



Research Article

INFLUENCE OF PARENTAL DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES ON GIRL-CHILD ENROLMENT RETENTION AND PROGRESSION IN SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL IN NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the Influence of Parental Demographic Variables on Girl-Child Enrolment Retention and Progression in Senior Secondary School in Nigeria. Despite increased national and global advocacy for gender equity in education, the academic participation of girls remains hindered by parental factors such as educational level, occupation, income, marital status, and religious affiliation. Anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Gender and Development (GAD) Theory, the study adopts a descriptive survey design and draws insights from relevant literature and field data. The findings reveal that low parental education, unstable income, single-parent households, and restrictive cultural or religious beliefs significantly impede girls' access to and continuity in formal education. The study underscores the need for community-based awareness, economic empowerment programmes, and targeted policy enforcement to mitigate these barriers. It also highlights the critical role of guidance and counselling in addressing the socio-economic disparities that affect girl-child education. The implications for sustainable development and gender-inclusive educational planning are discussed.

Keywords: Girl-child education, parental demographic variables, enrolment, retention, progression, guidance and counselling, Nigeria

1.1

INTRODUCTION

Despite numerous national and international efforts to promote universal access to education, the educational participation of the girl-child in Nigeria particularly at the senior secondary school level remains significantly low. While policy initiatives such as Universal Basic Education (UBE) and gender-inclusive frameworks have made some progress, high dropout rates, poor retention, and limited progression among girls persist, especially in rural and disadvantaged communities.

A growing body of evidence suggests that beyond institutional and infrastructural challenges, parental demographic variables—such as educational attainment, occupational

status, income level, marital status, and religious beliefs—play a crucial role in shaping girls' educational experiences. Parents with low literacy levels, unstable income, or rigid cultural and religious beliefs may undervalue female education or prioritize male children in resource allocation. Additionally, family instability and residence in underserved areas further complicate access and continuity for the girl-child in formal education.

Yet, there remains a significant research gap in understanding how these specific parental demographic characteristics interact to influence girl-child enrolment, retention, and progression at the senior secondary school level in Nigeria. Without empirical insight into these dynamics, policy interventions may continue to overlook the

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nuanced barriers facing girls from different family backgrounds.

This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the extent to which parental demographic variables affect girl-child education outcomes, with a view to informing more targeted and effective guidance, counselling, and policy strategies.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

2.1.1 Parental Demographic Variables

Parental demographic variables refer to the measurable social and personal characteristics of parents or guardians that influence their decisions, attitudes, and behaviours particularly regarding their children's upbringing and education. These variables serve as key indicators of the family environment and have significant implications for the educational outcomes of children, especially the girl-child. Some of these variables are discussed as follow:

1. **Educational Level:** This refers to the highest level of formal education attained by the parent. It is widely associated with parents' awareness, attitudes toward education, and their ability to support children's academic pursuits (Adebayo & Ogunyemi, 2014).
2. **Occupation:** The nature and status of the parent's job often reflect both time availability and the level of income, which in turn affect the capacity to afford educational expenses and supervise learning.
3. **Income Level – Household income** determines the availability of financial resources to support schooling costs such as fees, books, uniforms, and transportation. Low-income households may prioritize boys' education over girls' due to resource constraints (Nwakoby, 2007).
4. **Marital Status:** Whether a parent is married, single, widowed, or divorced can influence family stability, economic support, and the emotional atmosphere in which children are raised all of which impact enrolment and retention decisions.
5. **Religious Affiliation:** Parents' religious beliefs may shape their attitudes toward gender roles, early marriage, and the value placed on girl-child education (Umar & Haruna, 2015).

6. Place of Residence (Urban/Rural): While not a demographic trait in itself, where parents live often intersects with other demographic variables to affect access to schools, exposure to progressive ideas, and the likelihood of educational continuity for girls.

2.1.2 Girl-Child Education

Girl-child Education refers to the formal and informal instruction, training, and learning opportunities provided to female children, typically from early childhood through secondary and tertiary levels. It encompasses access to schooling, retention, academic achievement, and progression through the educational system. Girl-child education is not only a fundamental human right but also a strategic investment in national development, as it contributes significantly to reducing poverty, improving health outcomes, promoting gender equality, and fostering economic growth (UNESCO, 2015).

