

Imagined Futures: Indigenous Girls and Higher Education Access in Nigeria

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“People from my community think university education will change me, make me too proud, wayward and that no man will want to marry me after.”

Female, 14, not attending university.

Executive Summary

This University of Bath policy brief presents Indigenous students' views and experiences regarding access and participation in university education in Northern Nigeria and highlights the key enablers and barriers.

Nigeria has an estimated population of approximately 214 million (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). It is the most populous country in Africa and has the largest youth population on the continent, with 70% and 42% of its citizens under the age of 30 and 15, respectively (Akinyemi, 2023).

While postcolonial Nigeria has experienced a growing number of universities, access and participation remain highly uneven, particularly across regions and for students from disadvantaged and lower socio-economic groups (Lebeau and Oanda, 2020). Less than 15% of young people in Nigeria access university education (Okebukola, 2020), and 20 million are out-of-school, the majority of which are girls, one of the highest in the world, along with India and Pakistan (Woldbank, 2022). Geographic, economic, and cultural factors shape these opportunities, with students in urban centres having far greater access compared to those in marginalised and low-income areas (Owoeye and Yara, 2011; Olanrewaju et al., 2021). In Northern Nigeria, these challenges are even more pronounced due to social norms and economic barriers (UNICEF, 2022).

Girls' education, in particular, remains a major issue. Many girls, especially in the North, are unable to pursue university education due to economic constraints, early marriage, and societal expectations that prioritise domestic roles over academic achievement (Azeez et al., 2024). Studies show that two in five young women in Nigeria are married before the age of 18, and most of these women have little or no education (UNICEF, 2022).

Therefore, if sustainable economic and social justice is to be achieved, urgent action is needed to challenge these barriers and expand access to university education for girls and women. Equipping young women with university education opportunities enables them to participate in broader societal issues, including climate change action, community development, and policy advocacy, ensuring they play a vital role in shaping a more just and sustainable future.

We conducted a qualitative study in three Indigenous communities in Kano State, Northern Nigeria to explore these issues. We interviewed 80 young people (60 girls and 20 boys), capturing their personal experiences, aspirations, and the obstacles they face in accessing and participating in university education. The research was conducted in partnership with Five Cowries Arts Education Initiative, a local NGO working closely with Indigenous communities. With their support, we ensured that the study was culturally sensitive, using local languages such as Hausa for interviews and later translating them into English. This approach allowed us to engage meaningfully with participants and gain a deeper understanding of their experience in accessing university education.

Key Findings

- Many men see university education for women as a threat to traditional roles, often associating it with pride, waywardness, disobedience, or loss of cultural values, including marriage prospects.
- Women, while often eager to attend university, often feel anxious due to fears of societal judgment, forced marriages, and reduced opportunities for finding a partner.
- The challenges go beyond the lack of infrastructure or resources. Beliefs and values about university education play a major role in limiting access.
- Some participants expressed the need for financial support and for universities to be located closer to their communities to ensure cultural and social values are not undermined.
- There are concerns that universities could promote behaviours seen as contrary to community values.
- Participants in the study noted that their communities often saw Islamic or traditional education as more compatible with their values and religion compared to Western university education.
- Some participants, especially boys, expressed concerns that even with a university degree, securing employment remains uncertain. This discourages them and their parents from prioritising university education.



This report emphasises the importance of culturally sensitive advocacy and community-based interventions. It recommends five (5) guiding principles for advocacy and sensitivity regarding university education in Indigenous communities to help reshape perceptions about university education and show how it can coexist with traditional values. These are:

One

Community-driven Collaboration

Engaging with local leaders, parents, and cultural influencers to ensure advocacy efforts align with community values.

Two

Relational Advocacy

Building trust through personal connections, storytelling, and shared experiences to challenge misconceptions about higher education.

Three

Sustainability and Continuity

Establishing long-term awareness programs to reinforce the benefits of university education and address evolving concerns.

Four

Youth as Change Agents

Empowering young people to advocate for their right to education and act as role models within their communities.

Five

Measurable Impact

Tracking changes in perceptions, enrollment rates, and policy shifts to assess progress and refine advocacy strategies.

Background and Context

This research was collaboratively conducted by the University of Bath and Five Cowries Arts Education Initiative between November 2024 and March 2025. Its aim was to understand how young people, particularly girls, in Indigenous communities across three of the largest Indigenous areas in Kano, North-west Nigeria, access university education. It focuses on their everyday challenges and provides a novel and deeper understanding of the social and cultural context shaping their narratives in accessing university education.

"...more than half of the girls are not in school in states in the North-west and North-east of Nigeria."

(UNICEF, 2022, P.2)

Access to University education is a significant challenge for Indigenous communities in Northern Nigeria, especially for women, who face barriers shaped by cultural, social, and gender-related issues.

"2 in 5 young women in Nigeria were first married or in union before the age of 18. 81% of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18 had no education as compared to 19% who had at least a secondary education."

(UNICEF 2022, P.84)

Women's access to university education has been recognised globally as a transformative factor for social and economic development. However, in Sub-Saharan Africa, traditional norms and systemic inequalities hinder these opportunities, leaving many women unable to pursue university education.

