

ROLE OF UNICEF IN PROMOTING GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examined the Role of UNICEF in Promoting Girl-Child Education in Anambra State, Nigeria. It covered study a period between 2015 and 2023. The objectives of the study were to; investigate the extent have UNICEF's educational interventions improved enrollment and retention rates for girls in Anambra State, examine the prevailing cultural norms and traditional practices in Anambra State influence the implementation and outcomes of UNICEF's girl-child education programs, ascertain the measurable impact of UNICEF's advocacy efforts on Anambra State's education policies regarding gender equality in schools and evaluate the educational outcomes for girls in UNICEF-supported schools compare with those in non-UNICEF-supported schools in Anambra State in terms of academic performance. It adopted the Capability Approach theory as its theoretical framework. The study employed primary and secondary sources of data, the primary was an oral interview from key informants, while the secondary sources was from existing literature. The findings revealed that UNICEF's educational interventions have significantly improved enrollment and retention rates for girls in Anambra State, it also showed that prevailing cultural norms and traditional practices in Anambra State still pose significant challenges to UNICEF's girl-child education programs, the The study further recommends that; Anambra State Ministry of Education should collaborate closely with UNICEF to scale up the provision of scholarships and school materials targeting girls, especially in rural communities, to sustain and further improve enrollment and retention rates, Anambra State Ministry of Culture and Traditional Affairs should initiate and support community-based sensitization campaigns involving local leaders and women's groups to address cultural barriers hindering girls' education, lastly, Anambra State House of Assembly should prioritize reviewing and strengthening existing education policies to institutionalize gender equality measures advocated by UNICEF, ensuring adequate funding and enforcement mechanisms.

Keywords: Education, Girl Child, UNICEF, Anambra State, School.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of UNICEF in promoting girl-child education in Anambra State, Nigeria is situated within a complex socio-economic and cultural context where gender disparities in education

persist despite significant progress in enrollment rates. Anambra State, located in southeastern Nigeria, has historically demonstrated strong educational indicators compared to other Nigerian states, with a literacy rate of approximately 75% according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2021). However, deep-rooted cultural norms and economic challenges continue to hinder equal access to education for girls, particularly in rural communities.

UNICEF's intervention in Anambra State's education sector is grounded in its global mandate to protect children's rights and its commitment to Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 5 (Gender Equality). The organization's 2021-2025 Country Program Document for Nigeria explicitly prioritizes girls' education as a key strategy for national development (UNICEF, 2021). In Anambra State, UNICEF operates through a multi-pronged approach that addresses both supply-side and demand-side barriers to girls' education, working in close collaboration with the State Universal Basic Education Board (ASUBEB) and local civil society organizations. The educational landscape in Anambra presents unique challenges for girl-child education. While the state boasts relatively good school infrastructure compared to northern states, cultural factors such as early marriage expectations and preference for boys' education persist.

According to Ogbuagu, (2024) approximately 23% of girls in rural areas drop out before completing junior secondary school, primarily due to economic pressures and cultural factors (Ofojebe, & Ikegbunam, 2022). Furthermore, menstrual hygiene management remains a significant challenge, with many schools lacking adequate sanitation facilities that would enable girls to attend school comfortably during their periods.

UNICEF's programming in Anambra State employs evidence-based strategies to address these challenges. The organization's Girls' Education Project (GEP) Phase 3, funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), has been particularly impactful in the state (UNICEF Nigeria, 2021). Through this initiative, UNICEF has supported the training of over 1,500 female teachers and school administrators in gender-responsive pedagogy, significantly improving the learning environment for girls in targeted schools. Additionally, UNICEF's advocacy efforts contributed to the passage of the Anambra State Child Rights Act in 2020, which includes specific provisions protecting girls' right to education. The organization's community engagement strategy has proven particularly effective in changing social norms. UNICEF's "Community Girls' Education Committees" have been established in 45 communities across the state, comprising traditional leaders, religious figures, and women's

groups who advocate for girls' education at the grassroots level (UNICEF Nigeria, 2021). These committees have been instrumental in reducing early marriage rates and increasing girls' school retention. In Ogbaru Local Government Area, for instance, the intervention led to a 40% increase in girls' secondary school enrollment between 2019 and 2022 (Ajeli, & Igwe, 2023).