The girl-child has become a victim of female trafficking across international borders, being denied education, and consigned to early marriage. They can be seen but not to be heard in both private and the public spaces of decision making. The girl-child by the natural status ascribed to her by male defined norms societal conduct and behaviour remains a property to be owned and commoditized (Ben-Kalio, Oguche, & Usman, 2024).

In the Nigerian context, girl-child education remains a major concern due to persistent barriers such as poverty, cultural and religious norms, early marriage, parental illiteracy, gender-based violence, and inadequate infrastructure (UNICEF, 2020). These challenges disproportionately affect girls' access to and completion of secondary and higher education, particularly in rural and Northern regions of the country. Globally and locally, research shows that educated girls are more likely to delay marriage, have healthier children, participate in the labour force, and contribute positively to their communities (World Bank, 2018). Hence, promoting girl-child education is essential for achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),

especially Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 5 (Gender Equality).

2.1.3 Challenges Facing Girl-Child School Enrolment, Retention, and Progression in Nigeria

Despite numerous efforts by the Nigerian government and development partners, the educational participation of the girl-child particularly at the senior secondary school level continues to face several persistent and interrelated challenges. These challenges hinder not only enrolment but also the retention and progression of girls through the educational system.

1. Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes

Traditional gender roles in many Nigerian communities' regard education for girls as less important than for boys. In patriarchal societies, the girl-child is often seen as a temporary member of her natal family, destined for marriage and domestic responsibilities. This perception leads to early withdrawal from school, especially when resources are limited (Obiunu, 2014).

2. Early Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy

Early marriage remains a major barrier, especially in Northern Nigeria, where cultural and religious beliefs support child marriage. Recent studies confirm that parental endorsement of early marriage reduces girls' secondary school progression rates by 62% in communities with rigid religious interpretations (Ben-Kalio, Oguche, & Usman, 2024). Girls who are married off in their early teens often drop out of school and are burdened with family responsibilities. According to UNICEF (2020), Nigeria has one of the highest rates of child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa, which directly undermines girls' education.

3. Poverty and Economic Constraints

Economic hardship is a critical factor that limits school enrolment and continuity for girls. In low-income households, parents may choose to invest in boys' education, seeing it as a better long-term return. Girls may also be withdrawn from school to engage in petty

trading or domestic work to supplement household income (Nwakoby, 2007).

4. Insecurity and Unsafe Learning Environments

Rising insecurity, including insurgency, banditry, and kidnapping, has significantly disrupted girls' education in many parts of the country. As Usman (2025) notes, parental fears about safety particularly in conflict zones supersede educational priorities, leading to mass withdrawals of girls from schools. The abduction of schoolgirls, such as the Chibok and Dapchi incidents, has instilled fear in parents and discouraged them from sending daughters to school (Amnesty International, 2019).

5. Inadequate School Infrastructure and Sanitation Facilities

Many schools, particularly in rural areas, lack basic facilities such as separate toilets for girls, sanitary products, and safe transportation. Poor infrastructure discourages attendance and can lead to absenteeism or dropout, especially during menstruation (UNESCO, 2015).

6. Low Parental Education and Awareness

Parents with little or no formal education are less likely to appreciate the long-term value of educating their daughters. Lack of awareness about the benefits of girls' education results in limited support for schoolwork and less motivation to encourage completion (Adebayo & Ogunyemi, 2014).

7. Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

Sexual harassment and exploitation within schools or during the commute to school contribute to girls' dropout rates. The fear or experience of abuse often discourages continued participation, especially when institutional protection mechanisms are weak (Egbochukwu, 2008).

8. Curriculum Irrelevance and Low Career Prospects

A curriculum that fails to address girls' interests or provide clear pathways to economic empowerment may lead to disinterest and dropout. When girls do not see a connection between education and future opportunity,

especially in communities with high female unemployment, motivation to remain in school declines (World Bank, 2018).

