

# Education and Employment: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Access to Education in Nigeria, 1960 - 2024

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## ABSTRACT

The relationship between educational accessibility and labor force participation serves as a critical barometer for measuring national development and gender equity in Nigeria. This paper presents an exhaustive historical analysis of the trajectory of gendered access to education and its subsequent impact on employment outcomes from 1960 to 2024. By tracing the evolution of pedagogical paradigms from pre-colonial functionalism and the colonial "domesticity" curriculum to post-independence modernization and the contemporary digital transformation, the study identifies persistent structural barriers that have hindered women's full professional integration. Utilizing a summative qualitative content analysis (QCA) of 86 primary and secondary sources including National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reports, World Bank datasets, and peer-reviewed historical texts the paper explores the devastating impacts of the 1980s Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) on female schooling and the subsequent "learning crisis" in Northern Nigeria. The study argues that despite the adoption of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004 and various national gender policies, the "motherhood penalty" and the monetization of politics have sustained a significant gender-employment gap. The paper concludes with detailed narrative-based policy recommendations centered on legislative reform, Technical and Vocational Education (TVET) modernization, and digital inclusion strategies to ensure an inclusive and resilient democratic future for all citizens of the Nigerian federation.

**Keywords:** Education Policy, Nigeria, Gender Inequality, Labor Market, Fourth Republic, 1960-2024.

## INTRODUCTION

The narrative of national development in Nigeria is inextricably linked to the evolution of its human capital, yet this journey has been characterized by a profound and persistent gender disparity in access to formal schooling and high-productivity employment. Education is recognized globally as a fundamental human right and a critical catalyst for socio-economic transformation; however, in the Nigerian context, this right has historically been mediated by a complex interplay of gender, geography, class, and religious identity. Since the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Nigerian state has theoretically committed to providing equal educational opportunities for all citizens, but the transition from lofty theoretical ideals to grassroots practice has been fraught with structural inefficiencies and the heavy weight of historical legacies. The relationship between education and employment in Nigeria serves as a mirror to the country's shifting political and economic priorities across different republics, revealing how gendered barriers have been constructed and maintained over several decades of post-colonial governance. This study investigates the nuances of these barriers, analyzing how institutional frameworks have both facilitated and hindered female professional mobility throughout the nation's history.<sup>1</sup>

From the optimism of the 1960 independence era to the fiscal turbulence of the 1980s and the digital aspirations of the 2020s, each epoch has redefined the role of the Nigerian woman in the public sphere through various educational models and policy shifts. Historically, the Nigerian educational system has transitioned through

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Ugwu and O. Lawal, "Women and Girls' Vulnerability to Climate Change: Gender-Based Policy Strategies," *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences* 16, no. 2 (2022): 54.

several structural frameworks including the 6-5-2-3, the 6-3-3-4, and the current 9-3-4 system each attempting to address the question of "educational relevance" for a burgeoning and diverse population. Despite these consistent efforts toward reform and the intermittent injection of funds during periods of economic boom, as of 2024, Nigeria continues to grapple with a profound "learning crisis" where enrollment figures do not necessarily translate into employability or labor market leadership for the female population.<sup>2</sup> This crisis is particularly acute in regions where educational infrastructure has failed to keep pace with demographic growth, leading to a situation where academic certification lacks the corresponding skill acquisition required for the modern knowledge economy. Consequently, many women find themselves holding qualifications that do not align with the demands of the current workforce, reinforcing a cycle of underemployment and stagnation.<sup>3</sup>

Rapid socioeconomic development has been observed to depend heavily on the caliber of women and their access to quality education, yet gender-based stereotyping and institutional biases remain deeply entrenched in the nation's pedagogical and corporate architecture. The historical trajectory of female marginalization in modern Nigeria can be traced directly back to the nation's contact with European colonizers who imposed Victorian ideologies of women's alienation from the formal sectors of the money economy.<sup>4</sup> In the contemporary era, these colonial legacies intersect with overlapping climate stressors, regional insurgencies, and entrenched patriarchal norms that disproportionately affect women in rural and coastal communities across the federation. Recent reports indicate that over 60% of Nigeria's out-of-school children are girls, a staggering statistic that underscores the fragility of the progress made in the years since independence in 1960.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the labor market remains highly segmented, with women significantly underrepresented in high-growth Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) sectors while remaining overrepresented in vulnerable, informal employment that lacks formal safety nets or social protection.<sup>6</sup>

