



BARRIERS TO EDUCATION: UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT CAUSES OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN ZARIA LOCAL GOVERNMENT, KADUNA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of economic and social development. However, Nigeria continues to struggle with a high number of out-of-school children, particularly in rural areas such as Zaria Local Government in Kaduna State. This paper examines the systemic barriers that hinder access to education, including economic hardship, cultural norms, inadequate infrastructure, and security challenges. It highlights the impact of poverty, the hidden costs of education, child labour, and gender disparities on school enrollment. The study also addresses the influence of traditional and religious education systems and the effects of weak governance and corruption on educational outcomes. Furthermore, counterarguments regarding government interventions, alternative education models, and security concerns are critically analysed. To address these challenges, the paper recommends increased government funding, stronger policy enforcement, community engagement, alternative learning approaches, and enhanced school security measures. By implementing these strategies, stakeholders can work towards an inclusive and sustainable education system that ensures every child has access to quality education, ultimately fostering national development and social stability.

Keywords: Barriers to Education, Out of School Children, Zaria, School Enrolment,

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of economic growth, social development, and poverty reduction (World Bank, 2020). However, in Nigeria, millions of children remain out of school due to systemic barriers that hinder access to quality education. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2022), Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children in sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite government efforts such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, challenges persist. Many children, particularly in rural areas, are unable to access formal education due to financial constraints, cultural barriers, and ongoing security threats. The consequences of low school enrollment are far-reaching, leading to increased child labour, early marriages, and a cycle of poverty that perpetuates for generations.

Moreover, the lack of proper implementation of existing educational policies has further exacerbated the crisis. While some progress has been made in urban areas, rural communities like Zaria Local Government in Kaduna State continue to face multiple challenges that hinder children's ability to complete basic education. This paper explores the underlying causes of this crisis, discusses counterarguments, and provides recommendations for addressing these issues effectively.

Understanding the Barriers to Education in Zaria Local Government, Kaduna State

Understanding the barriers to education in the study area is crucial to addressing the problem. This section addresses the matter at hand.

Economic Barriers

One of the most significant barriers to education in Nigeria, including Zaria Local Government in Kaduna State, is poverty. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2021), over 40% of Nigerians live below the poverty line, with many families struggling to afford necessities. Education, despite being

constitutionally recognised as a right, remains financially inaccessible for millions of children. In Zaria, many families cannot afford the basic school expenses required to keep their children enrolled, such as uniforms, books, transportation, and examination fees. This leads to high dropout rates, particularly among children from low-income households.

Hidden Costs of "Free" Education

Even though Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (UBE) policy mandates free primary education, many hidden costs burden families. Schools often require students to pay unofficial levies for maintenance, parent-teacher association (PTA) contributions, and examination fees. Additionally, learning materials such as textbooks, notebooks, and writing materials are not always provided, making education a financial strain for struggling families. The cost of school uniforms and transportation further increases the burden, especially for families with multiple children. As a result, many parents, particularly in rural communities like Zaria, prioritise survival over education, leading to high dropout rates.

Opportunity Cost and Child Labour

Child labour is prevalent in Zaria due to economic hardship. Many children engage in street vending, farming, and domestic work to support their families (International Labour Organization, 2022). Some work as apprentices in informal sectors, such as tailoring, mechanics, and brick-making, further limiting their time for schooling. These children often face exhaustion, making it difficult to focus on academic activities even when they attend school.

Moreover, many parents view sending their children to work as an immediate economic benefit compared to the long-term gains of education. In agricultural areas of Zaria, children are commonly involved in farming activities, especially during harvest seasons, leading to seasonal absenteeism from school. In urban centres, some children serve as domestic workers or hawkers, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation while denying them the opportunity for formal learning.

Underfunding and Poor Infrastructure

Although public schools exist in Zaria, they are often underfunded, resulting in poor infrastructure, a lack of teaching materials, and overcrowded classrooms. Many schools operate without adequate furniture, electricity, or clean water, creating an un conducive learning environment. Dilapidated school buildings and insufficient classroom spaces force students to learn in harsh conditions, sometimes under trees or in makeshift structures.

Overcrowded classrooms are another major issue. In many public schools in Zaria, the student-to-teacher ratio is extremely high, sometimes exceeding 80 students per class. This makes it difficult for teachers to provide individualised attention, reducing the quality of education. Furthermore, the lack of adequate teaching materials such as textbooks, laboratory equipment, and digital learning tools significantly hampers effective teaching and learning.

Social and Cultural Barriers

Social and cultural norms in Zaria Local Government significantly affect school attendance, particularly for girls. Deeply rooted traditions and societal expectations often dictate the educational opportunities available to children, with gender playing a crucial role in school enrollment and retention.

