BREAKING BARRIERS: ADDRESSING SOCIAL NORMS THAT HINDER GIRLS' TRANSITION AND COMPLETION OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ZAMFARA STATE CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

This research investigates the social norms hindering girls' transition and completion of secondary education in Zamfara State, Nigeria, focusing on cultural, economic, and gendered barriers. Feminist economic theory emphasizes how economic systems, compounded by poverty, exacerbate gender disparities in education. In Zamfara, many families prioritize boys' education due to limited financial resources, while societal expectations, such as early marriage and domestic duties, constrain girls' opportunities. Social norms, reinforced by religious and community leaders, often dictate that girls' primary roles are within the home, reducing their educational aspirations. Furthermore, economic views that undervalue girls' education as a long-term investment, alongside logistical barriers such as distant schools and inadequate facilities, limit girls' academic progress. This study highlights how early marriage, gender roles, and unpaid domestic labor reinforce educational inequities. To address these challenges, the research proposes community awareness campaigns, legal reforms, and financial incentives for families, as well as the improvement of educational infrastructure. Additionally, engaging religious and traditional leaders and expanding vocational training programs are recommended to challenge harmful norms and empower girls. By advocating for a multi-dimensional strategy, this research underscores the need for systemic changes to ensure girls in Zamfara State have equitable access to education and the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Keywords: Challenges, Girls' education, Secondary School Education, Social norms, Zamfara State

Introduction

Across the globe, secondary education plays a vital role in opening doors to economic advancement, better health outcomes, and enhanced autonomy particularly for women (World

Bank, 2021). Yet, in many northern regions of Nigeria, such as Zamfara State, girls face significant barriers to accessing and completing secondary education. These challenges include societal stigma, familial resistance, and limited institutional support (Adamu & Chuku, 2021). Consequently, a large number of girls are unable to finish their secondary schooling, which perpetuates poverty and dependency (UNESCO, 2022). Education serves as a cornerstone for social and economic progress, but persistent gender inequalities continue to obstruct this progress—especially in northern Nigeria (UNESCO, 2022). Although various initiatives have been launched to promote gender parity in education, girls in Zamfara State remain disproportionately affected by deep-rooted social and cultural norms, as well as economic hardships (UNICEF, 2021). Their transition from primary to secondary education is often curtailed by early marriages, household responsibilities, financial difficulties, and prevailing cultural attitudes that favor boys' education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021).

However, these societal expectations not only hinder educational attainment for girls but also restrict their economic freedom, health prospects, and overall empowerment (World Bank, 2021). Zamfara, situated in Nigeria's northwestern zone, records some of the country's lowest female literacy and school completion rates (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2020). While many girls do begin primary education, a substantial number drop out before reaching or finishing secondary school due to cultural pressures and economic limitations (UNICEF, 2021). In several communities, secondary education for girls is undervalued, as traditional beliefs prioritize early marriage and domestic responsibilities over formal learning (Aliyu & Salihu, 2020). These entrenched norms continue to obstruct girls' educational journeys in Zamfara, leading to high dropout rates and limiting their chances for personal and economic development (UNICEF, 2021). Additionally, structural issues such as financial insecurity, violence, and the absence of gender-responsive school policies further entrench these challenges (World Bank, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory serves as a critical framework for analyzing gender inequality, particularly how patriarchal structures create obstacles to women's empowerment and access to essential resources, including education (Tong, 2018). It challenges societal norms and cultural traditions that reinforce the subjugation of women and girls, arguing that these disparities are socially constructed rather than inherent (Butler, 2019). Feminist scholars assert that education is a fundamental tool for women's empowerment, yet many societies impose restrictive gender norms that curtail girls' access to schooling and career opportunities (Hooks, 2020). In northern

Nigeria, including Zamfara State, social norms largely define girls' societal roles, often prioritizing marriage and domestic responsibilities over formal education (Aliyu & Salihu, 2020). Feminist theory provides a valuable lens for examining how these societal expectations hinder girls' transition to and completion of secondary education. Feminist scholars argue that patriarchy plays a dominant role in shaping social norms that limit women's opportunities (Connell, 2019). In Zamfara State, traditional beliefs often prioritize boys' education over girls due to the perception that girls are destined to become wives and mothers rather than economic contributors (Adamu & Chuku, 2021). Many families view investment in girls' education as unprofitable, believing that any financial benefits would ultimately accrue to their future husbands' families rather than their own (UNESCO, 2021). This perspective aligns with feminist critiques of gendered divisions of labor, where women's roles are confined to caregiving rather than professional and economic advancement (Hooks, 2020).