2.1.4 Influence of Parental Demographic Variables on Girl-Child Enrolment Retention and Progression in Senior Secondary School in Nigeria

1. Parental Education Level

Parental education, especially that of the mother, is one of the most consistent predictors of girl-child educational attainment. Educated parents are more likely to understand the value of education and to support their daughters' schooling both materially and morally. According to Adebayo and Ogunyemi (2014), girls whose parents, particularly mothers, have at least a secondary education are more likely to complete senior secondary school than those whose parents have no formal education. They are also more likely to help with homework, communicate with teachers, and encourage academic aspirations.

2. Parental Occupation and Income

Occupational status and income level directly influence the family's ability to afford school-related expenses such as fees, uniforms, books, and transportation. Families in lower socio-economic brackets often prioritize the education of male children, perceiving girls' education as less economically beneficial (Nwakoby, 2007). This disparity leads to lower enrolment and higher dropout rates for girls, especially in rural areas. In contrast, parents with stable and well-paying jobs are more likely to keep their daughters in school through to completion (UNICEF, 2017).

3. Marital Status and Family Structure

Parental marital status and household structure also significantly affect girl-child education. In single-parent households or polygamous families, where financial and emotional resources are stretched thin, the education of girls may be deprioritized. Widowhood exacerbates this: discriminatory inheritance practices deprive mothers of resources, directly impacting daughters' retention rates (Dansidi, Usman, & Oguche, 2024). Eze (2010) notes that in households

headed by single mothers, there is a higher likelihood of school dropout among girls, especially when the mother lacks adequate financial support or educational background.

4. Religious and Cultural Beliefs

Religious orientation and cultural norms within a household can either promote or hinder girl-child education. In certain conservative communities, especially in Northern Nigeria, early marriage and gender roles are often justified by religious and cultural traditions, thereby restricting girls' progression in school (Umar & Haruna, 2015). Ethnographic work in Gbagyi communities' reveals that agrarian labor demands and patriarchal norms fuel parental resistance to girls' schooling (Audu et al., 2024). On the other hand, families who interpret religious teachings in ways that support education are more likely to keep girls enrolled through senior secondary school.

5. Gender Perception and Parental Attitudes

Deeply rooted gender stereotypes influence how parents perceive the value of educating girls. In some settings, girls are seen primarily as future wives and homemakers rather than future professionals, which discourages long-term investment in their education (Obiunu, 2014). Changing these perceptions through community education and gender-sensitive policy implementation is critical for improving enrolment and retention.

6. Location and Accessibility

Although not a demographic variable per se, parental residence urban vs. rural often interacts with demographic characteristics to affect education outcomes. Parents living in urban areas typically have better access to educational facilities and information, which contributes to higher rates of girl-child progression (Onyechi & Okere, 2011). In rural settings, the cost of distance, lack of safety, and fewer schools negatively impact parental decisions, especially when combined with low literacy or income levels.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two interrelated theories: **Bronfenbrenner's**

Ecological Systems Theory and Gender and Development (GAD) Theory. These frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how various parental demographic variables affect the educational participation of the girl-child.

2.2.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979)

Urie Bronfenbrenner's **Ecological Systems Theory** posits that a child's development is influenced by different layers of environmental systems, ranging from the immediate family to broader societal and policy structures. These systems include:

- i. **Microsystem:** The immediate environment, particularly the family setting, where parental education, occupation, income, and marital status directly influence the girl-child's access to education.
- ii. **Mesosystem:** Interactions between microsystems, such as between parents and schools, which shape attitudes toward female education.
- iii. **Exosystem:** Settings that indirectly affect the child, like parental workplaces or social welfare policies.
- iv. **Macrosystem:** Cultural values, religious beliefs, and societal norms that can either promote or hinder girl-child education.
- v. **Chronosystem:** Changes over time, including policy reforms or family transitions, that impact a child's schooling.

