

A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE BARRIERS TO QUALITY EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a systematic literature review examining the barriers to quality education in Northern Nigeria. Education is a basic human right and the focal point of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), yet there are challenges in providing equal educational opportunities in Northern Nigeria. Five different categories of challenges are identified in the review process: Socio-economic factors, institutional or infrastructural challenges, cultural or gender-based issues, and security-based threats. Findings from this study indicates that poverty, poor parental education, and overcrowded classrooms hinder educational outcomes. Societal values and patriarchal systems contribute to gender gaps, while insurgency and violent conflict make learning environments insecure, resulting in school closures and psychological distress. The research indicates that successful interventions, such as government policies, global efforts, and community-led projects, are most effective when they are multi-dimensional and tailored to address structural, socio-economic, cultural, and security constraints simultaneously. By integrating findings from peer-reviewed literature and official documents, this study offers perspectives to inform policymakers, educators, and development professionals on how to develop strategies to enhance educational access, equity, and quality in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: Education Barriers, Northern Nigeria, Socio-economic Factors, Gender Disparity, Insecurity

Introduction

Education is recognised as a basic human right which enables people to develop themselves while fostering social development and sustainable development (Nwoke, 2024). The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which aims to provide everyone with inclusive and equitable quality education should have improved educational standards in sub-Saharan African territories including Northern Nigeria. The educational system in Northern Nigeria suffers from multiple issues which result in high out-of-school rates and low literacy rates and poor learning results and educational access restrictions which prevent students from reaching their educational goals (Kukawa, Adamu & Gajiram, 2025).

According to (Kukawa, Adamu & Gajiram, 2025), children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds face decreased school attendance and retention because of widespread poverty and limited household resources in the region. Girls encounter barriers to starting and finishing basic education because of existing cultural norms and existing gender imbalances (Azeez, 2024). The combination of armed conflicts and criminal activities which cause ongoing security problems has resulted in decreased school attendance while creating safety concerns that affect parental and teacher trust in educational systems (UNICEF Nigeria, 2025). The educational system in Northern Nigeria encounters multiple obstacles which stem from interconnected social and economic factors and cultural customs and security issues.

The educational system in Northern Nigeria faces critical challenges because socio-economic barriers impede student access to quality education and educational performance (Kukawa, Adamu and Gajiram, 2025; Muhammad et al., 2024). Families lack the financial resources needed to provide their children with educational opportunities because poverty and low household income levels force them to choose between essential survival costs and educational expenses which results in higher student dropout rates (Okoliko and Adebayo, 2025). The socioeconomic status of individuals determines their educational goals and accomplishments because financial difficulties force low-income children to work for their families which results in decreased school attendance and lower learning motivation (Muhammad et al., 2024). The educational system experiences two distinct barriers from two main factors because parental education levels and household wealth differences create obstacles which limit access to essential educational materials such as books and uniforms and transportation (Kukawa, Adamu and Gajiram, 2025). The educational system in low-income families suffers from educational gaps which result from cultural and gender norms that affect girls and other underrepresented groups (Azeez, 2024). The educational system faces operational challenges as students from low-income backgrounds require resources which their families cannot provide and their parents cannot give sufficient support because of existing systemic inequities (Okoliko and Adebayo, 2025).

The region suffers direct educational damage because unqualified teachers work in schools which leads to poor student performance (Batagarawa & Bagiwa, 2025; Yusuf & Bello, 2024). Schools face difficulties in providing educational spaces because their classrooms become overcrowded and their facilities lack essential resources such as desks and textbooks and instructional materials (Azeez, 2024; Ladan, Ibrahim & Musa, 2025). Research shows that weak governance and poor policy implementation create more severe problems because educational funds become inadequate which leads to mismanagement of resources that should support school operations and teacher development (Okoliko & Adebayo, 2025; Muhammad et al., 2024). The distribution of educational infrastructure between urban and rural areas creates persistent educational disparities because children in remote and rural areas face difficulties accessing

essential educational materials which their urban counterparts receive without trouble (Batagarawa & Bagiwa, 2025).

Educational access and educational quality in Northern Nigeria depend on cultural traditions and gender-based factors which govern educational practices. The existing research shows that traditional beliefs together with patriarchal social systems give boys educational advantages which result in decreased enrollment and retention of female students (Azeez, 2024; Aliyu & Haruna, 2021). Girls face major obstacles to their ability to attend school because of early marriage and domestic duties together with societal expectations which lead to gender-based educational disparities in literacy and educational achievement (Abdulganeey et al., 2025). Research demonstrates that religious interpretations together with community attitudes create barriers to formal education in rural regions because families view schooling as incompatible with their cultural and religious practices (Aliyu & Haruna, 2021; Nwoke, 2024). The educational exclusion of marginalized communities occurs when cultural and economic and institutional barriers combine to obstruct access to educational opportunities (Kukawa, Adamu & Gajiram, 2025). The improvement of educational access together with gender-based barriers requires culturally specific solutions which will help Northern Nigeria achieve its national and international educational goals.