Feminist theory highlights early marriage as a significant form of gender oppression that curtails women's autonomy and access to education (Mohanty, 2021). In Zamfara State, many girls are married off before completing secondary school, depriving them of the necessary skills for self-sufficiency (UNICEF, 2021). Cultural and religious norms often justify early marriage, emphasizing female chastity and obedience (World Bank, 2021). Feminist theorists argue that such practices reinforce male control over women's lives, systematically excluding them from educational and economic opportunities (Nussbaum, 2020). Another critical issue feminist scholars' critique is the unequal burden of domestic labor placed on girls, which adversely affects their education (Benería et al., 2018). In many communities in Zamfara State, girls are expected to manage household chores, care for younger siblings, and support family businesses, leaving little time for academic pursuits (Aliyu & Salihu, 2020). This aligns with feminist arguments that rigid gender roles perpetuate economic dependency by restricting women's access to formal education and career pathways (Hooks, 2020). A core tenet of feminist theory is the critique of social norms that restrict women's mobility and participation in public life (Butler, 2019). In Zamfara State, some families hesitate to send girls to secondary schools, particularly those located far from home, due to concerns about safety, honor, and exposure to perceived negative influences (Amnesty International, 2021). This restriction aligns with feminist critiques that controlling women's physical movement upholds patriarchal values and limits their access to opportunities outside the domestic sphere (Mohanty, 2021).

Feminist economic theory underscores how economic systems disadvantage women, further reinforcing social norms that limit girls' education (Benería et al., 2018). In Zamfara State,

poverty exacerbates gender disparities, as many families cannot afford school fees and prioritize boys' education over girls' when making financial decisions (UNESCO, 2021). Feminist scholars argue that economic policies and social investments must be gender-sensitive to ensure that girls have equal access to educational resources (Hooks, 2020).

Concept of Social Norms

Social norms constitute the unwritten guidelines and collective expectations that steer behavior within a society or group, defining what is deemed acceptable and appropriate across various situations. They act as shared representations of proper conduct, significantly influencing individual actions and social interactions. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes social norms as "the informal rules that govern behavior in groups and societies" (Bicchieri, 2017). This characterization highlights the implicit and unofficial nature of social norms, setting them apart from formal laws and regulations. Expanding on this concept, Bicchieri (2006) explains that social norms are "rules of behavior that individuals prefer to conform to on condition that they believe that most people in their reference network conform to them" (p. 11). This viewpoint emphasizes the conditional aspect of social norms, suggesting that an individual's adherence is influenced by their perceptions of others' behaviors and expectations within their social network. Legros and Cislaghi (2020) define social norms as "the perceived informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable and appropriate actions within a given group or community, thus guiding human behavior" (p. 1). Social norms can be categorized into two main types: descriptive and injunctive norms. Descriptive norms pertain to perceptions of what is commonly done in specific situations, essentially reflecting typical behavior. In contrast, injunctive norms relate to perceptions of what behaviors are approved or disapproved by the group, indicating societal expectations (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). This distinction highlights the dual influence of norms: they inform individuals about common practices and simultaneously convey societal judgments regarding those practices.

Prevalence of Educational Challenges Facing Girls in Zamfara State (2020–2025)

Over the past several years, Zamfara State has grappled with persistent challenges in advancing girls' education, marked by high numbers of school-age girls either out of school or unable to complete their education. Data from the Nigeria Education Data Survey (NEDS) in 2020 indicated that about 51% of children eligible for schooling in the state were not enrolled, reflecting a significant level of educational deprivation. In 2021, the High-Level Women Advocate (HILWA) for Girl Child Education reported that around 68,000 girls were not attending school in Zamfara, drawing attention to the substantial gender gap in educational access. This situation did not

improve by 2022, as reports from education stakeholders indicated that 66% of girls remained outside the formal education system, reinforcing the ongoing marginalization of girls in education. Furthermore, although specific data on dropout rates among girls is limited, widespread insecurity has been a major barrier to consistent schooling. As of August 2022, insecurity had led to the closure of 75 girls' secondary schools, disrupting learning for thousands and increasing the risk of permanent dropout.

Interventions and Government Response Current Status and Educational Challenges Facing Girls in Zamfara State

To counter these issues, the Zamfara State Government, in collaboration with international partners, has initiated targeted programs to re-engage girls in education and foster empowerment:

1. **Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment (AGILE):** Introduced in September 2024, this initiative, backed by the World Bank, aimed to enroll 44,000 out-of-school adolescent girls. The project emphasizes not only school enrollment but also skill-building and empowerment for long-term impact.

2. **Second Chance Education Program:** By December 2024, efforts were underway to bring 2,250 disadvantaged adolescent girls into learning programs focused on foundational literacy and numeracy, as well as life skills. This program provides an alternative learning route for girls who have been unable to access or complete formal schooling.