Disparities and Early Marriage

Early marriage and teenage pregnancy remain widespread, preventing many young girls from continuing their education. According to the Global Partnership for Education (2022), traditional gender roles in northern Nigeria often prioritise domestic responsibilities over formal schooling. Many parents prefer to invest in their sons' education, believing that daughters will eventually marry and become financially dependent on their husbands.

Child marriage is a significant challenge. Many girls are married off at an early age, sometimes as young as 13 or 14, effectively ending their educational journey. According to UNICEF (2021), nearly 44% of girls in northern Nigeria are married before the age of 18. Once married, young girls face societal expectations to focus on household responsibilities and childbearing, making a return to school nearly impossible.

Teenage Pregnancy and Its Impact on Education

Even among those who avoid early marriage, teenage pregnancy poses a major barrier to education. Girls who become pregnant often drop out due to societal stigma, lack of support, or school policies that do not allow pregnant students to continue their education. Some young mothers wish to return to school but face challenges such as financial constraints, lack of childcare support, and discrimination from teachers and peers.

Religious and Traditional Education Systems

The influence of religious education systems, such as the *Almajiri* system, affects school attendance. Many children in Zaria are enrolled in informal Islamic schools that do not provide a balanced curriculum to equip them with modern skills necessary for economic participation (Human Rights Watch, 2021). While religious education plays a crucial role in cultural identity, its lack of integration with formal schooling hinders children's ability to compete in the modern job market.

Many parents prioritise Quranic education over Western-style education, believing it aligns better with their religious and cultural values. However, the lack of formal subjects such as mathematics, science, and literacy in many *Almajiri* schools leaves children without the necessary competencies to secure employment or further education opportunities later in life.

Political and Governance Issues

Weak governance, corruption, and inconsistent education policies in Zaria Local Government contribute to the high number of out-of-school children. Although the Universal Basic Education Act (2004) mandates free primary education, implementation challenges, such as mismanagement of funds and lack of enforcement, hinder progress (World Bank, 2020).

Corruption and Resource Mismanagement

Corruption within the education sector in Kaduna State has led to inadequate school infrastructure, underpaid teachers, and the misallocation of educational resources (Transparency International, 2022). Funds allocated for school improvements are often embezzled, leaving schools in poor condition.

Teacher salaries are also affected by corruption and poor administrative management, leading to frequent strikes. Many public school teachers experience delayed payments, forcing them to take on second jobs or abandon their posts. This results in inconsistent teaching, affecting students' learning outcomes.

Shortage of Qualified Teachers

Rural communities in Zaria experience severe shortages of qualified teachers, resulting in poor-quality education. In some cases, unqualified individuals are hired to fill teaching positions, leading to substandard instruction. The lack of proper teacher training programmes further exacerbates the issue, as many educators are not adequately equipped to handle large classrooms or modern teaching methodologies.

Security Concerns

Insecurity is a major concern for education in Zaria. Kidnappings, banditry, and communal conflicts in parts of Kaduna State have created fear among parents, discouraging them from sending their children to school (Amnesty International, 2022).

Impact of School Attacks

Attacks on schools, abductions of students, and violence in surrounding areas have led to school closures and increased dropout rates. Between 2020 and 2022, several schools in Kaduna State, including Zaria, faced security threats, leading to the displacement of families and disruptions in education (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

The fear of abduction has made many parents reluctant to send their children, especially girls, to school. Some schools have been forced to shut down due to repeated security threats, leaving students with no alternatives for continuing their education.

Internally Displaced Children and Education Disruptions

Many children in conflict-affected areas find it difficult to return to school due to safety concerns. Those displaced by violence often end up in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, where access to education is limited. In such camps, schooling facilities are either non-existent or overcrowded, with a lack of teachers and materials.

Counterarguments and Rebuttals

While the challenges of out-of-school children in Zaria Local Government are well-documented, some argue that government interventions and community-driven efforts have made significant progress in addressing the crisis. Others contend that alternative education models, such as religious schooling and vocational training, provide viable educational pathways for children in the region. Additionally, some believe that security concerns and economic challenges are overstated, pointing to examples of resilience where education has thrived despite adversity. However, a closer examination of these counterarguments reveals significant gaps that continue to hinder educational access and quality in Zaria.

Government Interventions Have Improved School Enrollment

A common counterargument is that government initiatives, such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, free education policies, and school feeding programmes, have contributed to reducing the number of out-of-school children in Kaduna State, including Zaria. Proponents argue that these policies have removed financial barriers, increased enrollment, and encouraged retention in primary education. The school feeding programme, in particular, has been cited as an incentive for students from low-income households to attend school regularly, as it provides them with at least one meal per day (World Bank, 2020).

