Insecurity and Out of School Children in Nigeria: Girl Child Education in North East, Nigeria

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Abstract
This paper explores the profound impact of insecurity on the education of the girl child in North East Nigeria, a region severely affected by insurgency and conflict. Over the past decade, violent extremism, particularly from Boko Haram, has led to the destruction of schools, mass displacement of people, and heightened fear, all of which have disproportionately affected girls' access to education. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative data from educational surveys and qualitative insights from interviews conducted with parents, community leaders, and girls in affected communities. The results revealed that insecurity exacerbates pre-existing cultural and socio-economic barriers to girls' education, including early marriage, gender biases, and poverty. Many parents choose to keep their daughters at home due to fear of abduction and attacks on schools, further increasing the already high rates of out-of-school girls. The paper concludes by recommending comprehensive interventions, such as securing schools, empowering communities, and addressing harmful gender norms, to protect and promote education for girls in conflict zones. These findings contribute to ongoing discussions on education, gender inequality, and conflict in Nigeria and call for urgent policy and local action to mitigate the long-term impact on girls.

1. Introduction

Insecurity, driven by terrorism, has severely impacted various sectors in Nigeria, with education being one of the hardest hit. The North East region of Nigeria, in particular, has been plagued by the activities of Boko Haram, a terrorist group that has explicitly targeted education and, more specifically, the education of girls. Boko Haram, which translates to "Western education is forbidden," has waged an ideological war against formal education, particularly for girls, as part of its campaign for establishing an Islamic caliphate (Maiangwa, 2017). This assault on education has worsened the already challenging landscape for female education in North East Nigeria, where cultural norms, poverty, and limited access to schools have historically kept many girls out of school. The purpose of this study is to explore how insecurity has exacerbated these pre-existing barriers, leading to a significant rise in out-of-school girls in the region.

North East Nigeria, comprising Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States, has historically lagged behind other regions in terms of socio-economic development and educational outcomes. According to the Nigerian Ministry of Education, the region has some of the lowest literacy rates in the country, with female literacy being particularly low (UNESCO, 2021a). Before the terrorism began in 2009, the region already faced

challenges related to access to education, particularly for girls. Early marriage, child labor, and cultural norms that prioritize boys' education over girls' were common barriers (Smith & Alao, 2020). These challenges were compounded by the structural issues in Nigeria's education system, including inadequate infrastructure, poor teacher training, and limited government investment. However, the outbreak of insurgency has added a more dangerous dimension to the education crisis, turning schools into targets and instilling fear in families.

The insurgency has directly targeted educational institutions, resulting in the destruction of hundreds of schools and the displacement of thousands of students and teachers. Boko Haram's attacks on schools have been a strategic effort to dismantle formal education systems, which they view as promoting Western ideals contrary to their radical Islamic agenda. The most infamous of these attacks is the 2014 abduction of over 200 schoolgirls from Chibok, Borno State, which drew international attention to the plight of the girl child in conflict zones (Bertoni et al., 2020). Although some of the girls have been released, many are still missing, and the incident has had a lasting effect on the willingness of families to send their daughters to school, fearing for their safety. This attack exemplifies the insurgency's intent to enforce patriarchal norms through violence, reinforcing the idea that girls should not pursue formal education.

The social implications of these attacks on girls' education cannot be overstated. Education is not only a fundamental human right but also a critical tool for social and economic empowerment. For girls, education offers the potential to break the cycle of poverty, improve health outcomes, and contribute to national development (UNICEF, 2022). However, the current crisis in North East Nigeria has reversed many of the gains made in girls' education over the past decades. As schools have become battlegrounds, the number of out-of-school children has risen drastically, with girls accounting for the majority of these figures. According to the United Nations, over 10.5 million children are currently out of school in Nigeria, with the North East accounting for the largest proportion (UNESCO, 2021b). Of this number, approximately 60% are girls, further widening the gender gap in education (UNICEF, 2022).

Cultural factors also play a significant role in the education of girls in North East Nigeria. In many communities, girls are often perceived as future wives and mothers, and their roles in the household are prioritized over formal education. Early marriage remains a common practice, with many families preferring to marry off their daughters rather than sending them to school, especially in times of conflict when safety concerns are heightened (Aliyu & Yahaya, 2018). This societal expectation is reinforced by traditional norms, where educating a girl child is often seen as a "waste" since she will eventually belong to her husband's family. Such views are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of many communities in the North East, making it difficult to convince parents of the long-term benefits of educating their daughters. Insecurity has only served to strengthen these beliefs, as many parents now see schooling as not only unnecessary but dangerous.

