Assessing Global achievements of the right to education: Boys' Education Rights in Nigeria

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# **Introduction**

1. Education is a basic human right but about 244 million children and youth across the world are out of school and not enjoying this right because of some social, economic and cultural reasons[[2]](#footnote-2). Nigeria is a unique example of countries where education is human rights de jure but not de facto. Chapter Two of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides for the right to education as non-justiciable. In section 18, it provides that: (1) Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels (3) Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy; and to this end, the Government shall as and when practicable provide (a) free, compulsory and universal primary education; (b) free secondary education; (c) free university education; and (d) free adult literacy programme. The Nigerian Universal Basic Education Act (2004) makes basic education (primary and junior secondary education for children between five and fourteen years old) free and compulsory and also makes withdrawal or failure to send children of basic education age to school a punishable offence. However, in practice, as Ezegwu (2020)[[3]](#footnote-3) observed, education is a public affair, but it is largely privately determined at the household level. Despite the provision of the law, some parents in many parts of the country tend to ignore the law and continue to keep their wards from school. Some are pushed to do so by poverty and other socioeconomic challenges while others have low value for education due to their traditional and religious perspectives[[4]](#footnote-4).
2. Nigeria currently has some of the worst and most persistent poor access to education, and social inequality and is home to the highest number of out-of-school children in the world[[5]](#footnote-5)’[[6]](#footnote-6). In 2006, the number of out-of-school children stood at about 7.4 million, which increased to about 10.5 million by 2010. It rose to about 13.2 million in 2017 and 20 million in 2022[[7]](#footnote-7)’[[8]](#footnote-8)’[[9]](#footnote-9)’[[10]](#footnote-10). Information from the Federal Ministry of Education (FME, 2017)[[11]](#footnote-11) suggests that at the primary level (aged 6-11 years old) the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER - the percentage of the total number of children attending school regardless of their age in relation to the official school-going age) in 2015/2016 academic year stood at 83.81% (80.40% for female and 87.16% for males) while the Net Enrolment Rate (NER - the percentage of the official primary school-aged population) stood at 64.92% (63.43 for females and 66.38% for males). At the lower secondary school level (12 to 14 years), GER stood at 43.3% (41.4% for girls and 45.2% for boys) – the data did not include junior secondary NER. The increasing number of out-of-school children over the years cast doubt on possible claims that education issues are approached through the lens of the human right to education in the country.
3. This paper draws from the literature to discuss the following question:
4. Are education issues approached through the lens of the human right to education in Nigeria?
5. What are the main challenges in implementing the right to education in Nigeria?
6. What are the crucial issues to address, nationally as well as internationally, to ensure the realization of the right to education in Nigeria?
7. It is noteworthy that factors that contribute to hindering access to primary and junior secondary education in Nigeria include in-school factors (such as availability of female teachers, health and sanitary facilities, school distance and poor state of important school facilities) and out of school factors such as violent conflict, early marriage, poverty, low value for education, traditional attitude to education, pregnancy and gender violence. These affect both boys and girls but some factors affect girls more than boys, and most gender-focused interventions tend to focus on girls more than boys. Hence, this paper focuses on boys' educational access and progression in northern and eastern Nigeria – where more boys are observed to be out of school in the country.