Rebuttal: While these programmes have made some positive contributions, their implementation has been inconsistent and marred by corruption, mismanagement, and inadequate funding (Transparency International, 2022). The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, for example, has struggled with enforcement, as many families still incur hidden costs such as examination fees, uniforms, and transportation (UNESCO, 2022). Additionally, the school feeding programme, though beneficial in theory, has been plagued by irregular funding and supply chain inefficiencies, leading to periods where meals are not provided. Furthermore, the quality of education in public schools remains poor due to underpaid teachers, outdated curricula, and overcrowded classrooms (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Without significant structural reforms, government initiatives alone are insufficient to tackle the full scope of the education crisis in Zaria.

Religious and Traditional Education Systems Provide an Alternative

Some argue that traditional and religious education systems, particularly the *Almajiri* system, provide a valuable alternative to Western-style formal education. Many parents believe that Quranic schools instil strong moral values, discipline, and religious knowledge, which they see as more relevant to their children's futures than conventional academic subjects (UNICEF, 2021). Proponents also argue that vocational training and apprenticeships allow children to acquire practical skills that enable them to contribute to household incomes and secure employment.

Rebuttal: While religious and traditional education play a crucial cultural role, the lack of integration with formal education puts children at a severe disadvantage. Many *Almajiri* schools in Zaria lack basic literacy and numeracy training, leaving students unprepared for economic participation in modern society (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Without exposure to core subjects such as mathematics, science, and English, children in these systems have limited career prospects outside of religious instruction. Furthermore, the conditions in many *Almajiri* schools are poor, with students often facing neglect, inadequate shelter, and health risks (UNESCO, 2022). A more effective approach would be to integrate religious education with standard curricula, ensuring that children receive both spiritual guidance and academic training necessary for long-term success.

Similarly, vocational training and apprenticeships, while beneficial, should not replace basic education. Many children engaged in these training programmes lack fundamental literacy and numeracy skills, which are critical for adapting to technological advancements and modern economic demands (Global Partnership for

Education, 2022). Governments and stakeholders should focus on expanding formal education while incorporating vocational skills into the curriculum rather than viewing them as separate pathways.

Security Challenges Are Overstated

Another counterargument suggests that security concerns are sometimes exaggerated, as some areas within Zaria continue to maintain stable school attendance despite reports of violence. Some believe that insecurity is used as an excuse by parents who prioritise their children's labour contributions over education (Amnesty International, 2022). Additionally, proponents argue that private schools offer alternatives for those who fear public school insecurity, allowing students to continue their education in relatively safer environments (Akorede et al., 2022).

Rebuttal: While certain communities in Zaria experience lower levels of violence than others, the overall impact of insecurity on education cannot be dismissed. Attacks on schools, kidnappings, and banditry have created widespread fear among parents, many of whom prefer to keep their children at home rather than risk their safety (Akorede et al., 2022). The psychological trauma inflicted by these security threats also affects children's ability to focus on learning, even when schools remain open.

Furthermore, private schools, while safer in some instances, remain inaccessible to most families due to high tuition fees (World Bank, 2020). Many low-income households cannot afford private education, forcing them to either enrol in underfunded public schools or withdraw their children entirely. Security concerns are not merely perceived threats but real barriers that require urgent intervention through increased government protection, community-based security initiatives, and safe school programmes.

Economic Barriers Can Be Overcome Through Community Support

Some argue that economic hardship does not necessarily prevent school attendance, as community-driven efforts such as scholarships, crowdfunding, and local education initiatives can provide financial support for struggling families. They point to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and philanthropists who offer scholarships and learning materials to underprivileged children (UNICEF, 2021). Additionally, proponents argue that parents can still send their children to school if they prioritise education over non-essential expenses.

Rebuttal: While community-driven initiatives are commendable, they are not sustainable solutions to the systemic poverty that keeps children out of school. Scholarships and educational grants are often limited and unable to cover all children in need (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Additionally, the financial burden on families goes beyond tuition fees, as many struggle with indirect costs such as transportation, uniforms, and lost income from child labour (International Labour Organisation, 2022).

Moreover, the assumption that parents simply need to prioritise education ignores the economic realities of low-income households. For many families, daily survival takes precedence over long-term educational benefits. Without targeted government intervention, including conditional cash transfers, subsidised school materials, and income support for low-income families, the economic barriers to education in Zaria will persist (UNESCO, 2022).