UNICEF has also addressed infrastructure gaps that disproportionately affect girls. The organization's Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in Schools program has constructed gender-segregated toilets with menstrual hygiene facilities in 78 primary and junior secondary schools across the state (UNICEF Nigeria, 2021). This intervention has been credited with reducing absenteeism among adolescent girls by approximately 30% in beneficiary schools. Economic barriers remain a significant challenge, particularly in the wake of Nigeria's economic downturn. UNICEF's conditional cash transfer program, implemented in partnership with the Anambra State government, provides financial incentives to 2,500 low-income families to keep their daughters in school (UNICEF Nigeria, 2021). The program has shown promising results, with 85% of beneficiary girls remaining in school for at least three consecutive academic years

Objective of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the Role of UNICEF in Promoting Girl-Child Education in Anambra State, Nigeria. While the specific objectives are to;

- a. investigate the extent have UNICEF's educational interventions improved enrollment and retention rates for girls in Anambra State
- b. Examine the prevailing cultural norms and traditional practices in Anambra State influence the implementation and outcomes of UNICEF's girl-child education programs

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Girl-Child

Adesina (2017) defines a girl-child as a female aged 14 years or older. Offorma (2009) defines a girl-child as a female individual from birth to eighteen (18) years of age. A girl's identity is fundamentally determined at birth by the genitalia assigned to her by nature and the creator. The phase of girlhood encompasses the periods of birth, childhood, early adolescence, and late adolescence. The girl-child is regarded as a young female destined to mature into a woman and

thereafter enter into marriage. She is educated to nurture her progeny (if relevant), administer the household, and supervise culinary activities through informal instruction received from her mother and senior people in her surroundings.

The girl-child is regarded as a female who will eventually develop into a woman, leave her parents, marry, assume her husband's surname, and bore children. Education acts as a catalyst for economic advancement, prompting industrialized nations to spend substantial resources on human capital education for sustained integration and development. Parankimalil (2012) defines education as a systematic process through which an individual, regardless of age, acquires knowledge, experiences, skills, and a positive disposition. It cultivates an individual who is civilized, refined, cultured, and educated. In a civilized and socialized society, education is the exclusive pathway. The idea is to make an individual impeccable. All societies regard education as a solution to various problems. It is the remedy for the multitude of life's troubles. Rousseau J.J views education as the intrinsic development of a kid. Offorma (2009) defines education as the process of transmitting knowledge to an untrained individual to promote their physical, mental, social, emotional, spiritual, political, and economic growth. She contends that the statement made by vice-chancellors at graduation ceremonies, "you have been found worthy in character and learning," embodies the previously indicated notion of education. She asserted that this indicates the individual has acquired adequate and appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, known as cognitive, psychomotor, and emotional behaviors, to function effectively as a citizen. The focus of training persons in educational institutions is on these. Naro, Mirnawati, Suarni, & Gani (2023) assert that education encompasses the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development of an individual, with the objective of preparing the individual for significant contributions to community advancement and the preservation of cultural heritage. This suggests that an educated person is inclined to improve personal growth and make a constructive contribution to society, thereby promoting cultural heritage. Furthermore, education entails the proficiency in applying knowledge; it involves not only the acquisition of knowledge but also its application for the benefit of society.