"Nearly 60 million young girls in West and Central Africa were first married or in union before the age of 18"

(UNICEF, 2022, P.8)

"Better educated women tend to be more informed about nutrition and healthcare, have fewer children, marry at a later age, and their children are usually healthier, should they choose to become mothers. They are more likely to participate in the formal labor market and earn higher incomes"

(WORLD BANK, N.D, P.1)

Northern Nigeria, particularly Kano state, is known for its rich cultural heritage, vibrant history, and strong religious traditions. These traditions form the backbone of societal values and community identity, yet they often serve as barriers to accessing university education, especially for women.

Cultural expectations and societal pressures reinforce the belief that education for women is unnecessary or even detrimental to traditional roles. For instance, this research found that women pursuing university education are often labelled as "too proud" or "wayward," discouraging families from supporting their daughters' academic aspirations. Similarly, boys, while generally more supported, face economic pressures to engage in income-generating activities, often at the expense of their education.

"In 2018/19, before COVID-19, some 40.1 percent of Nigerians were living in poverty"

(WORLD BANK 2022, P.10)

Despite being home to several universities and higher education institutions, Northern Nigeria still suffers from an inequalities in educational access. Early marriages, societal stigmas, and financial hardships create an environment where education for young boys and especially girls is seen as incompatible with their prescribed societal roles.

This research investigates these barriers in depth and highlights the intersection of cultural, economic, and societal factors shaping perceptions of university education among Indigenous communities.

Methodology

In this research, working with the NGO Five Cowries, we used qualitative methods to investigate the experiences and perspectives of university education among Indigenous boys and girls in Kano, Nigeria. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 80 participants from three different communities in Kano, each in its own local government district. The participants were 60 girls and 20 boys aged 14 to 25. To guarantee a varied range of opinions, we chose participants who were currently attending university, had dropped out, and had never attended.

We worked together with Five Cowries Arts Education Initiative, a local non-governmental organisation that works with marginalised populations in Kano. Their knowledge and

relationships among these groups were important in identifying participants and conducting interviews. To guarantee inclusivity and authenticity, the interviews were conducted in Hausa, an Indigenous language that is widely spoken and understood in the communities. This method enables individuals to freely and completely express themselves in their original language. The data collected was then transcribed and translated into English for examination. We designed the interviews to focus on the barriers participants encounter, their personal experiences with university education, and broader societal attitudes that influence access. This collaborative approach ensured that our study was culturally sensitive and reflective of community reality.

Key Findings

Out of all those who took part in our research, over three-quarters (80%) identified societal resistance, especially from men, as a major barrier to women pursuing university education. Men often associated higher education with a loss of traditional values, pride, or reduced marriage prospects for women.

Over **95%** of participants who took part in the research described a perception within their communities that universities promote “anti-community” behaviours or ideologies, making families hesitant to send their children, particularly girls, to university.

Many participants reported that educated women were often viewed as “too proud” or “wayward,” with parents fearing they would lose marriage opportunities or reject traditional gender roles.

85% of female participants in the research cited pressure to marry early as a key factor limiting their ability to pursue university education.

Female participants mentioned that marriage was frequently seen as the only path for girls once they completed secondary school, with university education considered unnecessary or even detrimental.

Nearly all (95%) of female participants in the research expressed fears of forced marriage, judgment, or rejection from their communities for aspiring to attend university.

80% of all those who took part also reported financial constraints as a critical obstacle, with many families unable to afford tuition fees or related costs like transportation and accommodation.

Over **half** of respondents in the study stated they would consider a university education if scholarships or financial aid were provided. This likely reflects the high rates of poverty amongst Indigenous populations in rural areas.

Three-quarters (75%) of female participants in the study cited pressure to marry early as a key factor limiting their ability to pursue higher education.

Boys who took part in the research were slightly more likely than girls to attribute financial difficulties as their primary barrier, with **40%** saying they viewed vocational work as more practical for immediate family support.

Over **70%** of participants in the research mentioned the lack of universities within or near their communities as a significant barrier to access. They mentioned their parents’ concerns about sending their daughters far from home due to safety, monitoring, and cultural expectations.

Participants believed proximity to universities could increase access by addressing logistical and cultural concerns.

Many of the research participants, especially boys, reported scepticism about the value of university education due to limited job opportunities after graduation. **60%** of participants noted that families were discouraged from investing in education because they perceived no tangible return in terms of employment.



Participants in the study also revealed widespread perceptions about universities being places of moral corruption, leading to fear and mistrust. Families were particularly concerned about intergender mingling, perceived loss of traditional values, and influence from urban lifestyles.

University education was perceived as making girls disobedient, less likely to marry, and exposed to bad influences that go against cultural values.

"People from our town mostly think about girls' education as a waste of time. They think about marrying us off when a girl attains the age of 19 years. That's what they understand."

"Some if you are about to continue education, some say to you there is no morality for women to continue education. It's better just to marry."

"If a girl wants to further her education, some people look at her differently - that such a girl is already wayward and too smart in everything, and getting married will be difficult for her. (She may not find a suitor easily). Because she has already attended university education and mingled with men."