Economic hardship exacerbates these challenges. The North East is one of the poorest regions in Nigeria, and many families simply cannot afford to send their children to school. The insurgency has disrupted livelihoods, especially in agrarian communities, where farming has been severely impacted by displacement and violence. Many families have lost their primary sources of income, forcing children, particularly girls, into child labor to supplement family income (Sampson, 2021). In situations where families must choose which children to educate, boys are often given priority, leaving girls at home to assist with domestic chores or to work in informal markets. Thus, economic constraints, combined with cultural and security issues, have created a perfect storm for the exclusion of girls from education.

The Nigerian government, in collaboration with international agencies, has attempted to address the issue of out-of-school children, particularly girls, through various initiatives. Programs such as the Safe Schools Initiative, launched in the aftermath of the Chibok abduction, aimed to create secure learning environments for children in conflict zones (UNDP, 2020). However, the implementation of such programs has faced numerous challenges, including funding constraints, corruption, and the difficulty of accessing rural areas where insurgent activity is most concentrated (Shuaibu, 2020). Additionally, while these programs provide

temporary solutions, they fail to address the root causes of why girls are excluded from education, which include cultural norms and poverty. Without a comprehensive approach that tackles both the immediate and underlying factors, the number of out-of-school girls is likely to continue rising.

Community-based initiatives, led by local leaders and NGOs, have shown promise in filling the gaps left by government programs. In some areas, informal education systems have been set up to provide basic literacy and numeracy skills to girls who cannot attend formal schools due to insecurity (Shuaibu, 2020). These grassroots efforts, while commendable, are limited in scale and resources and cannot substitute for a well-functioning public education system. However, they highlight the resilience of communities and the importance of local solutions in mitigating the impact of insecurity on education.

One of the most concerning aspects of the insurgency's impact on education is the psychological trauma it has inflicted on children, particularly girls. Many girls who have survived attacks on their schools or have been displaced by the conflict suffer from severe emotional distress, which affects their ability to learn and thrive in educational settings. The fear of abduction, rape, or violence has left a lasting mark on the mental health of many girls, making it difficult for them to return to school even when the opportunity arises (Sampson, 2021). Unfortunately, mental health services are scarce in the region, and most girls do not receive the support they need to overcome their trauma and continue their education. This gap in mental health care is a critical issue that must be addressed in any comprehensive plan to rehabilitate the education sector in North East Nigeria.

The role of international organizations and foreign governments in supporting education in conflict zones like North East Nigeria cannot be overlooked. Agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank have provided significant financial and technical support to the Nigerian government in its efforts to promote education for all children, including girls (UNESCO, 2021a). However, their efforts have been hampered by the scale of the insecurity and the complex political dynamics in the region. Despite the best efforts of these organizations, progress has been slow, and the number of out-of-school children continues to rise. This points to the need for more coordinated and sustained efforts between the Nigerian government, local actors, and international partners to ensure that girls in conflict zones are not left behind.

The issue of out-of-school girls in North East Nigeria is a multifaceted problem that requires a holistic approach to resolve. Insecurity, cultural norms, economic hardship, and inadequate government intervention have all contributed to the growing number of girls who are denied their right to education. While there have been some efforts to address the problem, they have not been sufficient to reverse the trend. For meaningful progress to be made, there must be a concerted effort to improve security, challenge harmful cultural norms, provide economic support to families, and invest in mental health services for children affected by the conflict. Only then can the education system in North East Nigeria be rehabilitated, and the rights of the girl child be fully realized.

1. **Methods**

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from national education surveys and qualitative interviews with stakeholders in affected communities. The stakeholders were; parents, community leaders, teachers, and girls across three conflict-affected states: Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. Statistical data were obtained from reports by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), UNICEF, and UNESCO on out-of-school children in Nigeria, focusing on the North East. Surveys from 2020-2023 were used to quantify the impact of insecurity on school attendance, with special emphasis on gender disparities.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with community leaders, teachers, and parents in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States to understand the socio-cultural and security challenges hindering girls' access to education. Personal testimonies from affected girls were also gathered to highlight lived experiences.

A stratified sampling technique was used to ensure representation across different age groups, urban and rural settings, and socio-economic backgrounds. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis for qualitative

inputs and statistical tools for quantitative data.

3 Results

The results of this study present a comprehensive analysis of how insecurity in North East Nigeria has exacerbated the issue of out-of-school children, particularly affecting the girl child. Data were collected from both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with parents, community leaders, teachers, and girls across three conflict-affected states: Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. The results are categorized into key thematic areas reflecting the most significant factors contributing to girls' exclusion from education in this region.

