Journal of Public Policy and Administration
2026, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 287–292
https://doi.org/10.11648/j.jppa.20261004.13

SciencePG
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Review Article

Quality Education and Gender Equality: Pillars for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Quality education and gender equality are mutually reinforcing conditions for inclusive and sustainable development. This review examines how the two priorities interact in Nigeria, the policy measures intended to advance them, and the institutional and socio-economic constraints that limit implementation. The paper adopts a qualitative documentary review design. It draws on published scholarly literature, relevant Nigerian policy and legislative documents, and reports from national and international institutions. The materials are examined thematically; the paper does not claim to conduct a statistical meta-analysis or to generate primary field data. The review argues that access to schooling alone is an insufficient measure of progress. Educational quality also depends on learning, safe and adequately resourced schools, relevant skills, completion and equitable outcomes. Similarly, gender parity in enrolment does not by itself establish gender equality where differences persist in retention, learning, subject choice, safety, leadership and transitions to employment. In Nigeria, poverty, insecurity, uneven infrastructure, socio-cultural practices, weak implementation and fragmented monitoring can compound disadvantage, particularly for girls and children in underserved communities. The paper concludes that SDG 4 and SDG 5 should be pursued through coordinated education, social-protection and gender-responsive policies, supported by reliable disaggregated data, adequate financing and accountability. It recommends strengthening public-school quality assurance, addressing barriers to girls' completion, improving teacher support and school safety, and monitoring outcomes beyond enrolment.

Keywords

Quality Education, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goals

1. Introduction

Nigeria's large and diverse population presents considerable possibilities for economic, social and political development. Realizing these possibilities, however, depends not simply on the availability of natural resources or the adoption of development programs, but on whether people can acquire knowledge, capabilities and opportunities and participate in social, economic and political life on fair terms. Education is central to this process because it develops literacy, numeracy, technical competence, critical reasoning and the capacity to participate in public life. Gender equality is equally important because unequal access to resources, opportunities, safety and decision-making restricts the capabilities of individuals and

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Received: 24 October 2026; **Accepted:** 12 November 2026; **Published:** 27 November 2026

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weakens the development potential of communities. [8, 11]

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes these concerns in SDG 4, which seeks inclusive, and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, and SDG 5, which seeks gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls [1]. These goals are connected rather than independent. Education can improve women's and girls' access to information, employment and public participation; gender equality can, in turn, improve access to schooling, retention, learning conditions and the distribution of educational benefits. The relationship is therefore reciprocal: progress in one goal can support progress in the other, while persistent inequality can undermine both. [9, 10]

The Nigerian policy environment includes the Universal Basic Education framework, the National Policy on Gender in Education, and broader social-protection and student-support initiatives. The UBE framework establishes a commitment to free and compulsory basic education, while the National Policy on Gender in Education provides a policy basis for addressing gender-related barriers across the education system [2, 3]. Yet the existence of policies should not be equated with their effective implementation. Implementation depends on financing, institutional capacity, school infrastructure, teacher availability and quality, security, reliable data and accountability. It also depends on the ability of policies to respond to intersecting disadvantages associated with poverty, disability, location, displacement and household responsibilities. [15, 16]

The central problem addressed in this paper is the continuing gap between policy commitments to quality education and gender equality and the uneven realization of these commitments in Nigeria. A further analytical problem is that discussions of the two issues are often conducted separately: education debates may focus on enrolment and infrastructure, while gender debates may focus on representation or formal rights. Such separation can obscure the ways in which gender norms shape educational participation and how unequal educational experiences reproduce wider social and economic inequalities. [12, 17]

Although existing scholarship and policy documents address education, gender and sustainable development, there remains a need for an integrated Nigerian-focused discussion that examines their mutual reinforcement alongside the implementation conditions that shape outcomes. This paper contributes by bringing the two priorities together within the SDG framework, distinguishing educational access from educational quality and gender parity from substantive equality, and identifying practical policy implications for Nigeria. The paper is guided by four objectives: (i) clarify the concepts of sustainable development, quality education and gender equality; (ii) examine the relationship between quality education and gender equality in sustainable development; (iii) review relevant Nigerian policy interventions and implementation constraints; and (iv) propose measures for strengthening their joint contribution to sustainable development. [9, 10, 19]

2. Conceptual and Analytical Review

2.1. Development, Sustainable Development and the SDGs

Development is a multidimensional process involving improvements in material well-being, human capabilities, social relations and institutional conditions. Economic growth and productivity are important, but they do not by themselves establish that development is inclusive or sustainable. The human development perspective associated with Sen [4] places emphasis on expanding people's substantive freedoms and capabilities. Nussbaum [5] similarly draws attention to the conditions that enable people to live lives they have reason to value. These perspectives are useful for this paper because education and gender equality expand capabilities while also influencing how the benefits and burdens of development are distributed. [8, 11]

The Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development in terms of meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs [6]. The concept therefore combines economic, social and environmental dimensions and requires attention to equity within and between generations. The 2030 Agenda translates this broad commitment into 17 Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 4 and SDG 5 [1]. The goals are interdependent: education contributes to poverty reduction, health, decent work and civic participation, while gender equality affects access to these opportunities and the distribution of resources and power. An integrated approach is consequently more appropriate than treating each goal as a stand-alone policy target. [9-11]

2.2. Quality Education

Quality education extends beyond school attendance or the availability of classrooms. It includes equitable access, regular attendance, retention and completion; competent and supported teachers; safe and inclusive learning environments; relevant curricula; adequate learning materials; effective assessment; and demonstrable learning. It also requires that learners acquire foundational literacy and numeracy, transferable skills, critical thinking and competencies relevant to further education, work and citizenship. UNICEF's discussion of quality in education emphasizes learners, learning environments, content, processes and outcomes as interconnected dimensions [7, 18]

This distinction matters in Nigeria because enrolment statistics alone cannot reveal whether learners attend regularly, complete school, acquire foundational skills or experience safe and supportive learning conditions. A school may be formally accessible but functionally inaccessible where distance, cost, insecurity, disability-related barriers, inadequate sanitation or household labor prevent attendance. Likewise, a learner may complete a level of schooling without attaining

the expected competencies. Quality should therefore be assessed through a combination of access, equity, learning, completion and institutional conditions [18]

2.3. Gender and Gender Equality

Gender refers to socially constructed roles, expectations, responsibilities and power relations associated with being female or male in a particular society. These arrangements are shaped by culture, institutions, economic structures and public policy; they are not fixed or uniform. Gender equality concerns equal rights, responsibilities, opportunities and substantive ability to participate and benefit, irrespective of sex. It does not require that all people have identical experiences. Rather, it requires the removal of unjust barriers and the provision of fair conditions for the realization of rights and capabilities.

In education, gender equality must be assessed across the full educational pathway: entry, attendance, retention, completion, learning achievement, subject selection, access to technical and higher education, safety, leadership and transition into decent work. Similar enrolment rates can coexist with unequal learning conditions, school-related violence, discriminatory expectations or differences in subject choice. Gender parity is therefore a useful indicator, but it is not a complete measure of substantive gender equality. Analysis should also recognize that girls and women are not a homogeneous group; poverty, disability, rural location, displacement and insecurity can interact with gender to deepen exclusion [12, 16, 17]

2.4. The Relationship Between Quality Education and Gender Equality

Quality education can advance gender equality by strengthening literacy, knowledge of rights, economic independence, health awareness and participation in decision-making. Educational attainment can widen access to employment and income, although the extent of this benefit depends on labor-market opportunities, discrimination and the quality and relevance of the education received. Education can also challenge restrictive social norms when curricula, teaching practices and school environments promote respect, non-discrimination and equal participation [12]

The relationship also operates in the opposite direction. Gender equality can improve educational outcomes when households and institutions value girls' education, distribute resources fairly, protect learners from violence and harassment, provide appropriate sanitation and address barriers associated with early marriage, pregnancy and unpaid care responsibilities. Where girls are excluded or pushed out of school, the loss is not confined to individual learners: communities also lose potential skills, productivity, leadership and intergenerational benefits [12, 20]

However, neither relationship is automatic. Schooling can reproduce inequality where textbooks and classroom practices reinforce stereotypes, where girls are channeled away from science and technology, or where school environments tolerate harassment. Similarly, expanding access without improving learning may increase years spent in school without delivering the capabilities required for meaningful participation. A sustainable-development approach must therefore address both the quantity and quality of education and the institutional and social relations that determine who benefits [19, 20]

3. Nigerian Policy Interventions and Implementation Context

3.1. Policy and Institutional Interventions

Nigeria's Universal Basic Education framework provides a legal and policy foundation for free and compulsory basic education. The Universal Basic Education Act 2004 places responsibilities on government to provide basic education and establishes a framework for implementation [2]. Its significance lies in the recognition of basic education as a public responsibility. Nevertheless, statutory entitlement must be translated into functioning schools, adequate teachers, learning materials, accessible facilities and effective monitoring.