Social Norms that Hinder Girls' Transition and Completion of Secondary Education in Zamfara State

Social norms in Zamfara State are influenced by a combination of cultural traditions, patriarchal values, religious beliefs, and economic factors. Below are key challenges that arise from these social norms:

1. **The Practice of Early Marriage and Pressure from Families:** A dominant social norm in Zamfara State is the cultural expectation that girls should marry at a young age, often as soon as they reach puberty. As girls transition into adolescence, families and communities frequently exert pressure to arrange marriages for them. This societal expectation leads to the early withdrawal of girls from school, disrupting their education and severely limiting their future opportunities. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2020), Zamfara has one of the highest rates of child marriage in Nigeria, which has a direct negative impact on girls' ability to complete their secondary

education. This practice is often justified through cultural and religious beliefs that emphasize a girl's role as a wife and mother, rather than encouraging her to pursue formal education (Adamu & Chuku, 2021).

2. **Gender Roles and Female Modesty**: Deeply entrenched societal views regarding gender roles further restrict girls' educational opportunities. In many communities within Zamfara, girls are expected to prioritize domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and caregiving over their education (Amnesty International, 2021). The societal pressure, coupled with concerns about modesty and the preservation of family honor, leads many parents to limit their daughters' education. They are especially hesitant to send girls to co-educational schools or those located far from home due to fears of exposure to perceived immoral influences, harassment, or damage to the family's reputation (UNICEF, 2021).

3. **Economic Constraints and the Perceived Lack of Value in Girls' Education**: Economic factors also contribute to the limited educational opportunities available to girls in Zamfara. Many families view investing in girls' education as unwise, given the belief that the economic benefits of education will primarily accrue to the husband's family once the girl marries, rather than benefiting the girl's own family (Adamu & Chuku, 2021). This perception, compounded by economic hardship and limited resources, often leads families to prioritize educating boys, who are considered future breadwinners, over girls. Such economic constraints reflect broader patriarchal structures that devalue girls' contributions beyond domestic spheres and perpetuate gender inequalities in education (UNESCO, 2021).

4. **Limited Educational Infrastructure and Accessibility**: Another critical barrier to girls' education in Zamfara is the inadequate educational infrastructure, especially in rural areas. Schools often lack girl-friendly facilities, such as separate sanitation facilities, security, and female teachers, which further discourages girls from attending and succeeding in school (Aliyu & Salihu, 2020). The remoteness of schools, combined with prevailing social norms about girls' mobility, restricts their access to education and contributes to the gender disparity in educational outcomes.

5. **Religious and Traditional Influences:** Religious and traditional leaders play a significant role in shaping and reinforcing social norms in Zamfara. While many religious doctrines encourage education, certain interpretations of religious texts and practices can discourage girls from pursuing formal education. In some cases, religious leaders

stress the importance of girls' roles within the home and oppose the idea of girls attending school beyond the primary level (Aliyu & Salihu, 2020). Such interpretations can have a profound impact on families, who may defer to religious authorities when making decisions about their daughters' education.

6. **The Burden of Domestic Labor:** In Zamfara, girls are expected to contribute to household chores, care for younger siblings, and assist with family businesses, often at the expense of their schoolwork. This heavy domestic workload leaves girls with limited time and energy to focus on their education, leading to absenteeism, poor academic performance, or, in many cases, total withdrawal from school (Benería, Berik, & Floro, 2018). This reinforces the traditional view that girls' primary role is within the home, rather than in the classroom or workforce.

Proposed Solutions to Address the Challenges Hindering Girls' Transition and Completion of Secondary Education in Zamfara State

The following solutions aim to address the deep-rooted social norms and structural barriers preventing girls from transitioning to and completing secondary education:

1. **Community Awareness and Engagement:** A vital step toward transforming the social norms that hinder girls' education is through extensive community awareness campaigns. These initiatives should focus on educating parents, community leaders, and religious authorities about the immense personal and societal benefits of girls' education. Engaging local leaders and influential figures in these campaigns will help shift traditional views, reduce the pressure for early marriages, and promote a more balanced understanding of girls' roles beyond domestic duties.

2. **Incentives for Educating Girls:** This might include scholarships, stipends, or conditional cash transfers to families that send and keep their daughters in school until graduation. By easing the financial burdens on families, such programs would encourage parents to view girls' education as both a social and economic asset, helping to ensure long-term community development.

3. **Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Policies:** The government should implement and enforce stricter policies to curb child marriage and ensure that girls can complete secondary school. Raising the legal marriage age, imposing stringent penalties for violators of child marriage laws, and ensuring the effective enforcement of existing regulations are essential steps in protecting girls' education. Moreover, allocating

adequate resources to educational infrastructure in rural areas will help address barriers such as inadequate facilities and long distances to schools.