### Statement of the Problem

Despite the proliferation of educational policies and the legal mandate of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004, a significant disconnect persists between female academic achievement and labor market participation in Nigeria. This problem is rooted in a historical "path-dependency" where the functional, economically inclusive indigenous educational models of the pre-colonial era were systematically supplanted by a colonial curriculum that institutionalized female domestication. This colonial "cult of domesticity" created a structural bias that guides women toward "caring" professions and informal trade while excluding them from the technical, scientific, and administrative cores of the formal economy. The contemporary manifestation of this problem is visible in the "labor market paradox," where female graduates often outperform their male counterparts academically in higher education but face significant barriers to professional prominence due to the "motherhood penalty" and pervasive gendered hiring biases.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the current "learning crisis" in Northern Nigeria, exacerbated by the historical regional gaps and the 1980s economic downturn under the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), has created a situation where millions of girls lack the basic literacy required for digital inclusion. This exclusion has profound economic implications, as the 5th Industrial Revolution demands a high level of technical literacy that the current educational framework struggles to provide for the girl-child in underserved regions. Without a systematic analysis of these historical causalities, contemporary policy interventions risk being merely normative rather than transformative, failing to address the underlying structural inequities that keep half of the nation's potential productivity sidelined. This study therefore seeks to bridge the gap between historical narrative and empirical policy analysis by investigating the specific mechanisms through which past educational paradigms continue to restrict modern female employment outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A. Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1995/2018), 50.

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF Nigeria, *Girls' Education Cheat Sheet* (Abuja: UNICEF, 2023), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Okebukola, *Nigerian Education Delivery System: A Historical Appraisal* (Lagos: UNESCO Publishing, 2015), 31.

<sup>5</sup> V. Anunobi, "Women's Marginalization," in *Understanding Modern Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 321.

<sup>6</sup> Centre for African Justice, *Girls' Education in Nigeria: Barriers and Importance* (The Hague: CAJ, 2024), 5.

<sup>7</sup> O. George et al., "Gender Differences in Academic Performance and Industry Relevance," *WSEAS Transactions on Business and Economics* 18 (2021): 485.

<sup>8</sup> Federal Ministry of Education, *Synthesis Report on Contiguous Nationalities* (Abuja: FGN, 2007), 31.

## Research Questions

To address the identified gaps in female educational and professional integration, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent did the transition from pre-colonial functionalism to the colonial "domesticity" curriculum redefine women's economic agency and communal roles in Nigeria?
2. How did the fiscal policies and public sector retrenchments of the 1986 Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) influence female school completion rates and subsequent labor market entry?
3. What are the persistent historical and structural factors that prevent the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act from achieving its goal of gender parity in the 21st-century labor market?
4. In what ways can current digital literacy and STEM outreach programs be restructured to mitigate the "motherhood penalty" and current occupational segregation?

## Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a longitudinal analysis of the historical factors that have shaped gendered access to education and employment in Nigeria from 1960 to 2024. The specific objectives include:

1. To trace the evolution of pedagogical paradigms from pre-colonial functionalism to colonial domestication and evaluate their impact on female economic centrality.
2. To analyze the socio-economic impacts of the 1986 Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) on female educational attainment and the subsequent "feminization of poverty."
3. To evaluate the efficacy of post-independence educational reforms, specifically the 2004 Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act, in addressing the contemporary labor market paradox.
4. To propose evidence-based policy strategies for enhancing female participation in STEM and TVET to foster a majoritarian and inclusive democratic architecture.