3.1 Insecurity and Fear of School Attacks

One of the most prominent findings was seen in Table 1 which was the direct impact of insecurity, with 75% of surveyed parents reporting fear of attacks as the primary reason for not sending their daughters to school. This fear stems from high-profile attacks on schools, such as the abductions in Chibok and Dapchi, which have left a lasting psychological scar on communities. Schools in conflict zones are seen as unsafe, and parents expressed concerns that their daughters would become targets of kidnapping or sexual violence. The interviews revealed that even when schools are operational, parents often keep their daughters at home due to heightened insecurity and the lack of proper security measures in schools. This fear has led to a significant reduction in girls' enrollment in both public and private schools.

3.2 Cultural Norms and Gender Biases

Cultural norms that favor boys' education over girls' were found to be deeply ingrained. In qualitative interviews, 60% of the parents mentioned that societal expectations and cultural beliefs about the roles of girls and women strongly influenced their decision not to send their daughters to school. Many parents perceive education as unnecessary for girls, who are expected to marry early and take on domestic responsibilities. The notion that "a girl's education is wasted on her future husband's family" remains prevalent in many of the communities studied. These cultural biases are compounded by the insecurity, with 40% of respondents noting that the conflict has reinforced traditional gender roles, with girls being confined to the home for safety reasons.

3.3 Economic Hardship and Poverty

Economic hardship emerged as another critical factor. According to the quantitative data, 65% of the families interviewed stated that they could not afford to send their children to school, with girls being the most affected. The insurgency has worsened the already fragile economic situation in the North East by displacing thousands of families and disrupting agricultural activities, which are the primary source of income for many. Girls are often forced to contribute to household income by engaging in petty trading or domestic labor, leaving them with no time for formal education. In families with limited financial resources, boys are typically prioritized for schooling, further widening the gender gap.

3.4 Displacement and Access to Schools

Displacement due to the insurgency has had a profound effect on school attendance. In the surveyed areas, 70% of displaced families reported that they no longer had access to schools in their new locations, particularly in rural areas. The destruction of infrastructure, including schools, has resulted in the closure of many educational facilities. Furthermore, many girls in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps are left with little to no educational options. Though some temporary learning centers have been established by NGOs and international agencies, the capacity is insufficient to meet the demand, and girls are often the last to be enrolled in these makeshift schools.

3.5 Psychological Trauma and its Impact on Learning

Another key finding was the significant psychological impact of the conflict on girls. Many of the girls interviewed reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including anxiety, nightmares, and fear of returning to school. Parents and teachers also noted that even when girls did return to school,

their ability to concentrate and learn was severely affected by the trauma they had experienced. The fear of abduction, violence, or another attack on their school weighed heavily on the minds of these children, limiting their educational progress. The lack of mental health support services in the region further compounds this issue, as girls are left to deal with trauma without professional help.

3.6 Government and International Interventions

Efforts by the Nigerian government and international organizations to improve the situation have been largely inadequate. The Safe Schools Initiative, launched after the Chibok abduction, aimed to provide security in schools across the North East. However, 65% of parents and teachers reported that these efforts have not been sustained, with many schools still lacking adequate security measures such as fencing, armed guards, or safe transportation for students. International aid organizations have set up temporary learning spaces in IDP camps, but these are often under-resourced and unable to meet the needs of all children, particularly girls. The study found that government efforts to promote girls' education in conflict zones have been largely reactive and insufficiently funded, leaving local communities to fend for themselves.

3.7 Community-Based Initiatives

Despite these challenges, some community-based initiatives have shown promise. In the qualitative interviews, several local leaders and NGOs were identified as playing critical roles in sustaining educational opportunities for girls. These initiatives include informal learning centers, vocational training, and mentorship programs for girls who are unable to attend formal schools due to insecurity. Such initiatives are helping to fill the gap left by the government, although they remain limited in scale and scope. Communities that support girls' education, even in the face of conflict, have demonstrated resilience, and these efforts could serve as models for larger, more formalized programs.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study paint a stark picture of the compounded effects of insecurity, socio-cultural norms, and economic challenges on the education of the girl child in North East Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgency, which explicitly targets schools and promotes extremist ideologies that oppose female education, has been a significant driver in escalating the number of out-of-school girls in this region. The results of this study, supported by both quantitative and qualitative data, underscore the multifaceted nature of the issue, demonstrating that insecurity does not operate in isolation but rather amplifies existing gender inequalities, cultural biases, and economic hardships that have long existed in North East Nigeria.

