

Promoting girls' education

The experience in Nigeria

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Nigeria recognises education as a fundamental human right and is signatory to the major conventions for the protection of the rights of children (girls and boys) and women. In 2004, the country enacted the Universal Basic Education (UBE) law to fast track attainment of Education For All (EFA) goals. The enabling legislation – The Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act – provides for nine years continuous education (comprising six years of primary and three years of junior secondary), which is known as 'basic education'. All states have now passed UBE laws.

The 2005 National School Census (NSC) revealed a net enrolment ratio (NER) for primary education of 83.71% (87.01% for males and 81.39% for females), suggesting that a substantial proportion (16%) of the primary school-age population (6–11 years) was not enrolled in schools. There are large geographical and gender disparities between the northern and southern states of Nigeria; this is partly due to underlying socio-cultural factors. Girls' NER in some states in the south are as high as 70%, while in the north, some states have an NER as low as 24%.

The picture is worse in secondary schools, with the national female enrolment ratio at 44%. The regional breakdown shows an alarming disparity, with girls' NER of 60% in the south-west and only 10% in the north-west.

Between 2002 and 2005, completion rates improved for boys by 3% (from 83.4% to 86.4%), while they declined for girls by 8% (from 83% to 75%). Gender participation (measured by gender ratio [GR]) still favoured males, with wide variations in gender-gap access in primary school education across the states and zones. The underlying causes for low attendance by girls include the low value accorded by parents to girls' education, early marriages, poverty, low-quality learning environments, and the cultural norms that impact negatively on girls' education. Against this backdrop, the federal government is making efforts to ensure that children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary education. This is being done by developing alliances with development partners, civil society organisations (CSOs), the private sector, and philanthropic individuals and groups.

UNICEF Nigeria and other development partners have been working with the Government of Nigeria to promote girls' education, and various initiatives have been undertaken, including the current Girls Education Project (GEP), inspired by an earlier initiative, the African Girls' Education Initiative (AGEI), delivered through UNICEF and its government partners and funded by the Norwegian Government. The AGEI recorded remarkable progress, including a 28% increase in girls' NER and an 80% decrease in

drop-out rates for girls in the participating schools. In 2006, the Nigerian Girls' Education Initiative (NGEI) was established (an offshoot of the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative [UNGEI]). The main aim of the NGEI was to improve the quality of life for girls in Nigeria through a collaborative approach to their education, and through forging strong links with CSOs and federal and state governments.

UNICEF also supported the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) to develop the Strategy for the Acceleration of Girls' Education in Nigeria (SAGEN), after Nigeria's inclusion in the UNICEF-supported '25 by 2005' global initiative in 2003. This national FME/UNICEF initiative then evolved into SAGEN+ in early 2004, with support from other major international development partners.

The Girls' Education Project (GEP) evolved from a major partnership between UNICEF, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), and the Government of Nigeria. It has become the largest DFID/UNICEF partnership in the world with the aim of boosting girls' participation in Northern Nigeria, where it is being implemented in six states (Bauchi, Sokoto, Jigawa, Katsina, Borno and Niger). The girls' education initiatives take an inter-sectoral approach, including interventions in the areas of health, water and sanitation, and income-generation activities to support



Katsina State provided bicycles to six girls to facilitate their transition to the junior secondary school



girls in school. The aim is not only to accelerate progress towards Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2 and 3, but also to impact on the other six MDGs, especially the health goals.

Since its inception, the GEP has continued to record success in providing access to education for girls. Increases in enrolment and attendance rates and decreases in gender gaps have been witnessed during the project implementation phase. On average, in the project implementation focus communities, girls' enrolment has increased by an average of 73% since 2005. This has resulted in an overall reduction of gender gaps in the GEP focus schools – from 44% in 2005 to 31% in 2007. Attendance rates have also improved, with an 11.9% increment in the GEP focus schools, with that of girls increasing by 39%. Much of the overall success is attributable to sustained political commitment at the federal and state levels, including increased funding to support girls' education; development of policies such as the national policy on Gender in Basic Education, the National School Health policy and the Integrated Early Childhood Care and Development policy; focusing on mainstreaming gender in educational planning and implementation; establishing School Based Management Committees (SBMCs) in all schools; and the instigation of the National Education Sector HIV/AIDS Strategic Plan.

These major outcomes exemplify the overall systemic impact on girls' education interventions and the education sector as a whole. Government efforts in addressing gender issues in education have been strong. Currently, in close collaboration with DFID, UNESCO Paris and the MDG support Team (UNDP New York), UNICEF is supporting the Federal Ministry of Education and state governments in developing well-costed sector plans that focus on the issues affecting girls' education. Other interventions include:

Strong Partnerships: Establishing strong networks through the NGEI with non-government organisations (NGOs) that support girls' education. NGEI's grand patron is the First Lady of Nigeria, while the wives of governors at the state levels are the patrons of the state chapters. Their involvement and support have garnered more support for girls' education, with a push for results, increased funding, improved facilities and evidence-based advocacy to persuade traditional and religious leaders to favour girls' participation in schools.