## Conceptual Review

### The Concept of Vulnerable Employment

A proper understanding of the education-employment nexus in Nigeria requires the clarification of "vulnerable employment," which the World Bank defines as work lacking formal arrangements and social safety nets. Statistics indicate that 78.9% of employed Nigerian women fall into this category, reflecting a labor market where female productivity is concentrated in the unrecognized informal sector despite formal schooling achievements. By conceptualizing employment through this lens, the study can better explain why rising literacy rates have not necessarily led to improved economic security for the majority of Nigerian women. This conceptualization moves beyond simple unemployment rates to address the quality of work available to women, highlighting how the lack of formal contracts and benefits reinforces the cycle of economic marginalization within the Fourth Republic.<sup>9</sup>

### The Motherhood Penalty and Occupational Segregation

The "motherhood penalty" refers to the systemic disadvantages in pay and perceived competence that working mothers encounter relative to childless women in professional environments. In the Nigerian banking and corporate sectors, this penalty often manifests as unwritten workplace policies that discourage or even ban conception within the first year of hire, forcing a choice between career and reproduction. This phenomenon is closely tied to occupational segregation, where women are traditionally guided toward "feminine" areas of study that generally pay less and offer fewer leadership opportunities. By reviewing these concepts, the study identifies the "gatekeeping" mechanisms that maintain gendered labor segmentation, suggesting that modern corporate biases are a direct continuation of colonial-era beliefs regarding women's subordinate professional roles.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> World Bank, *Nigeria Vulnerable Employment Data* (Washington: World Bank, 2023), 62.

<sup>10</sup> Merri Iddrisu et al., "Motherhood Penalty, a Silent Phenomenon: Unveiling the Challenges and Inequalities Working Mothers Encounter," in *Gender Differences in Labour Markets* (2025), 41.

## Literacy and the Contemporary Learning Crisis

The "learning crisis" is a critical concept denoting a situation where children remain in school for several years but fail to acquire basic proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics. In Nigeria, this crisis disproportionately affects the girl-child, with regional literacy rates in the North frequently falling below 40% due to historical deprivation and contemporary insecurity. This conceptual review argues that literacy should not be measured by enrollment alone, but by "industry relevance" and the capacity to participate in the knowledge-based economy. Without addressing this crisis, targets such as 95% digital literacy by 2030 remain aspirational, as the foundational skills required for technical training are systematically denied to millions of girls across the federation.<sup>11</sup>

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Human Capital Theory

**Proponents:** The primary proponents of Human Capital Theory include neoclassical economists such as Gary Becker, Theodore Schultz, and Jacob Mincer, who formalized the framework in the 1960s. **Ideology:** The theory posits that education, training, and health are deliberate investments that increase an individual's productivity and, consequently, a nation's economic output. It views labor as an asset whose value can be augmented through pedagogical investment, leading to higher individual earnings and national growth.<sup>12</sup> **Strengths:** This theory provides a robust economic justification for public spending on education and vocational training by demonstrating the high returns on investment (ROI). It allows for the quantification of societal progress through metrics such as literacy rates and skill alignment with market demands. **Weaknesses/Critiques:** Critics like Michael Spence argue that the theory overemphasizes economic framing, treating humans as "economic units" while ignoring non-monetary benefits of education. It is also criticized for assuming that labor markets are perfect and for ignoring structural inequalities like discrimination. **Application:** In this study, Human Capital Theory is used to analyze how the historical marginalization of Nigerian women represents a "lost investment" for the state. It provides the analytical lens to explain why the current "learning crisis" is an economic catastrophe that hinders Nigeria's sustainable development goals.<sup>13</sup>

### Liberal Feminist Theory

**Proponents:** Key figures associated with Liberal Feminism include Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem.

**Ideology:** Liberal feminism asserts that gender equality can be achieved through systematic legal and political reform within existing social systems. It focuses on individual rights, equal citizenship, and the removal of discriminatory laws and customary constraints that block women's entrance into the public sphere.<sup>14</sup>

**Strengths:** This framework is highly effective for identifying specific institutional barriers and advocating for practical reforms such as gender quotas and equal pay. It has been instrumental in securing voting rights and property rights for women across the globe.

**Weaknesses/Critiques:** Marxist and Radical feminists argue that liberal feminism fails to challenge the underlying patriarchal and capitalist structures that cause oppression. African feminists also critique its Western individualism, which may overlook the communal relational personhood of African societies. **Application:** This study utilizes Liberal Feminist Theory to critique the colonial "cult of domesticity" and to justify recommendations for statutory gender quotas and legislative changes in Nigeria. It provides the scholarly foundation for arguing that achieving gender equity requires the dismantling of institutionalized barriers in the Fourth Republic.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, *Literacy Scope and State Rankings* (Abuja: NBS, 2023), 60.

