

The North-East girls in Nigeria. (An intersectional analysis of girls in conflict areas)

In 2014, 270 girls were abducted from a school in Borno State by the terrorist group “Boko Haram”. These girls went on to be known as the ‘Chibok girls’. Seven years down the lane, 109 girls are still missing, and 16 girls have been killed (Amnesty International, 2022). For more than three decades, conflict in Nigeria has been on the rise displacing 1.9 million people and responsible for the death of 350,000 people of which the majority are children (UNICEF, 2020; Aljazeera, 2021). The most vulnerable population during conflict in North East Nigeria has been girls, especially girls with disabilities accounting for 60% of 1 million out-of-school children. (Erunke, 2022).

Education is important in every society as it has the potential to overcome poverty and inequality through the use of human capital investment/ employment (Awan et al.,2011). In 1991, Nigeria ratified the Child Right Act to provide free basic education to every Nigerian child (Okpalaobi and Ekuweme, 2015). The Child Right Act no 26 section 15 “Every child has the right to free, compulsory and universal basic education and it shall be the duty of the Government in Nigeria to provide such education. (2) Every parent or guardian shall ensure that his child or ward attends and completes his- (a) primary school education; and (b) junior secondary education” (Okpalaobi and Ekuweme, 2015). However, in Northern Nigeria due to insurgency, Nigeria has failed to achieve education for all, there is a disparity in inclusive education; these kids are left behind (Istifanus and Willams, 2017). Furthermore, only 24 states out of the 36 states in Nigeria have domesticated this child protection law. 12 States, which are in Northern Nigeria, are yet to internalise this Act as well as the Disability Act protecting disabled children (Okpalaobi and Ekuweme, 2015).

The Boko Haram is a terrorist group against western education. The term Boko Haram translates to “Western education is sin” in Hausa language (Iyekekpolo, 2016). They target

schools, burning them down, bombing learning or educational areas, kidnapping and killing children and teachers and inflicting violence against women and girls (Micheal, 2014; Iyekekpolo, 2016). The Kidnapping of 276 Chibok girls was just the beginning of a decade of terrorist attacks still active today. In an effort to internalise excluded children in Northern Nigeria the government launched the Universal basic Education policy, which provides free basic education to Nigerian Children (Usman,2019). Furthermore, in 2016, the Nigerian government launched the “Operation Safe Corridor” which is an amnesty policy for repentant Boko Haram soldiers providing them rehabilitation through the use of education and vocational skills (Ugwueze et al., 2021).

In this essay, theoretical and empirical data will be utilised to understand the intersectionality of identities of the girls residing in Northern Nigeria and how these various identities cause inequality and barriers to access to education. This paper examines educational inequality and the pursuit of social justice faced by girls in conflict areas through an intersectional approach; the first section would look at the intersectionality between gender, geographical location and social class for northern Nigerian girls, and the second section would look at the intersectionality of disability, gender and conflict, also, I critically evaluate the government intervention in trying to achieve social justice through the use of UBE policy and the amnesty policy and finally I conclude by suggesting a way forward. I argue using evidence that educational inequality and gender disparity in Northern Nigeria exist because educational policymakers have failed to acknowledge intersections of gender, disability, conflict and social class which have become the realities of Northern girls and I conclude by suggesting ways in which education can overcome these barriers.

Theory of Intersectionality

Before jumping into the role of education, let us examine the phenomena from the lens of the intersectional approach and feminism. The second wave of feminism began in the 1960s and faced a lot of criticism for being the activism of white middle-class women in the United States. (Rastogi, 2021) Among the critics, one of the major roles played in raising voices for the inequality and discrimination based on race, class, and gender was bell hooks. She wrote about overlapping roles of gender, class, and race and the idea later got more prominence when black feminist Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term "Intersectionality" (Rastogi, 2021). hooks emphasize inequality, discrimination, and exploitation at a larger scale. According to her, inequality exists across the intersections of race, class, and gender. In her feminist theory of intersectionality, she identifies those social classifications such as gender, race, class, etc. are all interconnected and because it has not been given specific attention therefore the oppression against women of colour in the United States increased. (Huff, 2016) The convergence of racism and sexism has created several problems for black women in the United States. bell hooks is an American author, professor, feminist, and social activist who challenged the core definition of feminism. In her writings, she questioned the existing discourses of feminism and the inclusion of wholly white and privileged feminists in the movement. Though many feminist writers have challenged the discourses of feminism and have made the same criticism what sets hooks apart is her revolutionary outlook. She looks at the phenomena of feminism from a pluralistic outlook and looks into the problems of oppressed classes and talks about the interrogation of different cultural representations. (Biana, 2020) These ideas came to hooks mind when she observed that the feminist movement in the United States was raising the issues of women just for being women. hooks came up with the book, "Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre" in which she gave a new definition of feminism. According to her, feminism is not that kind of movement that talks about the equality of men and women rather it is a movement

that fights to end sexist oppression without ignoring other kinds of oppression such as classism, racism, imperialism, etc. (Biana, 2020) All kinds of oppressions are inter-related to each other.