4. **Enhancing Educational Infrastructure:** Both the government and NGOs should work together to construct additional schools, provide reliable transportation, and ensure that schools are equipped with gender-sensitive amenities, such as separate toilets for girls and more female teachers. Investing in safe and secure school environments and offering boarding options for girls can reduce logistical barriers and ensure that more girls attend school consistently.

5. **Engaging Religious and Traditional Leaders:** Religious and traditional leaders play a central role in shaping societal attitudes towards girls' education. By involving these leaders in discussions about the importance of educating girls, their influence can be harnessed to challenge restrictive norms. Encouraging religious leaders to reinterpret texts in ways that support girls' education can help shift cultural perceptions and encourage families to prioritize schooling for their daughters.

6. **Expanding Vocational and Technical Education:** In addition to traditional academic paths, vocational and technical training programs should be expanded to provide girls with practical skills. These programs can offer valuable, community-relevant skills that enhance employability and economic independence. Offering alternative pathways like these not only reduces the societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles but also demonstrates that girls can achieve personal success and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

7. **Redistributing Domestic Responsibilities:** To alleviate the heavy burden of domestic chores on girls, community initiatives should encourage the equitable sharing of household duties. Engaging boys in household tasks will provide girls with more time and energy for academic pursuits and extracurricular activities. Public campaigns that challenge traditional gender roles in household labor will further help reshape societal norms, making it clear that domestic responsibilities should not fall exclusively on girls.

8. **Creating Safe and Supportive Educational Environments:** Schools must adopt gender-sensitive approaches that ensure girls feel safe, supported, and empowered throughout their education. This includes providing female role models, mentors, and counselors who can guide and motivate girls. Anti-bullying policies and measures to prevent harassment should be implemented to foster a positive learning environment where girls can thrive academically and personally.

9. **Establishing Robust Monitoring and Accountability Systems:** Strong monitoring and accountability systems are crucial for tracking the educational progress of girls. Regular data collection and analysis can help identify trends, such as school attendance and dropout rates, and uncover the underlying factors that contribute to these trends. Policymakers and educational institutions can use this data to refine strategies, ensuring that interventions are well-targeted and responsive to the challenges girls face.

Conclusion

The challenges that girls in Zamfara State face in transitioning and completing secondary education are deeply rooted in social norms, including patriarchal values, economic constraints, and cultural traditions. These norms often lead to early marriages, domestic duties, and limited mobility for girls, which restrict their educational opportunities and perpetuate cycles of poverty and gender inequality. To address these issues, a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach is needed. This includes community engagement, legal reforms, and improved educational infrastructure. The involvement of religious and traditional leaders can shift societal attitudes toward prioritizing education for girls. Financial incentives, such as scholarships, can ease the economic barriers to girls' education, while safe, gender-sensitive learning environments and the redistribution of domestic responsibilities can provide better opportunities for academic success. Additionally, expanding vocational and technical education offers alternative career paths for girls, promoting their economic independence. Ultimately, overcoming these barriers requires collective action from all sectors of society to ensure that all girls in Zamfara State have the opportunity to thrive in education and contribute to the region's social and economic development.

Suggestions

Suggestions for Addressing Challenges Hindering Girls' Education in Zamfara State:

1. Both government and non-governmental organizations should initiate community-based awareness programs to educate parents, local leaders, and religious figures on the immense benefits of girls' education.

2. Education stakeholders should offer financial support, such as scholarships or conditional cash transfers, to alleviate the financial burdens on families.

3. Policymakers must enforce stricter laws to combat child marriage and ensure that girls complete their secondary education.

4. Both government and non-governmental organizations should work to enhance educational facilities by constructing more schools, ensuring reliable transportation, and

providing gender-sensitive amenities such as separate toilets for girls and a higher number of female teachers.

5. Religious and traditional leaders, who wield significant influence in Zamfara State, should actively support girls' education. Their advocacy, including the reinterpretation of religious teachings that encourage girls' schooling, can challenge restrictive cultural norms and foster greater acceptance of girls' right to education.

6. Traditional academic paths, the expansion of vocational and technical education programs should be promoted to equip girls with practical skills, enhancing their employability and financial independence.

7. Encouraging an equitable sharing of household chores, including promoting boys' participation in domestic work, will give girls more time to focus on their education and extracurricular activities.

8. Schools should implement gender-sensitive policies that ensure a safe, supportive, and empowering environment for girls.

9. Robust systems should be put in place to track the educational progress of girls and identify the factors contributing to dropout rates. Consistent data collection will enable the design of targeted interventions, allowing policymakers and educators to address barriers to girls' education in an effective and efficient manner.

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