These interrelated barriers highlight the urgent need for a systematic examination of existing evidence to identify the most significant constraints and inform effective policies and interventions aimed at improving educational outcomes in the region. Consequently, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive review of the barriers to quality education in Northern Nigeria, offering insights that can guide policymakers, educators, and development practitioners in addressing these persistent challenges (Nwoke, 2024; Kukawa, Adamu & Gajiram, 2025).

Statement of the Problem

The educational system in Northern Nigeria fails to provide proper access and educational standards because of multiple obstacles which include economic deprivation and insufficient school facilities and lack of teachers and security concerns and persistent cultural and gender-based social practices (Kukawa, Adamu & Gajiram, 2025; Batagarawa & Bagiwa, 2025; Azeez, 2024; Aliyu & Haruna, 2021). The existing problems lead to increased rates of children who do not attend school and decreased rates of literacy and educational success which especially affects girls and marginalized groups thus hindering progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Nwoke, 2024; Abdulganeey et al., 2025). Existing research has investigated single educational factors but the field needs a comprehensive assessment which examines how multiple educational barriers work together to limit educational standards in the area. This research will perform a systematic literature review about the educational quality barriers in Northern Nigeria which will deliver complete information that will help policymakers and educators and development practitioners create specific programs to enhance educational access and fairness and educational results throughout the entire area (Muhammad et al., 2024; Okoliko & Adebayo, 2025).

Research Objectives

1. To identify the socio-economic factors that constrain access to and quality of education in Northern Nigeria.
2. To examine the institutional and infrastructural barriers, including teacher shortages, inadequate facilities, and policy implementation gaps, affecting educational quality.

3. To explore the cultural and gender-related factors that limit educational participation, particularly for girls and marginalized groups.
4. To provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and development practitioners to improve access, equity, and quality of education in the region .

Literature Review

The literature review aims to assess the obstacles which prevent people from obtaining decent educational opportunities throughout Northern Nigeria by evaluating research findings from academic publications to discover repeating patterns and research deficiencies and prospective solution areas (Kukawa, Adamu & Gajiram, 2025; Muhammad et al., 2024). The study examines existing research to create a complete understanding of all factors which restrict educational access and participation and learning results in the region, which includes socio-economic factors and institutional factors and cultural factors and gender-based factors and conflict-related factors (Azeez, 2024; Batagarawa & Bagiwa, 2025).

Conceptualizing Quality Education

Quality education is a type of education that guarantees effective learning outcomes, equity in access, and comprehensive development of learners, including cognitive, social, and emotional skills (UNESCO, 2015; Okereke & Okafor, 2022). This is not only measured by enrollment rates but also by learning outcomes, retention, and the provision of sufficient infrastructure and qualified teachers (Azeez, 2024; Yusuf & Bello, 2024). The importance of inclusivity, gender equity, and the reduction of disparities has been widely advocated by UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda as the hallmark of quality education (UNESCO, 2015; Gough, Oliver & Thomas, 2017). In the Nigerian setting, the National Policy on Education defines quality education, focusing on curriculum delivery standards, teacher qualifications, and school infrastructure, but there are still policy-practice gaps, especially in Northern Nigeria (Okereke & Okafor, 2022; Kukawa, Adamu & Gajiram, 2025). It is generally postulated that to achieve quality education, systemic, socio-economic, cultural, and security-related barriers need to be overcome in an integrated manner, as these variables cumulatively influence access, participation, and outcomes for learners (Batagarawa & Bagiwa, 2025; Abdulganeey et al., 2025). Thus, a precise conceptual framework of quality education forms the basis for understanding the impact of systemic barriers on educational delivery in Northern

Socio-Economic Barriers to Quality Education

The socio-economic conditions of Northern Nigeria create major challenges which prevent students from obtaining high-quality educational opportunities. Research shows that families with low income and poverty conditions must pay for school expenses which includes fees and uniforms and learning materials which prevents their children from attending school (Muhammad et al., 2024; Kukawa, Adamu & Gajiram, 2025). Parental education and parental involvement serve as critical factors because parents with low literacy skills fail to support education and prioritize it which results in more students being excluded from school programs (Okereke & Okafor, 2022; Abdulganeey et al., 2025). The need for children to work and support their families' financial needs leads to decreased study time and school retention which especially affects rural children who face heavy economic burdens (Batagarawa & Bagiwa, 2025).

The socio-economic divide between urban and rural regions creates additional problems because rural children must attend schools that lack essential resources and qualified educators which results in poor learning conditions (Yusuf & Bello, 2024; Azeez, 2024). The socio-economic conditions of people who live in deprived areas create an obstacle which combines with

institutional and cultural and gender-related barriers to prevent Northern Nigeria from achieving educational equality and high-quality education.