With relevance to education, hooks contributed by writing about a new kind of education. She focuses on teaching students to think critically and raises many concerns that are tended towards the field of critical pedagogy and then linking it to feminist thought. (Specia & Osman, 2015) In this way, teachers can make their students realise the critical issues of society, and then, one day, students will contribute to such issues. In her book, 'Teaching to Transgress' she mentions that students should be taught in such a way that they think beyond the boundaries of race, sex, and class. (Specia & Osman, 2015) In this way, the gift of freedom can be achieved and that should be the teacher's important goal. She also emphasizes the teacher's involvement and commitment in the process of self-actualization, and it will promote their well-being if they have the intent to teach the students in order to empower them.

As hooks focus on the approach of pluralism and inculcate oppressed segments of every society. For her, in a classroom, there should not be any domination or any kind of space for power. The domination or space of power is not affixed to the relationship of student or teacher but applies everywhere where there is diversity in order to eliminate the issues of race, gender, sex, and class. (hooks, 2003) Teachers and students can create a partnership in a classroom and turn it into a sort of community that inculcates everybody without looking at their gender, race, class, disability, etc. The community can be established by diffusing hierarchy and dialogue shall be encouraged in the education system. In this way, a well-creative education system can be established that can reproduce the inequality based on sex, class, and disability and create a society free of inequality and discrimination.

The simple way in which the idea of hooks can be applied to this study is to inculcate the idea of intersectionality. There is a dire need to understand that inequality is not a problem of any

specific class rather it is a common issue that can be addressed through education. Discrimination and inequalities are problems that are beyond races, different social classes, gender, and disabilities. The use of an intersectionality lens in education to understand structural inequality and social injustice has been criticised by conservatives (Collins & Bilge, 2016; May, 2015). According to critics, Intersectionality divides identities into victims and oppressed groups, rather than uniting them (Arasthasthis, 2008; Dietze et al., 2018). A white lady, for example, will suffer less inequality. However, years of historical and cultural oppression, as well as structural inequality, are overlooked by these critics. A recent example in the United States is the Black Lives Matter demonstrations that erupted in the United States and extended to other areas of the world following the violent killing of George Floyd (Olorunnipa & Witte, 2022). Slavery and colonialism constitute the historical context in which racial inequality has developed and continues to exist, examine the importance of years of historical and cultural oppression and structural inequality for the protests of Black Lives Matter that erupted in the United States and spread in other parts of the world after the brutal death of George Floyd is a recent example in the United States (Olorunnipa & Witte, 2022). For this essay, intersectionality is seen as a pathway towards inclusive education for marginalised children. As it argues that social justice to be achieved, structural inequality must be looked at from all aspects of a person's identity. It ensures that a particular identity is not excluded from education or educational resources through a one-fit all policy.

Intersectionality of gender, geographic location and social class

In this section of the essay, I will examine the intersection of gender, conflict and social class and how this shapes the experiences of North eastern Nigerian girls. 13 million people are currently displaced in Nigeria and women and children make up 79% of this (UN women and OXFAM, 2020). The experiences of these girls and women are rooted in gender inequality,

stereotype, and poverty. Research carried out by United Nations Women, OXFAM and Care in 2020 titled “Rapid gender analysis North East Region Nigeria” found that gender inequality and stereotypes affect girls' access to education in Northern East Nigeria. Gender inequality is a social phenomenon in which people of different sex are not treated equally. The inequality may arise from differences in biology or cultural norms in society. The Nigerian cultural society is predominantly in favour of the male gender (Pillay, 2018). During the conflict, girls are at risk of gender-based violence which includes rape, child marriage and child soldiers (Pillay, 2018).

Nigeria ranks first in the poverty index (NBS, 2020). When in conflict, parents have been reported selling their girl-children off to marriage to be able to bear the economic and financial burden of being displaced (UN women and OXFAM, 2020). This is where social class intersects with gender; Bourdieu in his theory noted that inequality would exist for children in marginalised places and whose parents have lower incomes because of cultural social norms (Grenfell and James, 2003; Bourdieu, 1986). According to Save the Children's Nigeria, North-East Nigeria has the largest number of child brides (Save the Children, 2020).