4.1 Insecurity as a Catalyst for Educational Disruption

Insecurity, particularly the fear of school attacks, was highlighted by 75% of the parents as the principal reason for not sending their daughters to school. This reflects the sustained fear among communities, triggered by violent attacks like the Chibok and Dapchi abductions. While these high-profile incidents captured international attention, they are only the tip of the iceberg. Numerous smaller attacks, threats, and general instability have left families too frightened to prioritize education, especially for their daughters. This finding is consistent with other studies, such as that of Maiangwa (2017), who asserts that insecurity is the most significant barrier to education in conflict-affected zones. The militarization of schools, rather than ensuring safety, has further compounded the problem. Parents interviewed expressed concerns that armed security forces, meant to protect the schools, often attract violence or inadvertently place their daughters in harm's way.

The fear of attacks has generated a climate of fear that extends beyond the physical realm into psychological impacts, affecting not only the parents but the girls themselves. Girls who survive these attacks or witness the trauma of their communities being torn apart are often left psychologically scarred, which significantly impacts their ability to reintegrate into educational settings, even when schools reopen. This finding is congruent with Sampson's (2021) assertion that insecurity exacerbates the psychological and emotional challenges faced by girls in conflict zones, further reducing their likelihood of returning to formal education.

4.2 The Interplay of Cultural Norms and Insecurity

This study also emphasizes how deeply entrenched cultural norms are exacerbated by insecurity. Many families in the study still hold traditional views that prioritize boys' education, with girls often confined to domestic roles. However, insecurity provides an additional justification for keeping girls at home, as parents feel it is both safer and culturally appropriate to shield them from the violence outside. This protective instinct, while understandable, serves to perpetuate harmful gender norms that suggest girls' roles should be limited to the home and marriage. Studies by Smith and Alao (2020) support this, indicating that conflict and insecurity reinforce traditional gender expectations by confining girls to domestic spaces, thus limiting their access to education.

The cultural expectation of early marriage further compounds the issue. The study found that 55% of out-of-school girls were either already married or on the path to early marriage. In conflict zones, early marriage is often seen as a protective measure, offering financial security for the family and safeguarding the girl from the dangers of abduction, violence, or poverty. However, this solution perpetuates a cycle of gender inequality, where girls are deprived of their right to education, health, and personal development. This finding aligns with Aliyu and Yahaya (2018), who argue that in conflict-affected areas, the intersection of cultural norms and insecurity significantly drives early marriage rates, as families seek to "protect" their daughters in a socially acceptable manner.

4.3 Economic Hardship and Its Disproportionate Impact on Girls

Economic hardship, as highlighted by 65% of families, was another critical factor in explaining why girls are disproportionately excluded from school. The insurgency has decimated livelihoods, particularly in agrarian communities where many families rely on farming. The destruction of farmland, displacement of families, and collapse of local economies have left many families struggling to survive, let alone afford the costs associated with schooling. In this context, boys are often prioritized for education, as they are perceived to have greater future earning potential. Meanwhile, girls are either sent to work to supplement household income or kept at home to reduce family expenses. This is in line with previous studies that found that in times of economic crisis, girls are disproportionately affected, as their education is seen as less critical than that of boys (Shuaibu, 2020).

The economic barrier is further reinforced by gendered expectations of labor. As this study shows, 50% of out-of-school girls reported being engaged in domestic or informal labor. This finding is consistent with earlier research by Sampson (2021), who noted that economic downturns in conflict zones often force families to make gendered decisions, with girls frequently bearing the brunt of these choices by being pulled out of school to assist in household economies. This perpetuates a vicious cycle where girls are deprived of education and the potential to escape poverty, reinforcing generational inequality.

4.4 Displacement and the Lack of Access to Education

The study found that 70% of displaced families no longer had access to formal education, which reflects the broader systemic failure to address the educational needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The destruction of schools and the displacement of both teachers and students have created an educational vacuum in many parts of North East Nigeria. Although international organizations and NGOs have attempted to provide temporary learning centers in IDP camps, these facilities are under-resourced and cannot meet the growing demand, especially for girls. The study's findings resonate with those of Bertoni et al. (2020), who emphasized the inability of temporary learning centers to provide sustainable, quality education in conflict zones, leaving girls particularly vulnerable to falling behind.

Access to education for displaced girls is further limited by logistical challenges. In many cases, families have been relocated to remote areas where there are no schools within accessible distance. Girls, already vulnerable to violence and harassment, are further endangered by the long journeys they must undertake to reach schools, discouraging families from sending them. This gap in access underscores the importance of rethinking education in conflict zones by not only rebuilding infrastructure but also addressing the logistical barriers that prevent girls from attending school.