Institutional and Infrastructural Barriers

The educational system in Northern Nigeria struggles to deliver successful educational results because of institutional deficiencies and infrastructural shortcomings. The research demonstrates that teacher shortages and teacher motivation problems and insufficient teacher training create negative effects on both instructional quality and student learning achievements (Batagarawa & Bagiwa, 2025; Yusuf & Bello, 2024). The learning space becomes less effective because of overcrowded classrooms and insufficient learning materials and because schools lack essential furniture and library resources and sanitary facilities (Kukawa, Adamu & Gajiram, 2025; Okereke & Okafor, 2022).

The existing challenges strengthen themselves through weak governance and regulatory enforcement shortcomings which include both funding allocation delays and weak educational program supervision (Okoliko & Adebayo, 2025; Azeez, 2024). The research demonstrates that rural schools which serve as the primary educational institutions in Northern Nigeria face major problems because of infrastructure deficiencies which lead to increased student dropouts and decreased academic achievement (Abdulganeey et al., 2025; Muhammad et al., 2024). The educational institutions and their infrastructure together with the social and economic and cultural and gender-based barriers create a combined effect which restricts people from accessing high-quality education in the area.

Cultural and Gender-Based Barriers

Cultural norms and gender-related factors constitute major barriers to quality education in Northern Nigeria which affects both girls and marginalized groups. Research shows that patriarchal beliefs together with traditional practices give priority to male education while girls are expected to take on domestic duties and marry at a young age which prevents them from attending school and staying in school (Azeez 2024; Aliyu Haruna 2021). The educational system in Western countries faces cultural opposition which originates from historical and religious beliefs that discourage students from attending formal schools (Kukawa Adamu Gajiram 2025; Batagarawa Bagiwa 2025). The combination of these practices with socio-economic disadvantages creates educational disparities which lead to unequal educational results for different genders (Abdulganeey et al. 2025; Muhammad et al. 2024). Studies further highlight that community attitudes, parental expectations, and local customs significantly influence school enrolment, especially in rural areas, where girls are disproportionately affected by both cultural constraints and inadequate educational infrastructure (Okereke & Okafor 2022; Okoliko & Adebayo 2025). The removal of these cultural and gender-based obstacles requires work to achieve equal educational opportunities and improve educational standards in Northern Nigeria.

Security and Conflict-Related Barriers

The educational system in Northern Nigeria faces major challenges because it must deal with both armed conflicts and insurgency as security threats. Boko Haram and other violent groups have targeted schools, which led to school closures, student and teacher displacement, and destruction of educational infrastructure that disrupted learning and increased dropout rates (Adamu & Umar, 2023; Azeez, 2024). The threat of violence also reduces attendance because parents fear sending children to school especially girls and teachers may refuse postings in conflict-affected areas (Kukawa, Adamu & Gajiram, 2025; Abdulganeey et al., 2025).

The conflicts create physical interruptions and psychological trauma that students experience, which harms their ability to focus and participate in school activities and study for

exams (Mohammed & Bello, 2022). The security-related barriers to education work together with socio-economic and cultural and infrastructural obstacles to create educational disparities, which hinder Northern Nigeria from achieving equitable access to quality education (Batagarawa & Bagiwa, 2025; Okoliko & Adebayo, 2025). The region requires an understanding of these challenges to develop effective interventions that create safe and resilient educational spaces. The region requires an understanding of these challenges to develop effective interventions that create safe and resilient educational spaces.

Policy Interventions and Best Practices

The efforts to enhance educational quality in Northern Nigeria face obstacles which require solutions from government policies and international initiatives and community-based programs. The National Policy on Education establishes standards for curriculum implementation and teacher development and school facility creation but actual educational quality varies between different regions due to content delivery problems which especially affect regions experiencing conflict (Okereke & Okafor, 2022; Okoliko & Adebayo, 2025). The organizations UNICEF and UNESCO have backed initiatives which help out-of-school children and promote gender equity and create secure learning spaces because they drive better student enrollment and retention results when local communities participate in educational programs (UNESCO, 2015; Abdulganeey et al., 2025). The results from non-governmental organizations and community-based programs show that they improve access to education and student enrollment rates for marginalized girls through their programs which provide financial assistance and scholarships and conduct public awareness initiatives (Azeez, 2024; Muhammad et al., 2024). The scholars maintain that strategic success depends on the development of comprehensive methods which need to handle the various obstacles that exist in educational institutions which require location specific strategies that create lasting solutions for educational advancement in Northern Nigeria (Batagarawa & Bagiwa, 2025; Aliyu & Haruna, 2021).