Examining the 2018 research by CARE Nigeria gives us an insight into the experiences of these girls; in the qualitative research the following themes developed;

- Gender norms in conflict and humanitarian settings
- Abduction of girls and use of them as suicide bombers
- Child marriage
- The stigmatisation of returned abducted girls
- Fear of parents due to insecurity

Gender roles exist in humanitarian settings; Men are viewed as the head of the home and women as domestic helpers. The power dynamics are in play; women and girls are not included

in decision making (Bertoni, 2019). Girls are not educated but instead used to gain finances through marriage. Many Families see investment in a girl's education as frugal as they are married off to another family to start childbearing activities (Joda and Abdulrasheed, 2015). Meaning they would become under another man's authority and leadership. Girls are seen only as child-bearers and don't need an education. They are known as caregivers and married off early due to financial hardship and traditional gender norms. The report stated that girls are primarily used for domestic chores including farming, cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger ones. Men are seen as the head of the household and breadwinners. Some girls are also forced into child labour to make up for economic hardship through hawking while some can not due to the loss of livelihood in an insurgency. In reaction to access to education; the research found out that due to insurgency many girls are out of school and most girls can't afford to go to school in camps due to hardship. Girls affected are mostly in rural areas and are deprived of educational resources.

The research also examines the use of girls as suicide bombers in Nigeria. In 2018, UNICEF reported that 77 girls have been successfully used as suicide bombers in Nigeria and there is an increasing number on the use of girls recruited by Boko Haram. Girls under the age of 10 and teenagers are recruited and trained to be used as bombers; and 4,826 girls connected with Boko Haram were arrested (UNICEF, 2018). The lack of education has made them vulnerable to gender-based violence.

15.7% of Participants in the Care Nigeria research reported being sexual abused in school; which makes schools not safe for girls. They were either sexually abused on their way to school or in school. They have been abducted and raped and school is no longer a safe place for them. Schools have been a target for Boko Haram. Participants reported they don't feel safe in school; various schools are used as hostage keeping ground; this makes it difficult for girls to access education and girls drop out of school (UN, 2015 and Human Rights Watch, 2015). Girls who

returned from being abducted faced fear and insecurity in returning to school. The research stated that they are often stigmatised in the community.

“They wrote down all our names and took our pictures with a strict warning that if we even think about secular schools, they would harm us.... Boko Haram told us that if they come and see us in school, they will kidnap us again and keep us permanently in their custody.” - participants 15-year old (Global Coalition to protect education from attack, 2018).

‘I was teaching in the school when Boko Haram came into town ... and started targeting all the primary school students with uniforms, as well as the teachers. On a typical day, there were over 500 children in the school. In my own section, which was for 7-10-year-old students, there were three classes each with approximately 50 children, so about 150 in total. I don’t know how many children were in the school the day of the attack. Some children fled, but many were captured.... They separated the teachers from the children and asked us what we had been teaching them. They said, “we told you not to teach in secular schools. They threatened to shoot us. It was terrible.... Those are days I will never forget’ - teacher, (Global Coalition to protect education from attack, 2018).

‘They lined us up and ordered us into a big truck one by one until they filled it up without even an inch for breathing.... They started speeding terribly for almost 9 hours driving through the bush with very bad roads. We kept on hitting ourselves and falling on each other. Some who were weak fell in the truck and others stepped on them. When the truck turned, they hit their body again and other people fell on them. It continued until [several of the girls died]. I was very close to one of the corpses’ – a female respondent kidnapped (Global Coalition to protect education from attack, 2018).

“When they took us to Sambisa, Boko Haram forced my elder sister to marry. My mother was very sad. Then they kept pressuring her to marry me too, and finally Boko Haram forced me to marry. I stayed for one week with my husband, and during that time he raped me. I cried and cried, and said I was too young to be able to handle this. Finally, a Boko Haram leader told the insurgents to send me back to my mother. But the husband continued to follow me around and rape me again and again. Boko Haram mistreated and raped many, many girls”- 13-year-old participant abducted from school

In this research, most girls vowed not to return to school. The research explains the barriers to access to education using Amarta sen theory of social justice; these children are denied their capabilities and education resources which then affects their future outcomes. (Sen, 2013). However, the research limitation is that this was short term bound.

