should continue to learn new things. The *Hadith* also instructs Muslims to continually seek to learn more and broaden their knowledge, rather than being content with their current state.

Moreover, women have made significant advancements in various branches of knowledge throughout Islamic history. The rich history of women's education in Islam is exemplified by scholars like Fatima al-Fihri, who founded the University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco, one of the world's oldest universities still in operation (Khoury, 2022). In addition, women such as Lubna of Cordoba and Zaynab al-Sahrawi were distinguished academics in mathematics and medicine, respectively (Shamsie, 2016). Their accomplishments show that women's education has always been appreciated and encouraged in Islamic society. Fafunwa (1974) observed that after the Jihad in 1804, Shehu' Uthman Dan Fodio promoted significant changes in Hausa-Muslim society, including the advancement of women's education. Thus, Islam does not prohibit the education of women; in fact, it promotes education for women (Patoari, 2019). However, the expectation for women to marry at a young age contradicts the practice of providing education. Some Muslim communities in Northern Nigeria still face obstacles and misconceptions about women's education, despite Islam's explicit teachings on the subject. Patriarchal beliefs and cultural practices can occasionally impede women's access to education. Therefore, it is imperative to distinguish between cultural behaviours and the genuine teachings of Islam, which firmly encourage education for all.

Conclusion and recommendations

The preceding findings show that the education of girls in Northern Nigeria faces substantial barriers rooted in religious and cultural beliefs. In this region, the interpretation of Islamic teachings often emphasises traditional roles for women, primarily as homemakers and mothers. Such interpretations can discourage families from investing in their daughters' formal education, fearing that it may lead them away from these traditional roles. In addition, this study has shown that the opposition to Western education among some Northern Nigerian Muslims can be traced to historical and ideological factors. The arrival of Western education in Nigeria was closely linked to colonial rule, which engendered mistrust and resistance among local populations. This scepticism persists, with Western education often being perceived as a threat to Islamic values and traditional ways of life. Consequently, there is a preference for Islamic education, which focuses on religious teachings and the study of Arabic.

This preference, while enriching in its own right, limits access to the broad-based education that encompasses science, technology, and other subjects crucial for national development and personal empowerment, as outlined in SDG 4. Likewise, marriage traditions in Northern Nigeria play a significant role in the subjugation of women. The practice of early and forced marriages is prevalent, with girls often being married off before they reach the age of 18. This practice not only deprives them of their right to education but also exposes them to various health risks and limits their socio-economic opportunities. Thus, achieving SDG 4 in the region entails addressing the educational and social challenges faced by girls and women, a goal that requires a multifaceted approach that respects cultural and religious contexts while promoting gender equality. Efforts must be made to reconcile Islamic teachings with the importance of education for all, to build trust in Western educational frameworks, and to reform marital practices that hinder women's rights. Only by addressing these interconnected issues can meaningful progress be made toward empowering women and developing a more equitable society in Northern Nigeria. Universal Basic Education Commission 2019

For Nigeria to achieve SDG 4, it is necessary to improve girl-child education in the Northern region of the country, which requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the religious and cultural challenges prevalent in the region. There is a need for the government at all levels to work closely with religious and community leaders to promote the importance of girl-child education within the cultural and religious frameworks. Engaging in dialogue to address misconceptions and highlighting the benefits of educating girls for the greater good of the entire community may fulfil this recommendation. Also, there is a further need to develop educational materials and teaching methods that are culturally sensitive and relevant to the local context. Incorporating elements of religious teachings and cultural practices into the curriculum to make education more engaging and relevant to the community is necessary because Nigerians may not share the same objectives as Western education for its inhabitants. By engaging parents in the curriculum planning process for local schools, ensuring their understanding of the schools' objectives, and attentively considering their opinions, concerns, and anxieties, educational curricula can be designed that respect social traditions while also facilitating and supporting social change that is consistent with economic developments.

To achieve gender equality in education and promote widespread literacy, the federal, state and local governments must prioritise the advancement of girls' education in Hausaland. Although the government must adhere to existing religious and societal customs, it cannot overlook the education of the girl-child if it intends to bring about social transformation. Women's advocacy groups can continue to advocate for the implementation of gender-sensitive policies and programs at all levels, including local, regional, and national, including measures to address gender-based discrimination in education, such as providing scholarships and incentives for girls, establishing safe and inclusive learning environments, and enforcing laws against child marriage and gender-based violence. Advancing girls' education will narrow gender disparities and enhance the potential of the future labour force. Finally, compulsory education would be the most straightforward resolution to the issues highlighted in this study. Constructing an adequate number of classrooms, providing teacher training, and devising methods to enforce school attendance are essential preparations to be implemented. The UBE is the initial stage, which consists of six years of Primary School education followed by three years of Junior Secondary School education, resulting in a total of nine years of uninterrupted schooling. The transition from one class to another is automatic; however, transitions are determined based on constant assessment. The practice of legally allowing girls to leave school for marriage at the age of 12, and before completing six years of elementary education, should be subject to comprehensive debate and research. If mandatory education disrupts societal customs, alternate approaches to providing education for the girl-child after marriage must be identified until the customs are modified. Limited access to high-quality and inclusive education sustains disparities and impedes economic development. Therefore, the government must allocate money towards enhancing the quality of education, constructing additional schools, and providing teacher training.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study is grounded in intersectionality, a central concept in contemporary feminist discourse. It examines how the intersection of gender, culture, social conventions, insecurity, poverty, and religion engenders intricate obstacles to the advancement of women's education in Nigeria.

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