Summary of the Report on Emerging Barriers and Responses to Girls' Education

Report Summary | 2022

Introduction

Nigeria is estimated to have the third highest population of out-of-school children worldwide[1]. Approximated at 19.7 million, this figure is nearing double the 10.5 million recorded in 2020[2] of which generally, a larger proportion are girls. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, barriers to enrolment and regular attendance were already more pronounced for girls. The studies conducted conclude that girls are more at risk than boys of dropping out of school due to the long-term effects of the lockdown. Poverty, early marriage, and the perceived lack of safety in school are the three biggest barriers affecting girls and their education. The inability and unwillingness of caregivers to pay for school fees, uniforms, and learning materials make the prospects of returning to school uncertain for many girls whose caregivers are more likely to invest in boys' education.

This study was conducted in Jigawa, Kaduna, and Kano states and it aimed to understand girls' learning experiences, including their anxieties about insecurity. It provides a snapshot of the current realities girls aged 11-17 years face, which make it difficult to access, perform, finish and return to education. It also presents insights and recommendations to respective state governments to improve education service delivery, especially in educating their girls. It builds on ongoing reforms and lessons learned from education interventions supported by the Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL) programme and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) wider support to Jigawa, Kaduna and Kano state governments.

The study consisted of a literature review and primary research using quantitative and qualitative approaches, including the school-based survey. Overall, 872 participants contributed to the study, including 713 adolescents - 573 girls and 140 boys currently enrolled in secondary school. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were held with female student dropouts, educators, parents, caregivers, community leaders, and key informants in the public and non-profit sectors. Six local government areas (LGAs) were selected in Jigawa and Kano states, while five LGAs were selected in Kaduna based on security advisory. A substantial level of importance was placed on protection for all under-aged respondents and the critical importance of children's voices in evidence generation and the shaping of interventions.

Findings

Gendered distance learning experiences: Within weeks of the lockdown, all three states had rolled out remote learning initiatives, with UNICEF's vigorous support. However, there were some challenges with distance learning, as bottlenecks to delivery included poor radio connectivity, insufficient access to laptops and smartphone devices, low affordability of data, power outages, and insufficient options to catch up with missed lessons. Distance learning was often supplemented with teacher and household tutoring support, however, girls had significantly less interpersonal support for learning during the lockdown, only 10% of girls reported visits with teachers compared to 21% of boys, and 13% were tutored by an elder sibling or relative compared to 16% of boys.

Impact of insecurity on girls' education and rise of gender-based violence (GBV): In Kaduna and Kano states, school closures were extended or reintroduced after a brief period of reopening due to targeted school kidnappings. Deboarding was also used to combat rising insecurity, however, it left girls more exposed to harassment on their way to and from school - and increased transfer costs for families. National media reports and anecdotal accounts point to an alarming increase in GBV during the lockdown period. Jigawa and Kaduna states responded with legislative force and a zero-tolerance stance. Similarly, when engaging with study respondents, there were numerous reports of an increase in sexual violence in domestic (marital) cases and towards young girls, many times perpetrated by relatives.

Reasons for school absenteeism and dropout: Poverty, early marriage, and the perceived lack of safety in schools are the three biggest barriers affecting girls' education, which is often one of the first spending items to be deprioritised when household incomes are strained. While underage motherhood and teen pregnancy were typically considered legitimate reasons for girls to withdraw from school, most out-of-school girls indicated a willingness to return to school. However, re-entry is constrained by access to or awareness of viable alternative education options, concerns about stigmatisation amongst peers, affordability, and early marriage (discouragement and lack of permission from spouse).

1. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382577
2. https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education

Pre-pandemic Advancements in Girls' Education

Due to state-led and donor-facilitated reforms, initiatives and policies, there have been significant gains made in the last 10 years, particularly in education financing and specific interventions that address girls' challenges in accessing and completing their education. Over the last three years, each state has consistently maintained above 22% investment in education in their state budget allocation, with Kano and Jigawa consistently achieving above 70% in the Education sector budget performance. Despite these financing triumphs, at the time the United Nations Children's Fund raised the alarm in February 2020, girls in Northern Nigeria were still less likely to finish senior secondary school.

Evidence gathered over the last decade from UK-funded programs provides critical insight into the typical barriers to girls' sustained and meaningful participation in formal education. They include physical, economic, health, social, cultural and personal barriers. For example, poor water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, and lack of access to menstruation kits affect whether Nigerian girls can participate fully in educational programmes. Additional reasons for low girls' enrolment in formal education include early marriage and the generally lower value accorded to females in the region.

Trends and the Geography of Insecurity in Northwest Nigeria

Even prior to the pandemic and its consequent economic strains, the North West already had the highest poverty rate in the region and the lowest human development indicators scores. The regional wave of insecurity in the North West and North Central has affected all the study states, with Kaduna hit hardest of the three. Four of the 14 worst affected LGAs across Nigeria are currently in Kaduna, namely Chikun, Birin Gwari, Igabi and Zagon Katafi, while Kano and Jigawa are regarded as relatively peaceful.

Insecurity has had severe consequences on Education sector delivery – as a contextual factor and with the direct targeting of school facilities and female students in planned assaults. Between 2014 and 2020, there was a spate of abductions in Nigerian secondary and tertiary educational institutions. The abduction of 344 boys from the Government Science Secondary School in Kankara, Katsina (December 2020) and 27 students from an all-boys college in Niger State (February 2021) serves as a notable reminder that both boys and girls are susceptible. COVID-19 and its compounding effects, coupled with insecurity conditions, have caused a widening of educational inequalities in Nigeria.

Lessons and Recommendations

- Keying into girls' coping mechanisms and preventative tactics is a good first step to addressing their vulnerabilities. Their self-reported requirements for safety include investments in infrastructure sanitary facilities, improved lighting, access to water within the premises and people resources – such as better trained and equipped school guards, teacher security training, and a stronger female adult presence in schools. There is also a need to prioritise finite public resources, with exercises such as the annual school census and other on-demand assessments helping to inform a phased approach.

- Amidst endemic insecurity and poverty, there is a need to support girls' retention and return to school. The findings of this study, strengthened by challenges identified by girls themselves, lead to several additional recommendations:
  - There is a need to supplement classroom learning with distance learning to address diverse access barriers and navigate unplanned interruptions in the future;
  - It is important to ramp up education and vocational training programmes, which can mop up the increased number of out-of-school children;
  - Efforts should target recently married young girls/women and early mothers as well petty traders and homebound caretakers through a focus on providing welfare support, business skills, basic literacy and numeracy skills over formal education;
  - Additional support can be provided to young mothers through the integration of day-care and nursing stations at learning institutions coupled with a blended learning approach that offers part-time, self-paced and/or distance learning modules; and
  - The inclusion of advocacy messaging at the community level that demonstrates female success stories and addresses the stigmatisation of dropping out, can sensitize the community and garner their support in encouraging girls to return to school.

- Given the rise in GBV, it is important to strengthen early warning systems and enforcement for offenders. This can be achieved by enabling anonymous reporting channels, integrating counselling services that respond to diverse needs, diversifying reporting channels and investing in training personnel. Additionally, resources should be dedicated to low-hanging behaviour change management opportunities including exam fee waivers for recent dropouts, cross-subsidizing school supplies, transport stipends and service improvements. Finally, given the finite resources, governments need to improve tracking disbursement and spending on girls' education.