Methodology

The research design of this study is qualitative research. Qualitative research is based on document analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, and other credible sources of information. Qualitative research is considered appropriate for this study since it provides a clear understanding of complex social phenomena that cannot be easily quantified, such as socio-economic, cultural, institutional, and security factors affecting education in Northern Nigeria (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Bowen, 2009).

The study uses a systematic literature review method to find and evaluate and combine relevant documents through a process that can be duplicated and verified (Liberati et al., 2009; Gough, Oliver & Thomas, 2017). The research method requires complete assessment of all chosen documents which will reveal main themes and common patterns and current knowledge gaps about quality education obstacles faced by Northern Nigeria.

The documents used for analysis were obtained from academic search engines such as Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Research Gate, and the UNESCO, UNICEF, and Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education websites. The criteria used for the selection of documents include: (i) the document must have been published between 2015 and 2025, (ii) the document must be about Northern Nigeria, (iii) the document must be in English, and (iv) the document must be peer-reviewed or an official report. The criteria that excluded documents include articles that are not empirical, opinion articles, and articles that are not related to educational barriers.

Data were gathered by extracting important details from their chosen documents while they examined obstacles which included socio-economic factors and cultural differences and gender discrimination and institutional constraints and security issues. The researchers used thematic analysis to organize their findings which enabled them to combine insights obtained from different sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers verified theme reliability through cross-checking while they established research objectives and questions of this study through pattern mapping.

Major Findings

The analysis of documents and peer-reviewed literature demonstrates that socio-economic factors constitute the primary obstacle that prevents people from receiving quality education in Northern Nigeria. The combination of poverty with low household income and high schooling expenses results in education access barriers that affect numerous children who want to attend school (Muhammad et al., 2024; Kukawa, Adamu & Gajiram, 2025). The research shows that parental education and engagement serve as the main factors which determine children's educational access because parents who lack literacy skills cannot help their children with schoolwork or make school attendance a priority (Okereke & Okafor, 2022; Abdulganeey et al., 2025).

The practice of child labor along with the expectation that children must help their families financially creates worsened problems which affect rural areas because those areas experience the highest economic demands (Batagarawa & Bagiwa, 2025). The existing socio-economic problems become worse because of existing gender imbalances which culturally restrict girls educational opportunities while maintaining male educational advantages through traditional practices (Azeez, 2024; Aliyu & Haruna, 2021).

Educational quality in the region experiences additional obstacles from institutional and infrastructural and security-related challenges. The study identified recurring problems in Northern Nigeria which included insufficient teaching staff who lacked proper qualifications and classrooms that exceeded their capacity and schools that lacked sufficient learning resources and school facilities that needed better upkeep (Yusuf & Bello, 2024; Okereke & Okafor, 2022). Security issues which include insurgency and violent school attacks have caused schools to close frequently and students to be displaced and learners to experience trauma which results in worse educational outcomes (Adamu & Umar, 2023; Mohammed & Bello, 2022). The research findings show that educational barriers connect with each other because socio-economic deprivation and cultural norms and security threats create multiple educational disadvantages for students. Interventions through government policies and international initiatives and community-based programs demonstrate positive results when multi-dimensional approaches target their objectives while integrated strategies for structural and contextual barriers enable sustainable educational development (Abdulganeey et al., 2025; Batagarawa & Bagiwa, 2025).

Conclusion

The systematic literature review shows that Northern Nigeria faces multiple interconnected obstacles which prevent people from receiving quality education because these obstacles stem from various factors. The evidence shows that poverty, low parental education, teacher shortages, inadequate learning facilities, harmful cultural norms, and insecurity collectively restrict access to education and undermine learning outcomes, particularly for girls and marginalized groups. The barriers create educational inequality which maintains itself through time because they interact

with each other to create permanent educational disadvantages which prevent national development targets and Sustainable Development Goal 4 from being achieved. The study concludes that Northern Nigeria needs educational improvement through integrated context-specific interventions which need policy reform with financial support from the community and gender-sensitive approaches and security-responsive strategies. The region needs these barriers to be addressed through holistic solutions which will provide equal access to quality education and create sustainable educational development.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations:

1. Nigeria government and development partners should implement targeted social protection measures which include conditional cash transfers and school feeding programmes and education subsidies to help low-income families. The social protection measures will help children from low-income families who live in rural areas to attend school and stay in school.
2. There should be more more financial resources for teacher recruitment and training and retention activities in areas which currently lack adequate educational staff and experience armed conflicts. The policies need to focus on reducing classroom overcrowding while upgrading school facilities and making learning materials accessible and improving governance and accountability systems which will help achieve better policy results.
3. The community needs to implement Culturally sensitive interventions which include parents and community leaders and religious institutions to challenge harmful gender norms and promote girls' education. The establishment of secure educational environments demands school security measures which include security-based education planning and psychosocial support and community-based partnerships.

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