"They consider them as bad girls. They think they are disobedient to their parents."

"The elders in my village say a woman with too much education will not listen to her husband. They think it's not good for families."

"People think universities are full of bad influences. They don't trust what happens there."

Patriarchal beliefs limit girls' education, as many see marriage as their true path and view university as unnecessary, risky, or a waste of money.

"Honestly, it is marriage. Mostly, if you do not go to university, then you are just going to get married."

"Honestly, some will be seen as indecent because most of them, when they go to school, it is to fall in love; some don't even focus on education, while some focus on education. That is why a girl is not allowed to go to university and study in this community. Just if she finds a husband, she will be married off because of such kinds of things happening."

"Because a father thinks of you as a female who only needs to get married. So, a father may think that if he pays money for girls' education, it is like he has wasted the money he paid. It is better to pay for males to continue with education."

For boys, the main barrier to university is money, without financial support, they are forced to work instead of continuing their education.

"For boys, the issue is not marriage, but money. If you cannot afford to go, then you just have to find work."

"Even if we have the grades, without money, how can we go? There is no support for families like mine."

"If there was a scholarship or some help, maybe my brother and I would have been in school now."

Many believe having universities closer to their communities would make education more accessible, affordable, and acceptable to parents who worry about distance and influence.

"In my opinion, universities have to be close to our community so that it will be easier for people to go to school and come back home because some parents do not have money."

"If the university was closer, maybe they would allow us to go because they could visit and monitor us."

"The first help is to enlighten the parents because most of our parents don't like us going to higher institutions. And I told you before, a college or university has to be built in this town. This is the biggest help we need."

Many parents see university as a threat to culture or a wasted effort due to unemployment after graduation.

"We need people to come to our communities and talk to parents. They need to understand that education does not destroy culture."

"Like in this village, our parents need to be reoriented and enlightened about the importance of university education because once a girl grows up, they will start talking about marriage. But if our parents are enlightened, they will know the importance of girls' education so that they will help the community."

"If people are getting jobs after graduation, they will agree. The lack of getting jobs is discouraging. Some parents spend a lot of money on their children's education, and still, the children do not get jobs after graduation."

Recommendations

Our findings inform the following recommendations to address the barriers Indigenous youth face in accessing university education.

- Encourage universities to co-develop programs with Indigenous leaders and NGOs that integrate traditional knowledge, align with local economic opportunities, and demonstrate the role of education in community development. This will help students and families see university education as both relevant and beneficial – combatting perceptions that it is a danger or risk.
- Develop culturally sensitive advocacy initiatives in partnership with local NGOs, elders, and community leaders to share knowledge about the value of university education. These programs should address misconceptions, particularly concerns that universities promote “anti-community” behaviours, and share success stories of Indigenous graduates.
- Work with local NGOs, religious leaders, and community organisations to promote the long-term benefits of education, ensuring young people, especially girls, have the opportunity to pursue learning alongside traditional expectations. Additionally, develop flexible education pathways for married students to continue their studies without stigma or financial hardship.
- Provides need-based scholarships, bursaries, and transportation stipends in collaboration with NGOs and government bodies. Additionally, explore the possibility of developing satellite campuses or learning hubs near Indigenous communities to improve accessibility, particularly for young women facing mobility and safety concerns.
- Universities should implement gender-sensitive policies, provide culturally respectful student housing, and establish mentorship programs led by Indigenous professionals. Creating safe, inclusive spaces that honour cultural identity and traditions will enhance student retention and success.
- Partner with universities, NGOs, and policymakers to conduct continuous research on evolving barriers to higher education. Data-driven interventions should be implemented and adjusted over time to ensure educational programs remain accessible and effective for Indigenous youth.



Guiding Principles for Advocacy and Sensitization about University Education in Indigenous Communities



Community-Driven Collaboration

Engage communities as partners in advocacy to build trust and ensure cultural relevance. Collaboration with local leaders, women's groups, and youth organisations can foster ownership of the advocacy process and its outcomes.

Example: Hold community forums where members share their aspirations and challenges around university education.

Relational Advocacy

Build relationships based on trust, respect, and mutual understanding to ensure that advocacy is welcomed and impactful. Relational advocacy involves listening to community concerns and adapting messages accordingly.

Example: Establish local mentorship programs pairing university graduates with community members to share personal experiences.

Sustainability and Continuity

Design advocacy programs that are not one-off events but ongoing processes embedded within the community's existing structures. This principle ensures the longevity of positive perceptions and practices.

Example: Collaborate with schools, religious institutions, and community groups to create yearly campaigns advocating for university education.

Youth as Change Agents

Involve youth as active participants in advocacy efforts, leveraging their potential to influence peers and elders alike.

Example: Establish student ambassador programs where current university students or recent graduates advocate within their communities.

Measurable Impact

Define clear metrics to assess the effectiveness of advocacy efforts, such as shifts in attitudes, increased school enrolment rates, and community support for university education.

Example: Conduct pre- and post-advocacy surveys to measure changes in perceptions and document success stories.

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