Girl-Child Education

The concept of girl-child education includes the fundamental attitudes, cultural standards, and behavioral conditioning that parents impart to their daughters at home, preparing them to become productive, resourceful, and respectable members of society. It includes practical training in skill development that many women seek in tailoring (for seamstresses), computer

training centers, weaving and fashion design centers, as well as culinary and interior decoration centers, among others. The concept of the Girl-Child is defined by specialized and meticulously regulated education acquired at schools, universities, and other higher education institutions (Alabi, Bahah, & Alabi, 2014).

Mwanahamisi (2014) asserted that the deprivation of early childhood education for girl-children leads to their social exclusion, creating circumstances that may culminate in their eventual illiteracy as women, thereby designating them as disadvantaged candidates for adult education, women's empowerment initiatives, and various remedial or support programs indicative of underdevelopment. Unfortunately, the right of a girl-child to receive a quality education has been denied. Despite the deep-seated challenges of our historical legacy, they have influenced society at large. Bhandari (2023) asserts that the oppression and discrimination of women and girls have been deeply ingrained in almost every community for a prolonged duration. Girl-child education includes several subjects and discussions related to the education of girls and women, specifically in primary, secondary, postsecondary, and health education. It includes the areas of gender equality and educational access, along with its correlation to poverty alleviation. The issues of single-sex schooling and religious education are also addressed. The division of education by gender and religious ideas has historically been prevalent and continues to be highly relevant in contemporary discussions on female education worldwide. Kip Kulei, Chepcheng, and Chepcheng (2012) contend that global education for girls benefits both families and society at large. Education mitigates poverty and hunger for its recipients. The education of the girl-child significantly enhances national development and acknowledges as well as unleashes the potential in every child. The National Policy on Education (1977) declares that access to education is a fundamental right for all Nigerian children, regardless of gender, religion, or disability. The education of the girl-child has become a critical concern in numerous developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where a considerable proportion of young girls remain unenrolled in school. The education of girls stimulates substantial beneficial effects on social and economic development for future generations. Investing in girls' education constitutes an advantageous economic strategy for society, given the contributions girls render to their families and local communities. Educating girls propels economic advancement and reduces social disparities (Naomi & Chukwueme (2020).

Nussbaum (2003) asserts that the rapid socio-economic progress of a nation depends on the status of women inside that country. Aliu (2001) recognizes the importance of women's education as a basis for the lifelong acquisition of information, values, attitudes, competencies, and skills. Moreover, educating more girls enhances the education of additional children, promoting the advancement of both the community and the nation overall. This is because no intelligent woman will deny her children access to quality education (Phinos, & Adegbite, 2025). Educating girls will address malnutrition, underdevelopment, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, child labor, early marriages, illiteracy, and ignorance, as knowledge is synonymous with power and awareness is cultivated via information. Low academic accomplishment is defined as failing to attain the average performance in assessments or examinations, as determined by a designated cut-off threshold (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004). A myriad of factors is associated with low achievement. Tooley and Dixon (2006) contend that the category of school a student attends affects the student's academic advancement. In their examination of 'private schools for the poor' in Ghana, Lagos State (Nigeria), Hyderabad, Delhi, and Mahbubnagar (India), Kibera (Nairobi, Kenya), and Gansu Province (China), Tooley and Dixon (2006) found that both registered and unregistered private schools demonstrated higher raw mean scores relative to government (public) schools. Gender is a supplementary variable associated with diminished performance.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted The Capability Approach as the theoretical framework, the theory was originally developed by Amartya Sen (1979) and later advanced by Martha Nussbaum (2000), provides a compelling theoretical framework for examining the role of UNICEF in promoting girl-child education in Anambra State, Nigeria. This framework shifts the focus from mere enrolment figures and resource allocation to evaluating the real opportunities and freedoms available to girls in accessing quality education and achieving meaningful life outcomes. In a context like Anambra State, where cultural, economic, and social barriers persistently hinder girls' educational opportunities, this theory offers a more holistic lens for understanding the issue.