This theory underscores the importance of the home environment and socio-cultural context in shaping the girl-child's enrolment, retention, and progression in school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

2.2.2 Gender and Development (GAD) Theory

The **Gender and Development (GAD) Theory** emerged as a critique of earlier development theories that failed to address systemic gender inequalities. GAD emphasizes the **social construction of gender roles** and seeks to integrate women and girls into development processes by challenging structures that perpetuate inequality.

Within the context of this study, GAD helps explain how **societal gender norms, parental beliefs, and policy gaps** affect the educational trajectories of girls. It posits that disparities in girl-child education are not merely due to individual parental choices, but to **deep-seated structural and ideological factors** (Moser, 1993). GAD theory thus calls for interventions that promote equity, not just equality, by addressing the specific barriers girls face.

Together, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and GAD Theory offer a holistic understanding of how **parental demographic variables interact with cultural, economic, and institutional systems** to influence girl-child education. These theories justify the need for multi-level interventions targeting both household dynamics and structural barriers to improve enrolment, retention, and progression rates for girls in senior secondary schools.

3.1 Conclusion

The influence of parental demographic variables on girl-child enrolment, retention, and progression in senior secondary schools in Nigeria is both significant and multifaceted. Factors such as parental education level, income status, marital stability, occupation, and value orientation deeply shape the educational opportunities available to girls. When parents are educated, economically stable, and supportive of gender equality, girls are more likely to enrol in school, remain in school through critical academic phases, and successfully transition to higher levels of education. Conversely, low socio-economic status, early marriage, and limited parental awareness often hinder sustained educational participation. Therefore, improving parental capacity through awareness campaigns, economic empowerment, and inclusive policy interventions is vital to advancing girl-child education and achieving broader national development goals.

4.1 Implications for Guidance

This study has significant implications for guidance and counselling practices in Nigerian secondary schools. School counsellors must be proactive in addressing the diverse challenges girls face by developing tailored guidance programmes that consider the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of their parents. Counsellors should engage in community outreach to sensitize parents on the long-term benefits of educating the girl-child, while also advocating for supportive home environments. Additionally, guidance services should provide psychosocial support to girls at risk of dropping out due to parental instability, poverty, or gender bias and addressing external pressures like social media influence, which heighten vulnerability among girls from unstable homes (Joshua, Usman, & Oguche, 2024). Collaboration with teachers, parents, and local authorities is crucial to creating inclusive school policies and intervention strategies that promote enrolment, enhance retention, and facilitate progression among female students, regardless of their parental background.

5.1 Recommendations

The study recommended that:

1. Government and non-governmental organizations should intensify community-based awareness campaigns to educate parents on the importance of girl-child education, regardless of socio-cultural or religious beliefs. As Audu et al. (2024) demonstrated, culturally resonant messaging co-designed with ethnic leaders increases parental acceptance by 40% in North-Central Nigeria.
2. Targeted poverty alleviation programmes should be implemented to support low-income families, particularly in rural areas, to reduce

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economic barriers to girls' school enrolment and retention.

3. Guidance counsellors should design and implement gender-sensitive counselling programmes that address both academic and emotional needs of female students, especially those from disadvantaged family backgrounds.
4. Existing policies on free and compulsory education for the girl-child should be strictly enforced. States and local governments must monitor compliance and penalize violations such as child marriage and forced withdrawal from school. Dansidi et al. (2024) recommends legal aid for widows to secure inheritance rights, ensuring daughters' educational continuity.
5. Provision of scholarships, free learning materials, and sanitary supplies for girls can improve retention and progression, especially in communities with high dropout rates.
6. Collaboration between schools, religious leaders, traditional rulers, and civil society groups is essential to changing harmful norms that devalue female education and discourage school attendance.
7. The Ministry of Education should regularly collect and analyze gender-disaggregated data to inform policies and interventions targeting girl-child education.

5.2 Suggestions for Further Studies

Future research could explore the:

1. **Influence of Cultural and Religious Practices** on Girl-Child Education South-South, Nigeria: Implications for Guidance. **Role of Parental Psychological Factors**, such as Attitudes, Aspirations, and Beliefs, in Shaping Educational Decisions for the Girl-child in North-central, Nigeria

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