Intersectionality between gender and disability in conflict settings

Boys with disabilities are most likely to complete school than girls with disabilities. Disabled girls face 10 times more violence than non-disabled girls (UNFPA, 2018). They are at higher risk of experiencing sexual, physical and emotional abuse (United Nations, 2021). In Nigeria, the realities of disabled women and girls are filled with stigma and violence. They are often accused of witchcraft or ‘paying for a sin committed’ (Groce and McGowen, 2013; Batterbee et al., 2020). They face stigmatisation and violence, often locked up in rooms and not allowed to socialise by family members (Groce and McGeown, 2013). Also, there is a myth that having sex with a mentally disabled woman or girl will result in wealth, this leads to many often being raped (Etiyebo and Omiegbe, 2016). These are but a few examples of structural violence directed at Nigerian disabled girls.

In terms of access to education, disabled children are often segregated from mainstream schools and are forced to seek education from private or non-profit organisations (Etiyebo and

Omiegbe, 2016). To understand the lived experiences of the intersectionality of gender, disability and conflict of disabled girls in humanitarian settings the research conducted by Inclusive Friends “What violence means to us” will be critically examined.

Disabled girls face different forms of stigmatisation because of their identities. In the case of the North East girls, disability intersects with poverty and conflict. Using an Emancipatory approach, qualitative research was carried out in Plateau state, a place with communal conflicts. The findings of this research show that disabled girls face different forms of discrimination according to their age, geographic location and ethnicity.

“They don't view us in the first place as human beings.”- (Inclusive friends, 2020)

“In Africa, a man is a man, and is valued more than a woman, whether or not he has a disability.” - Simi, a woman with a physical disability (Inclusive friends, 2020)

Girls with disabilities often don't attend schools because of gender societal norms and myths. They are excluded from mainstream schools and in rural areas, there are no schools available for them nor trained qualified teachers or educational resources such as braille (Inclusive friends, 2020). Schools in rural areas are already underfunded and so these girls are not educated (Inclusive friends, 2020). During the conflict, they are often left behind because of their disability or rely on their carers to help them escape the conflict. The research also found out most girls are targeted and raped by bandits.

“Me, I am deaf, I sit in the room, cannot hear what is happening. When fighting comes, everyone saves their life, I sit in the room’- participant (Inclusive friends, 2020)

‘My family ran away to safety but left me behind. It was a passer-by that advised me to run to the barracks for safety. He didn't stop to carry me because of fear so I had to crawl on the

ground with my hands all the way to the barracks. In an attempt to cross the river into a neighbouring community, I fell into it, almost drowning’- Participant (Inclusive friends, 2020)

“....I was raped till I passed out”- Participants (Inclusive friends, 2020)

This research highlights the violence faced by disabled girls in North-East Nigeria.

Evaluating the government response

The government in a bid to achieve social justice for these girls’ enacted policies. For the purpose of this essay, the UBE policy and the Amnesty policy will be critically examined. The Universal Basic Education policy provided a scheme where basic education for Nigerian children is free. However, this was the case on paper and not in practice. Children from rural families were still taxed for school uniforms, books and learning materials (Grenfell and James, 2003). Making it difficult for children with a financial hardship background to continue schooling. There is a lack of resources therefore access to education is skewed (Grenfell and James, 2003). This policy did nothing to address the injustice faced by these girls during the conflict and humanitarian settings.

To respond to the increasing rate of insurgency in Northern Nigeria; the government launched the ‘Operation Safe Corridor’; an amnesty program targeted at pardoning Boko Haram fighters who willingly give up their arms. This policy was to aid the reintegration of ex-Boko haram soldiers through education. 920 ex Boko-haram fighters have benefitted from this program, they undergo vocational skill training (Ugwueze et al.,2021). Amnesty International has criticized the program stating that it is not targeted at the North East Children who need to access education and most programs are only targeted at boys leaving girls left out of educational access and psychological support (Amnesty International, 2020).

Way Forward

Education can play a huge role in overcoming inequalities as it has the potential to recreate a society free from inequality through the use of policies. It has the ability to overcome poverty and improve life wellbeing. bell hooks focused on a community-based learning where the environment of education should expand beyond the walls of a school. Policy makers need to understand the intersectionality of girls' experiences; there exist overlapping identities that prevent educational equality. The government has only created free basic education which is a step in the right direction but also excludes so many identities who cannot access this education. A human-right and capability approach is needed to use education to achieve equality. The human right approach focuses on people-centred policies where marginalised groups are part of the policy process especially women, girls and the disabled community. Furthermore, Nigeria government needs to domesticate and implement global child protection laws such as the Child Right Act , Violence against persons Act and the Disability Act in Northern Nigeria. Finally, a need for peace education cannot be over-emphasized, educating community members and the public on peace and conflict resolution. It should also involve women and marginalised groups playing an active process in the post-conflict process.

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