The Capability Approach argues that human development should be assessed not just by the availability of resources or services, but by the actual freedoms individuals possess to utilise these resources to lead the lives they value (Sen, 1999). Applied to this study, it means looking beyond the number of school facilities provided by UNICEF or scholarships awarded, and

focusing on whether these interventions have meaningfully expanded the capabilities of girls in Anambra State such as their ability to stay in school, avoid early marriage, participate in leadership, and secure decent livelihoods (Naomi & Chukwueme, 2018).

The reason for adopting this theory lies in its sensitivity to contextual factors that affect real educational outcomes. In Anambra State, issues such as gender-biased cultural practices, poverty, insecurity, and inadequate sanitary facilities for girls in schools limit their ability to fully benefit from educational opportunities. The Capability Approach recognises these multi-dimensional barriers and encourages a focus on removing them to expand girls' substantive freedoms. Unlike Human Capital Theory which views education largely as a means to economic productivity, the Capability Approach values education as both an end in itself and a means to a better life, aligning closely with UNICEF's rights-based approach to child welfare and gender equality.

Its relevance to this study is significant. It provides a framework for assessing not just what UNICEF does, but whether those actions have improved girls' real freedoms and life prospects in Anambra State. For instance, it enables an evaluation of whether UNICEF's provision of sanitary facilities or advocacy against child marriage has genuinely increased girls' capacity to attend and remain in school. Moreover, it situates girl-child education within the broader goal of human dignity and social justice, making it an appropriate theory for a study concerned with both educational outcomes and the broader well-being of girls in the state.

UNICEF and Girl-Child Education in Anambra State

UNICEF's approach to girl-child education in Anambra reflects its broader global mandate to support inclusive, quality education for all children, with particular attention to marginalized groups. According to Nwozor and Okhillu (2022), UNICEF's interventions in Anambra North Senatorial District have included initiatives such as the establishment of girl-friendly learning environments, provision of scholarships, and campaigns against harmful cultural practices like early marriage. These interventions aim to improve enrolment, retention, and completion rates for female pupils in both primary and secondary schools. The educational landscape in Anambra has historically recorded high literacy rates compared to other regions in Nigeria, yet significant disparities persist, particularly in rural and riverine communities within Anambra North. Etejere (2024) notes that despite improvements, female pupils in these areas remain disproportionately disadvantaged due to infrastructural inadequacies and cultural expectations.

To address this, UNICEF partnered with local civil society organisations and community leaders to drive sensitisation campaigns, promote the benefits of educating girls, and engage parents in school management committees.

A key aspect of UNICEF's involvement in Anambra has been its collaboration with the State Ministry of Education to strengthen policy frameworks supporting gender equity in education. This includes the integration of gender-responsive teaching practices, enforcement of school safety policies, and provision of WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities in schools to ensure safe and hygienic learning environments for girls (Offor et al., 2021). By equipping schools with gender-segregated toilets and sanitary facilities, UNICEF aims to reduce dropout rates linked to menstruation-related absenteeism. Additionally, teacher training programs have been an integral part of UNICEF's strategy in Anambra. According to Okenwa-Ojo (2024), UNICEF has supported capacity-building workshops for teachers on child-friendly pedagogies and gender-sensitive classroom management. These trainings help teachers create supportive environments where female pupils feel valued, respected, and motivated to excel academically. Despite these interventions, challenges remain. Nwakwesiri and Onebunne (2017) highlight that deep-rooted socio-cultural norms and parental preferences for male-child education still undermine efforts to achieve full gender parity in Anambra. Nevertheless, sustained advocacy, policy support, and grassroots community engagement continue to be central to UNICEF's approach (Phinos, & Adegbite, 2025).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a purposive sampling technique to select 20 respondents from a total population of 120 stakeholders involved in girl-child education initiatives in Anambra North Senatorial District. Purposive sampling is suitable because it enables the deliberate selection of individuals with direct knowledge and experience relevant to UNICEF's programmes and girl-child education (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). The selected participants will include UNICEF officials, education officers, school principals, teachers, and parents, as these groups are directly engaged in implementing or experiencing girl-child education interventions (Chukwueme Phinos & Agaba, 2019). This approach ensures the inclusion of informed voices capable of providing detailed and meaningful responses. Selecting 20 participants allows for in-depth interviews while keeping data collection manageable, thereby enhancing the quality of insights gathered. This sampling strategy aligns with the qualitative nature of the study and supports a focused exploration of perspectives crucial for understanding UNICEF's