School Based Management Committees (SBMCs): The establishment of SBMCs is a policy requirement in all schools in Nigeria. The SBMC is made up of all key stakeholders of the community involved with the school. Its role is to ensure effective school management as well as improved teaching and learning in the school. It represents the participation of the community in school administration and has the potential to transform and sustain education, and promote school governance at the grassroots level. The SBMC involves the head teacher, teacher representatives, pupil representatives (when appropriate), representatives of the PTA and other stakeholders from the community, including religious and traditional leaders.

SBMCs have been rallying points for collaborative actions; the communities, through the SBMCs, have been given a say in the running and management of the school, as well as being able to offer their support to girls' education. Women's participation includes mobilising and sensitising other women to the need for girls' education, and ensuring gender mainstreaming in school management. The involvement and support of stakeholders at the community level has been a key to the success and sustainability of the efforts being made to reduce the gender gap and move towards equity in education.



Student Tutoring, Mentoring and Counselling (STUMEC): The STUMEC programme is an initiative aimed at supporting children, especially girls, throughout their learning period to help improve learning achievement and retention levels in schools. Support is provided by peer tutors, teacher tutors, mentors and role models from the community. The programme targets children who are most at risk of failing or dropping out of school, particularly girls. Through the implementation of this initiative, learning has become more participatory, with mentoring and counselling contributing to the retention of children in school and a reduction in drop-out rates. The initiative also contributes to improvement of internal efficiency through reducing the numbers of students who repeat a grade or are expelled from school. This is achieved through the provision of developmental, preventive and remedial services as a means of helping pupils attain their goals.

Advocacy and Sensitisation: Raising national awareness in girl-child education has increased political and financial commitment through advocacy and sensitisation of policy-makers at all levels: parents, school authorities, other leaders and girls themselves. High-level advocacy to policy-makers and traditional and religious leaders, as well as continuous sensitisation/mobilisation of communities, promotes commitment to implementation, ownership and sustainability of girls' education interventions. The high-level advocacy often involves meetings with state governors and leading Islamic figures, such as the most revered Sultan of Sokoto who provides leadership to the traditional rulers, and who, by using a targeted communication strategy, has helped to contribute to providing effective support for girls' education. The use and consistent reinforcing of key messages, such as the call that educating all children is a religious duty, and the drawing on evidence from the Qur'an and other religious texts, has influenced many parents to take their children, particularly girls to school. It has been seen that when properly informed, community leaders can play a crucial role in tackling issues of low priority for girls' education, child labour, early marriages, prejudiced perceptions of 'Western' education as being incompatible with traditional/religious/cultural beliefs and practices, and the sceptical attitudes towards the benefits of educating girls.

School Health Programming: The girls' education interventions have integrated strong components of health, hygiene and HIV/AIDS education. The idea is to reduce morbidity among girls and thus improve retention and achievement. At present, all project focus schools have environmental health clubs that facilitate hygiene promotion. The schools also have water and sanitation facilities, which are necessary for promoting the health of pupils, especially girls. Classes on health, family life and HIV/AIDS have also provided opportunities for girls to improve their health.

Providing quality education services at the school level, and ensuring that the minimum standards of a child-friendly school environment are met, leads to community members having increased confidence in education and a rise in enrolment and attendance rates, especially for girls. Water and sanitation facilities in the communities and in schools in particular have contributed to improved standards of living, not only for the pupils but also their parents; they have also greatly contributed to increased enrolment and retention rates of children in school. Young girls have reported that having clean toilets available at school has really changed their attitudes to attending school.

Other interventions undertaken include: (1) establishing child-friendly school principles as minimum benchmarks for effective schools linked to community empowerment and development; (2) building institutional capacity for promoting girls' education and the capacity of stakeholders on gender sensitivity and sexuality; (3) collaborating with government and other stakeholders in reviewing existing curricula and teaching materials for gender sensitivity; (4) promoting the employment of more female teachers to serve as role models and to mentor out-of-school girls; and (5) monitoring and evaluating girls' education programmes and mobilising and strengthening inspectorate for effective service delivery.

A key challenge identified is the need to ensure that supply side issues meet the high demand for education generated in order to sustain and avoid erosion of the gains made through pupil drop-out. This concern is being closely addressed; the Federal Ministry of Education, through the MDG funds (located at the Presidency), is making provision for schools to address the supply issues, particularly with regards to teaching and learning materials. In addition, state governments are increasing their funding for education; however, there is still a lot more that needs to be done.

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She is currently working as a project officer in education for UNICEF, in Abuja, Nigeria. Her main responsibilities include: the promotion of child-friendly and gender-sensitive teaching and learning environments; working in collaboration with government and other partners in the conceptualisation, planning, development and implementation of girls' education programmes; reviewing and evaluating the challenges in meeting gender equality in education and co-ordinating efforts with government and other partners to address the challenges; and organising training and orientation for government personnel and beneficiaries to strengthen their capacities in mainstreaming gender in planning, monitoring and evaluation systems for delivery of gender equality in education.

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