# **Out-of-School Boys in eastern and northern Nigeria**

1. The challenge of out-of-school boys in Nigeria is historically entrenched in northern and south-eastern Nigeria. In northern Nigeria, the phenomenon of out-of-school boys is intricately intertwined with alamajiri practices. Traditionally, almajiris are children (usually 5 to 15 years) who are acquiring Islamic education and ought to exclusively focus on the memorisation of the Quran. It is believed that memorisation is “only possible if a student has no access to other materials that may confuse or distract”[[12]](#footnote-12). In practice, the almajiri boys are largely seen roaming streets, poorly dressed and begging for alms with their emblematic plastic bowls. In 2020 UNICEF[[13]](#footnote-13) explained that it is difficult to estimate and “know the number of almajiri children in Nigeria, but some estimates put it at about 10 million, or about 81 per cent of the more than 10 million out-of-school children in the country”[[14]](#footnote-14). Several reports include almajiri children as street and trafficked children[[15]](#footnote-15)’[[16]](#footnote-16). UNESCO[[17]](#footnote-17) explains that almajiri practices involve the transfer of large numbers of children, often teenage males, "*from their hometown to somewhere far away from home and sometimes even unknown to the parents. The pupils learn from the scholar as they move from one town to another. They are often inadequately prepared for such a journey. The Malam is frequently too poor to sustain his family or the pupils entrusted to him. Consequently, both the Malam and his pupils often rely on the benevolence of the community in which they happen to be guests. In most instances, the Malam lives on the support of his pupils who beg or perform menial tasks for food sellers and shopkeepers in public places and motor parks all over northern Nigeria”.* As far as formal education is concerned, they are considered street and out-of-school children[[18]](#footnote-18). Various reports warn that almajiri children are moving from ‘alms to arms’, as "they often end up as street urchins (area boys), male prostitutes, petty and hard criminals, garage boys and most recently, Boko Haram, ISWAP and bandits as well as dangerous tools for desperate politicians to get at one another's throats"[[19]](#footnote-19)’[[20]](#footnote-20). This makes the need to attend to this situation quite urgent.
2. In the southeast, boys have historically tended to drop out of school after completing primary education to go into apprenticeship, trading and different kinds of economic activities. Available education statistics show that male secondary school enrolment has been low compared to females since the 1970s, indicating a relatively lower uptake of secondary education among males. As of the 1975 academic year, males' share of secondary school enrolment in the central (Anambra) state of the region was 57.92%. It began to drop, sliding to 46.64% in 1980 and 31.42% in 1987[[21]](#footnote-21)’[[22]](#footnote-22). By the year 2000, a UNESCO report[[23]](#footnote-23) confirms that the trend in Southeast Nigeria was a situation "where once boys tended to drop out at the secondary school level, they now do so at the primary level". Information from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS)[[24]](#footnote-24) indicates that while males represented 48.9% of children enrolled in Anambra state (which is now one of the five states in the southeast) primary school in 2008, they constituted 34.7% at the junior secondary level. By 2015, the situation has greatly improved in many parts of the zone following sensitisation campaigns by different groups in the region but gaps remain[[25]](#footnote-25). For example, the Federal Ministry of Education (FME, 2019[[26]](#footnote-26)) data on enrolment for public and private primary schools in urban areas of Ebonyi state for the 2018/2019 academic year shows that boys and girls’ enrolment stood at 18,229 and 31,251 respectively while they stood at 118,778 for males and 118,494 for females in Anambra State. In the rural parts of Imo state, they stood at 215,596 for males and 217,148 for females. These suggest that while some noticeable improvements have been observed in some parts of the southeast region that need to be sustained to prevent the reversal of the positive results recorded, in some other parts, like rural Ebonyi state, serious interventions are needed.

# **Are education issues approached through the lens of the human right to education?**

1. Recent global discussions have given significant attention to gender equality in education as an important dimension of human rights. A 2018 Global Education Monitoring Report technical paper titled 'Achieving Gender Equality in Education: Don't Forget the Boys' sought to "put the spotlight on the less recognized effects of gender norms on boys' schooling, particularly at the secondary level and amongst those from the poorest families "[[27]](#footnote-27). The report contends that, as part of the efforts towards achieving gender equality in and through education, which remains central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda in 2030, “addressing boys’ disadvantage and disengagement in education is an essential part of a response to the challenge of gender inequality, in education and beyond”[[28]](#footnote-28). These imply that as long as boys (as well as girls) continue to disengage from education, neither SDG nor gender-related rights in and through education may be fully realized.
2. While there is a need to give critical attention to girls' education in Nigeria, adequate attention has not been given to boys’ education in Nigeria both in terms of policy and programmatic interventions – pointing to a limitation in the approach to educational issues through the lens of human rights to education. For example, the National Gender in Basic Education Policy[[29]](#footnote-29) that is supposed to be a corresponding gender policy, specifically mentions that the policy for the country "was developed in the context of the Girls' Education Project, developed in 2005 and implemented by the FGN, DFID, and UNICEF as a contribution to the pursuit of EFA/UBE" rather than locally evolved policy that seeks to address holistic children’s education issues. Thus the policy largely omits boys’ education issues and particularly the effective out-of-school boys’ intervention strategies.