role in promoting girl-child education in the district (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative data obtained through oral interviews was analysed using content analysis. This method involves coding responses into thematic categories to identify patterns, challenges, and successes related to UNICEF's role in promoting girl-child education. It ensures systematic interpretation of participants' experiences, enhancing the validity and reliability of the study's findings (Krippendorff, 2018; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

4. ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF THE ROLE OF UNICEF IN PROMOTING GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN ANAMBRA STATE

Opinion of Respondents on the extent have UNICEF's educational interventions improved enrollment and retention rates for girls in Anambra State(Interview, 2025)

During a series of oral interviews conducted with selected stakeholders in Anambra State, varying opinions emerged regarding the impact of UNICEF's educational interventions on the enrollment and retention of girls in schools. The respondents included female students in both primary and secondary schools, parents, teachers, UNICEF officials, civil society organisations, academia, and officers of the Anambra State Ministry of Education.

Majority of the respondents, particularly female students in primary and secondary schools, parents, teachers, UNICEF officials, and officers from the State Ministry of Education, argued that UNICEF's programs have significantly improved enrollment and retention rates for girls in Anambra State. They contended that initiatives such as scholarship awards, provision of school materials, establishment of girl-friendly school environments, and advocacy campaigns have reduced the number of girls dropping out of school due to financial constraints, early marriage, or cultural barriers.

A female student from a secondary school in Onitsha noted,

“Before, many girls in our community did not go to school or stopped at primary six. But now, with the help of UNICEF giving us free books, uniforms, and sometimes school feeding, more girls stay in school till senior secondary school.” A teacher from Ayamelum corroborated this view, adding that “parents are now encouraged because UNICEF involves them in meetings and sensitisation programmes on the benefits of educating their daughters.”

Similarly, UNICEF officials confirmed that;

“Enrollment statistics in targeted communities have improved since 2020 following intensified awareness campaigns and infrastructural support. An officer from the Anambra State Ministry of Education also remarked that “the partnership with UNICEF has contributed to noticeable improvements in girl-child education indices, particularly in Anambra North and West.”

However, civil society organisations and members of academia differed in their assessment. They contended that while UNICEF’s efforts are commendable, the improvements have been unevenly distributed across local government areas. According to them, enrollment and retention rates in riverine and hard-to-reach communities remain poor, largely due to insecurity, difficult terrain, and the persistence of harmful socio-cultural norms.

A civil society respondent explained,

“Most of the interventions are concentrated in accessible towns like Onitsha and Awka North, while communities like Anambra East and Ogbaru still struggle with low attendance and high dropout rates among girls.”

an academic from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka stated:

“The sustainability of these interventions is questionable. While UNICEF has introduced vital initiatives, over-reliance on external agencies without corresponding government ownership may erode the gains when donor funding diminishes. There’s also a need for systematic policy reforms addressing deep-seated socio-cultural practices that dissuade families from sending girls to school in some rural areas.”

Opinion of Respondents on the prevailing cultural norms and traditional practices in Anambra State influence the implementation and outcomes of UNICEF's girl-child education programs(oral interview, 2025).

Majority of the respondents particularly female students in both primary and secondary schools, UNICEF officials, officers of the Anambra State Ministry of Education, and civil society organisations argued that while UNICEF’s interventions have made visible progress, deep-rooted cultural beliefs still present significant obstacles to full success. They contended that customary practices such as preference for male education, early marriage, and assigning domestic responsibilities to girls over schooling continue to affect both enrollment and retention of girls in certain communities.