While counterarguments highlight some ongoing efforts to address the educational crisis in Zaria, they fail to fully account for the deep-rooted systemic issues that continue to hinder access to quality education. Government interventions, though beneficial in theory, suffer from poor implementation and insufficient funding. Traditional education, while culturally significant, lacks integration with modern curricula, leaving children unprepared for contemporary challenges. Security threats, economic hardships, and social norms remain substantial obstacles that cannot be overlooked. A holistic approach that addresses governance failures, economic inequality, and social barriers is essential to creating a truly inclusive education system in Zaria.

Conclusion

The persistent issue of out-of-school children in Zaria Local Government is a multifaceted challenge that requires urgent intervention. Addressing economic barriers, cultural influences, weak governance, and security concerns is crucial for creating an inclusive and sustainable education system. While government policies and

community-driven efforts have contributed to improvements, substantial gaps remain in ensuring universal access to quality education.

A holistic approach that integrates increased funding, community involvement, alternative learning models, enhanced security measures, and legal enforcement is necessary to break the cycle of educational exclusion. The collaboration of government agencies, non-governmental organisations, religious leaders, and local communities is essential in driving meaningful change.

If effectively implemented, these recommendations will help bridge the educational gap, ensuring that every child in Zaria has the opportunity to receive a quality education. In the long run, improving access to education will not only enhance individual economic prospects but also contribute to social stability, poverty reduction, and national development.

By prioritising education as a fundamental right and a key driver of progress, Zaria Local Government can pave the way for a more prosperous and equitable future for its children.

Recommendations

Addressing the out-of-school crisis in Zaria Local Government requires a multi-faceted approach that tackles economic, social, political, and security barriers to education. The following policy recommendations outline critical steps that can improve school enrollment and retention in the region:

1. Increased Government Funding and Accountability

The Kaduna State government must allocate more resources to the education sector, ensuring the effective utilisation of funds for infrastructure development, teacher salaries, and the provision of essential school materials. Special emphasis should be placed on improving public school facilities, reducing overcrowding, and equipping classrooms with modern learning tools (UNESCO, 2022). Additionally, transparency and accountability mechanisms should be enforced to prevent the mismanagement of allocated funds, ensuring that financial resources directly benefit students and educators (Transparency International, 2022).

2. Strengthening Community Involvement

Religious and community leaders should be engaged to promote the importance of formal education while respecting cultural and religious values. Community-led advocacy programmes can help shift societal perceptions regarding gender roles, emphasising the benefits of educating both boys and girls. Additionally, grassroots organisations can support school enrollment campaigns, provide mentorship programmes, and establish scholarship funds for vulnerable children (Global Partnership for Education, 2022).

3. Expanding Alternative Learning Approaches

To accommodate children who cannot access traditional schooling due to economic or social constraints, alternative education models should be expanded. These include:

- a. **Non-formal Education Programmes:** Establishing community learning centres where children can receive basic literacy and numeracy training outside the conventional school setting (UNICEF, 2021).
- b. **Vocational Training Initiatives:** Integrating practical skill acquisition into the educational system to provide children, especially those engaged in child labour, with marketable skills for future employment (World Bank, 2020).
- c. **Digital Learning Platforms:** Utilising technology-based solutions, such as mobile learning applications and radio/television educational programmes, to reach students in remote areas (UNESCO, 2022).

4. Enhancing School Security Measures

Insecurity remains a major obstacle to education in Zaria, with frequent kidnappings and attacks on schools discouraging parents from enrolling their children. To improve safety, government authorities should:

- a. Deploy trained security personnel to schools located in high-risk areas (Amnesty International, 2022).

- b. Implement Safe School Initiatives, including perimeter fencing, emergency response protocols, and trauma counselling services for students affected by violence (Human Rights Watch, 2021).
- c. Strengthen collaboration between schools, local communities, and security agencies to enhance early warning systems and rapid response mechanisms in case of threats (UNHCR, 2022).

5. Enforcing Stronger Legal Frameworks

The enforcement of existing laws and the introduction of new policies to protect children's educational rights are essential. This includes:

- a. **Strict enforcement of laws against child labour:** Ensuring that children are not forced into economic activities that hinder their education (International Labour Organisation, 2022).
- b. **Eliminating early marriage:** Strengthening legal measures and community interventions to prevent the withdrawal of girls from school due to forced marriages (UNICEF, 2021).
- c. **Mandating compulsory basic education:** Ensuring that all children complete at least primary and junior secondary education through improved monitoring and enforcement mechanisms (Global Partnership for Education, 2022).

Implementing these policy recommendations will require collaboration between the government, local communities, international organisations, and civil society groups. A holistic and sustained approach will ensure that all children in Zaria Local Government, regardless of economic status, gender, or security challenges, have access to quality education. By addressing these fundamental barriers, Zaria can foster an inclusive and sustainable educational system that contributes to national development and social progress.

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