# **What are the main challenges in implementing the right to education in Nigeria?**

1. There are very few known governments and international donor interventions on out-of-school boys, especially on almajiri education issues in Nigeria. The available ones are very limited. In the southeast, limited information exists on the progress of the government-initiated boy-child education programme. Gershberg et al.[[30]](#footnote-30) reported in 2016 that, as part of the boys' back-to-school initiative, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme was expected to construct some vocational centres in some southeast states to create an opportunity to reabsorb out-of-school children and equip them with life-learning skills but the implementation appears not to have progressed.
2. Previous studies suggest that efforts to integrate almajiris into the formal education system were hindered by resistance from politicians and limited local support due to the low value placed on education and concerns about possible impacts of Western education on people’s religious, cultural and traditional values[[31]](#footnote-31)’[[32]](#footnote-32)’[[33]](#footnote-33). The Federal Government initiated an integrated almajiri education programme in 2012 that combined both Quranic and formal school subjects in the same school programme and provided free school feeding, furniture, uniforms and other school materials and built up to 125 almajiri model schools[[34]](#footnote-34). However, this was not supported with adequate local sensitisation, advocacies and engagement of critical stakeholders, including the Mallams and religious leaders. Consequently, the people and the pupils who were initially ill-prepared for the transition rejected the programme. It was noted that the pupils did not fully embrace the initiatives because they considered it to be ‘uncultured’ and did not fit into their cultural and religious tradition[[35]](#footnote-35).
3. The state governments in northern Nigeria also appeared not to have promoted, maintained and supported the almajiri education initiative. A recent study observes that “the whole of Sokoto and Kano states had only seven and thirteen [integrated] schools respectively. These numbers are quite insignificant considering the population of the states” and people complained about the absence of integrated schools in their locations[[36]](#footnote-36). Akhaine et al.[[37]](#footnote-37) report that the government let almajiri schools that were built by past political administrations in the country rot away and did not build new ones while the northern region continues to be plagued by almajiri syndrome. They also noted that leading cultural leaders in the region complained about the abandonment and criticized the government for abandoning the almajiri schools. Almajiri children are also excluded from other mainstream interventions. For example, while efforts were made to ensure the continuation of education of children who were in school before COVID-19, the Nigeria Education Sector COVID-19 Response Strategy in North East specifically notes that the COVID-19 Education Response Strategy targets learners that have been affected by COVID-19-related school closure and excluded almajiri and other children that were out of school for other reasons[[38]](#footnote-38).

# **Recommendations: What are the crucial issues to address, nationally as well as internationally, to ensure the realization of the right to education in Nigeria?**

1. **Develop home-grown policies and interventions**: The growing population of out-of-school boys’ (especially in northern Nigeria) points to a need for a shift in policy and intervention approaches of the government and international development agencies to accommodate boys' education needs and address the associated barriers. There is a need to explore home-grown policies and intervention strategies that effectively address local peculiarities and adequately accommodate both boys' and girls' education needs.
2. **Initiate boys-focused and targeted interventions and target root factors:** Boys’ education needs conscious attention because while there are many existing gender-based interventions in northern Nigeria's basic education sub-sector, many of them tend to miss boys’ education issues and are unable to find ways to accommodate alamajiri boys. Generally, extensive grassroots sensitisation and stakeholders' mobilisation are needed to address boys and girls' access to education challenges in northern Nigeria. In the southeast, where the value of education is already high, sensitisation on boys’ education issues needs to be scaled up and sustained; interventions are also needed to address factors that contribute to pushing boys out of school.
3. **Consider boys as well as girls; leave no boy behind:** The African Development Bank[[39]](#footnote-39) notes that some strategies are gender-neutral but they tend to benefit girls more than boys. It is also possible to implement gender-based interventions that address negative gender practices that affect girls without neglecting boys’ educational needs. A UNESCO (2022) report titled *Leave No Child Behind: Global Report on Boys’ Disengagement from Education* observes that “supporting boys does not mean that girls lose out and vice versa”, instead, “addressing boys’ disengagement not only benefits boys’ learning, employment opportunities, income and well-being, it is also highly beneficial for achieving gender equality and desirable economic, social and health outcomes”[[40]](#footnote-40). In this regard, leaving no boy behind in Nigeria demands that factors that contribute to boys' disengagement to be given critical attention by identifying and implementing policies that contribute to addressing them. Such interventions may need to give particular attention to historical and socioeconomic factors and culture-based resistance to the promotion of equal access to education (see Ezegwu, 2012 and Ezegwu, 2020)[[41]](#footnote-41).
4. **Further studies:** Further studies are required to identify various factors and their root causes, best approaches for dealing with the entrenched values and beliefs and how they work in different contexts or interact with different factors to deny children education.

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