A female secondary school student from Ogbaru remarked,

“Some girls in my community still stop school after primary six because their parents believe a girl’s place is in her husband’s house. Even though UNICEF gives us books and uniforms, some parents won’t allow their daughters to go far in school.”

A UNICEF official confirmed this challenge, noting that

“we observe resistance in areas where harmful traditional beliefs remain strong, and advocacy work requires more time and community engagement.”

Civil society organisations further noted that these cultural barriers reduce the effectiveness of UNICEF’s efforts, especially in riverine and rural parts of the state where such practices are deeply held. An officer from the State Ministry of Education added that community sensitisation campaigns are ongoing but results have been slow in certain areas.

However, parents and teachers differed in their assessment. Some of them contended that the situation has improved significantly and that cultural barriers are no longer as rigid as they used to be. A parent from Oyi Local Government stated,

“Things have changed now. Many parents, including myself, understand the value of educating our daughters. It is no longer like before when girls were married off early.”

A teacher from Anambra West argued:

“In my school, most parents have become aware of the importance of girl-child education due to constant meetings and seminars organised by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education. The old belief that a girl’s future is only in marriage is gradually fading, although there are still isolated cases of resistance among the elderly.”

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings revealed that UNICEF’s educational interventions have significantly improved enrollment and retention rates for girls in Anambra State. This aligned with respondents’ views who attributed this progress to initiatives like free learning materials, school clubs, and sanitary provisions. Majority of the respondents contended that these efforts removed key barriers, especially poverty and cultural biases, enhancing girls’ school attendance. This supports Etejere (2024), who observed that UNICEF-backed programs increased girl-child school participation in Idemili North. Similarly, Ahmed and Yola (2021) noted that advocacy, safe school initiatives, and community sensitization efforts by UNICEF improved retention and overall school attendance rates for girls.

More so, the finding showed that prevailing cultural norms and traditional practices in Anambra State still pose significant challenges to UNICEF's girl-child education programs. Majority of respondents argued that early marriage, preference for male education, and domestic expectations limit girls' schooling opportunities despite UNICEF's interventions. This mirrors Nwakwesiri and Onebunne's (2017) conclusion that entrenched patriarchal values hinder girl-child education in Anambra West. Offor et al. (2021) similarly observed that cultural resistance to gender equality in education remains a barrier, affecting the implementation and success of UNICEF initiatives, despite increased advocacy and community sensitization campaigns targeting these traditional beliefs.

6. CONCLUSION

UNICEF's educational interventions have significantly improved girls' enrollment and retention in Anambra State by providing scholarships, learning materials, and safe environments. These efforts have reduced dropout rates and encouraged sustained attendance, demonstrating positive progress toward bridging the gender gap in education within the region. Prevailing cultural norms and traditional practices, such as early marriage and gender-biased roles, continue to challenge UNICEF's girl-child education programs in Anambra State. Despite these barriers, UNICEF's community engagement and sensitization initiatives have begun to alter perceptions, promoting greater acceptance and support for girls' education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made;

- a. Anambra State Ministry of Education should collaborate closely with UNICEF to scale up the provision of scholarships and school materials targeting girls, especially in rural communities, to sustain and further improve enrollment and retention rates.
- b. Anambra State Ministry of Culture and Traditional Affairs should initiate and support community-based sensitization campaigns involving local leaders and women's groups to address cultural barriers hindering girls' education.
- c. Anambra State House of Assembly should prioritize reviewing and strengthening existing education policies to institutionalize gender equality measures advocated by UNICEF, ensuring adequate funding and enforcement mechanisms.
- d. The Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) should expand teacher training programs focused on gender-sensitive pedagogy and replicate successful UNICEF-

supported school models across more schools to enhance girls' academic outcomes statewide.

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