The National Policy on Gender in Education is another relevant intervention. It recognizes gender-related barriers in education and provides a framework for improving access, participation and outcomes [3]. The policy is important because gender-responsive education requires more than general statements of equal opportunity: it requires practical measures addressing retention, safety, school facilities, curriculum, teacher attitudes and the participation of women in educational leadership. Its impact depends on implementation plans, budget provision, coordination across levels of government and transparent monitoring.

Other interventions discussed in the Nigerian policy environment include school feeding and social-protection programs, student financing initiatives and efforts to expand access to tertiary education. Such programs can reduce the indirect costs of schooling and ease household constraints. Their contribution should, however, be evaluated against clearly defined outcomes, including attendance, retention, completion, learning and equitable reach. Program existence or announced coverage is not, on its own, evidence of effectiveness [13, 14]

3.2. Persistent Barriers and Implementation Gaps

Poverty and the direct and indirect costs of education remain important barriers. Even where tuition is formally free, families may face expenses for transport, uniforms, books, meals and examination-related items. For low-income households, children's time may also be required for paid work, domestic responsibilities or care. These pressures can affect girls and boys differently, depending on household expectations

and local labor arrangements. Social-protection measures can help, but they need reliable targeting and continuity [13, 14]

Socio-cultural practices and gender stereotypes can shape decisions about whether girls attend school, how long they remain there and which subjects or careers they pursue. Early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, unequal domestic workloads and beliefs that boys' education should take priority can constrain girls' educational opportunities. These barriers vary by community and should not be treated as uniform features of Nigerian culture. Policy responses need local engagement, community dialogue and protection of learners' rights rather than stigmatizing entire communities [12, 15, 16]

Insecurity and displacement disrupt schooling through school closures, threats to learners and teachers, damaged facilities and the movement of households. The consequences may be especially severe for girls where insecurity increases risks of abduction, exploitation or early marriage. Insecurity also compounds existing poverty and weak infrastructure. Education planning in affected areas therefore requires risk-sensitive approaches, safe learning spaces, psychosocial support and coordination with child-protection services [20]

Uneven infrastructure and teacher capacity also affect quality. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate water and sanitation, insufficient learning materials, unreliable electricity and shortages of trained teachers reduce the effectiveness of schooling. Girls may be particularly affected where sanitation facilities are unsafe or inadequate. Teacher deployment and professional development should address both subject competence and inclusive classroom practice, including the prevention of discrimination and harassment [18]

Finally, weaknesses in implementation, financing and data systems limit accountability. Policies may be fragmented across ministries and tiers of government, while monitoring may emphasize inputs or enrolment rather than learning and completion. Disaggregated data are needed to identify which groups are excluded and at what stage. Data should, where possible, be disaggregated by sex, location, disability and socio-economic status, while protecting children's privacy. Without such information, policy makers may overlook learners who are enrolled but irregularly attending, not learning or at risk of dropping out [9, 10]

4. Discussion: Implications for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

The review indicates that quality education and gender equality should be understood as mutually reinforcing development conditions rather than isolated social-sector targets. First, quality education can strengthen human capabilities and productivity, but these benefits are uneven when learners do not acquire relevant skills or when labor markets discriminate against women. The policy implication is that education planning should connect learning outcomes to pathways into further education, decent work and civic participation [9, 11, 12]

Second, gender equality improves the fairness and effectiveness of educational investment. Where girls face disproportionate barriers to attendance or completion, public expenditure does not translate into equal opportunity. Gender-responsive budgeting, school safety, adequate sanitation, accessible facilities and targeted support for vulnerable learners can help reduce these gaps. Such measures should be designed around documented local barriers rather than assumptions that a single intervention will work in every state or community [15, 17, 20]

Third, the relationship between the two goals is institutional. Education ministries, gender institutions, social-protection agencies, local governments and school management bodies need shared responsibilities and measurable targets. A policy framework that focuses only on enrolment may miss disparities in learning, completion and transition. Equally, a gender policy that does not address school financing, teacher deployment and infrastructure may have limited influence on everyday educational experience [10, 15, 16]

Fourth, the concept of sustainability requires attention to intergenerational effects. Girls' education can influence health knowledge, household decision-making and the educational opportunities of subsequent generations. Yet these effects should not be reduced to the instrumental value of girls and women for family or national development: equality is also a matter of rights, dignity and freedom. A rights-based approach is therefore consistent with, and strengthens, the broader development case for investment in education and gender equality [12, 17]

The available documentary evidence supports a policy and conceptual analysis, not a causal estimate of the effect of one variable on another. The paper consequently avoids claiming that particular programs have produced specified outcomes unless those outcomes are established by the cited source. It also recognizes that national averages can conceal substantial differences across states, rural and urban areas and socio-economic groups. These limitations reinforce the need for disaggregated, regularly updated evidence in future research and policy evaluation.

5. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative documentary review design. It examines secondary materials relevant to quality education, gender equality and sustainable development in Nigeria, including scholarly publications, Nigerian policy and legislative documents, and reports from relevant national and international institutions. The documentary materials considered include the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, the Universal Basic Education Act, the National Policy on Gender in Education, and literature addressing education quality, gender relations and sustainable development.

Materials were selected purposively for their relevance to the Nigerian context, their direct connection to the paper's objectives and the credibility of the issuing author or institution.

Greater attention was given to recent materials where they addressed current policy or implementation conditions, while foundational conceptual works were retained where necessary. The review used thematic analysis to organize the material around four themes: (i) the meaning and dimensions of quality education and gender equality; (ii) the relationship between the two concepts and sustainable development; (iii) Nigerian policy interventions; and (iv) barriers and implementation implications.

The analysis is interpretive and descriptive. It does not involve primary interviews, surveys or observations, nor does it apply a statistical meta-analysis, effect-size calculation or formal systematic-review screening protocol. Accordingly, the findings are presented as themes emerging from the documentary review and should not be interpreted as statistically representative estimates of the Nigerian education system. As the paper relies on publicly available documents, no human participants were recruited.

6. Conclusion

Quality education and gender equality are interdependent conditions for sustainable development in Nigeria. Quality education expands knowledge, skills and capabilities, while gender equality helps ensure that these opportunities and benefits are not restricted by discriminatory norms or institutional barriers. Their relationship is reciprocal: gender-responsive educational systems can improve girls' access, retention and learning, while equitable access to quality education can strengthen women's and girls' participation in economic, social and political life.

The review also shows that policy commitments and program announcements are not sufficient measures of progress. Persistent constraints include poverty, insecurity, socio-cultural barriers, uneven school infrastructure, teacher capacity challenges and weaknesses in implementation, financing and monitoring. In addition, enrolment and gender-parity figures alone cannot establish whether learners are completing school, acquiring relevant skills or experiencing safe and inclusive learning environments. Sustainable progress requires a shift from counting access alone to assessing equitable learning and life-course outcomes.

7. Recommendations

Government at federal, state and local levels should strengthen quality assurance in public and private schools through transparent inspections, published performance information and follow-up mechanisms. Monitoring should assess teaching and learning, safety, accessibility, sanitation and learner outcomes rather than relying only on registration or infrastructure checklists.

Education authorities should implement the National Policy on Gender in Education through costed action plans, clear institutional responsibilities and measurable indicators covering attendance, retention, completion, learning, subject choice and school leadership. Progress should be reviewed periodically and reported publicly [3, 15, 16]

Governments should prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy by supporting teacher recruitment, equitable deployment, continuous professional development, instructional materials and evidence-informed assessment. Additional support should be directed to underserved schools and communities.

States and local authorities should address barriers to girls' education through safe school environments, adequate gender-responsive sanitation, confidential reporting and referral systems for harassment and violence, and flexible support for learners affected by pregnancy, disability, displacement or household poverty, consistent with applicable law and child-protection standards [20]

Social-protection and school-support programs, including school feeding and targeted assistance, should be sustained only with transparent eligibility criteria, reliable funding, independent monitoring and evaluation of attendance, retention and learning outcomes. Program performance should be assessed rather than assumed [13, 14]

Government and community stakeholders should work with traditional, religious, parent and youth groups to challenge discriminatory practices and promote the value of girls' and boys' education. Community engagement should be locally grounded, rights-based and attentive to the different barriers faced by different groups.

Relevant ministries and agencies should strengthen education data systems and publish sex, location, disability and socio-economic status disaggregated indicators, subject to privacy safeguards. Reporting should distinguish enrolment from attendance, completion and learning achievement [9, 10]

Federal and state governments should improve coordination among education, women affairs, social development, health and child-protection institutions so that education and gender policies are supported by complementary services, adequate budgets and clear accountability arrangements.

8. Limitations and Areas for Further Research

This paper is a qualitative documentary review and does not provide primary field evidence or a statistical evaluation of the impact of individual government programs. The range and quality of publicly available documents also vary across states and policy areas. Future studies could use state-level comparative data, school-based surveys and program evaluations to examine differences in learning outcomes, gendered school experiences and the effectiveness of specific interventions. Longitudinal research would be particularly useful for assessing how educational access and completion translate into

employment, health and participation outcomes over time.

Abbreviations

SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UBE	Universal Basic Education

Author Contributions

Paschal Nchebechukwu Mba: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Writing – review & editing

Gabriel Igwebuike Ayogu: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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