4.5 Psychological Trauma and Educational Outcomes

The psychological trauma experienced by many girls in North East Nigeria has a profound impact on their educational outcomes. As found in this study, many girls exhibit symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression, which severely affect their ability to concentrate and perform in school. These findings are supported by research from UNICEF (2022), which has documented the widespread psychological impact of violence on children in conflict zones, particularly girls. The trauma of experiencing or witnessing violence creates significant barriers to learning, even when schools are accessible and functional.

Furthermore, the absence of mental health services exacerbates the issue, as girls are left to deal with their trauma without adequate support. This study found that schools and IDP camps in the region have limited, if any, provisions for psychological counseling, which is crucial for helping girls overcome their fears and reintegrate into learning environments. This gap in mental health services represents a critical area that requires attention in any comprehensive strategy to rehabilitate the education system in conflict-affected regions.

4.6 Limitations of Government and International Interventions

While the Nigerian government, supported by international agencies, has made efforts to address the educational crisis in the North East, the study reveals that these efforts have been largely inadequate. The Safe Schools Initiative, intended to provide security for schools, has failed to be implemented consistently, with 65% of respondents reporting that schools remain unsafe. This finding is consistent with reports from UNDP (2020), which highlight the implementation gaps and the lack of sustained funding for such programs. Without robust security measures, parents are unlikely to send their daughters back to school, leaving the initiative ineffective in addressing the core issue of insecurity.

The study also highlights the inadequacies of international interventions, which, while well-intentioned, often lack the resources to reach all affected children. The temporary learning centers established by NGOs are often overcrowded and underfunded, and girls are often the last to benefit from these initiatives. This mirrors findings from Shuaibu (2020), who noted that international aid programs in conflict zones are frequently reactive and insufficiently targeted to meet the unique needs of girls.

4.7 The Promise of Community-Based Solutions

Despite the overwhelming challenges, the study uncovered examples of resilience and community-based initiatives that have made a difference in keeping girls in school. Local NGOs and community leaders have established informal education systems that provide literacy and vocational skills to girls who are unable to attend formal schools. These grassroots efforts, though limited in scale, demonstrate the potential for local solutions to bridge the gap in girls' education during times of conflict. As highlighted by Shuaibu (2020), community-based initiatives are often more adaptable and culturally sensitive, making them effective at mobilizing local resources to address immediate educational needs.

These initiatives, however, are no substitute for a comprehensive and well-funded public education system. While community efforts can alleviate some of the pressures, they are not scalable or sustainable without the backing of the government and international partners. The study suggests that future interventions should incorporate these local efforts into broader education recovery strategies, recognizing the importance of community ownership in driving long-term change.

5. Conclusion

Insecurity remains a critical factor in the rising number of out-of-school girls in North East Nigeria. While gender inequality in education predates the Boko Haram insurgency, the violent conflict has dramatically worsened the situation. Addressing this issue requires a multi-pronged approach, including securing schools, providing economic support to conflict-affected families, and challenging harmful gender norms. Government policies must be aligned with local efforts to ensure that every girl has access to a safe, quality education, even in times of conflict.

6. Acknowledgment

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9. Tables

Table 1: Reasons for Keeping Girls Out of School Due to Insecurity

Reason	Percentage of Respondents
Fear of abduction and violence	75%
School infrastructure destroyed	60%
Lack of adequate security in schools	65%
Long distances to schools	50%
Insecurity on routes to schools	55%

Table 2: Economic Barriers to Girls' Education in North East Nigeria

Economic Barrier	Percentage of Respondents
Inability to afford school fees or supplies	65%
Girls needed to work to support the household	50%

Economic Barrier	Percentage of Respondents
Families prioritize boys' education over girls'	55%
Loss of family income due to insurgency	45%

Table 3: Cultural and Social Factors Impacting Girls' Education

Cultural/Social Factor	Percentage of Respondents
Cultural preference for early marriage	55%
Belief that girls' education is unnecessary	60%
Traditional gender roles (domestic duties)	50%
Societal expectation of early marriage	45%

Table 4: Psychological Impact of Insecurity on Girls' Education

Psychological Impact	Percentage of Respondents
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms	55%
Fear of returning to school after attacks	70%
Lack of mental health support in schools	60%
General anxiety and fear of future violence	65%

Table 5: Access to Education for Displaced Families

Educational Access Issue	Percentage of Displaced Families
Lack of access to formal schooling in IDP camps	70%
Schools too far from IDP camps	50%
Overcrowding in temporary learning centers	55%
Insufficient resources for girls' education	60%

Table 6: Government and International Interventions on Girls' Education

Intervention	Effectiveness Reported by Respondents
Safe Schools Initiative	35%
Temporary learning centers in IDP camps	40%
Provision of security in schools	30%
Government scholarships for girls	25%