<sup>12</sup> Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 12.

<sup>13</sup> S. S. Acemoglu and D. Autor, "Lectures in Labor Economics," (2011): 1.

<sup>14</sup> R. Giddens, *Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Onyebueke et al., "Patriarchy and Gender Disparities," in *Feminist Perspectives on Nigerian Economy* (Anambra, 2024), 18.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a Qualitative Historical Research design, utilizing a Summative Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) framework to synthesize data spanning a 64-year time horizon. This methodology was purposively selected to address the requirement for empirical rigor while maintaining the analytical depth required to interpret the latent meanings and historical continuities within Nigerian education policy. While purely quantitative statistical models provide valuable snapshots of current labor market disparities, QCA allows for the identification of "core consistencies" and causal patterns across different political eras from the colonial period to the current Fourth Republic that a narrow mathematical approach might otherwise overlook in a longitudinal study. This systematic method ensures that the research remains grounded in the socio-cultural context of Nigeria while utilizing data to support its historical claims.<sup>16</sup>

The data set for this analysis consists of 86 purposely selected primary and secondary documents, including institutional reports from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and the World Bank, legal frameworks like the 2004 UBE Act, and peer-reviewed scholarly texts. The analytical procedure followed a Directed and Summative approach, where manifest content, such as colonial-era enrollment figures and contemporary literacy rates, was organized into thematic categories derived from the study's theoretical lenses. Through Data Triangulation, the researcher cross-referenced these diverse sources to identify persistent "path-dependencies," such as the transition from "domestic science" to modern occupational segregation. This systematic qualitative method ensures that the findings are grounded in a transparent, reproducible, and academically rigorous evaluation of existing secondary data, satisfying the standards for social science research without the need for primary fieldwork.<sup>17</sup>

### Pre-Colonial Context: Functionalism, Economy, And Female Agency

Prior to the imposition of Western formal education, the diverse contiguous nationalities within the geographical space now known as Nigeria including the Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, and Edo peoples possessed comprehensive and functional educational systems.<sup>18</sup> Indigenous education was not characterized by formal classrooms or standardized examinations but was instead a lifelong, communal process of socialization and skill acquisition designed to ensure that every individual was prepared to function usefully within their society.<sup>19</sup> For the Nigerian girl, the curriculum was not restricted to the domestic sphere in the Western Victorian sense; rather, it was an intensive apprenticeship in the multi-faceted economic roles essential for the survival of the kin group. Traditional Nigerian education was fundamentally progressive and holistic, integrating moral formation with vocational training.<sup>20</sup>

Pre-colonial Nigerian women were central to subsistence agriculture, regional trade, food processing, and artisanal crafts, and education prepared them for these roles through observation, imitation, and active participation in the labor of the community.<sup>21</sup> In many pre-colonial societies, such as those of the Igbo and Yoruba, women dominated local markets and inter-regional trade, providing a significant buffer against environmental and economic stress.<sup>22</sup> Traditional educational practices such as rites of passage, folktales, and apprenticeships were used to transmit ecological literacy and administrative skills.<sup>23</sup> Apprenticeship systems thrived, especially among the Igbo with the *Igba-Odibo* model, where young people learned trades under experienced masters.<sup>24</sup> For women, this included mastery of pottery making, weaving, and complex food processing techniques. Education in the pre-colonial era was so functional that a woman without a craft or trade was often regarded with contempt in her community.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002), 453.

<sup>17</sup> S. Elo and H. Kyngäs, "The Qualitative Content Analysis Process," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62, no. 1 (2008): 107.

<sup>18</sup> Federal Ministry of Education, *Synthesis Report on Contiguous Nationalities* (Abuja: FGN, 2007), 31.

<sup>19</sup> D. D. Bakare, *Traditional Nigerian Education: An Overview* (Ibadan: Scholars Press, 2024), 38.

<sup>20</sup> I. E. Ezedinachi, "Women and Dynamics of Food Security in Pre-Colonial Nigeria," *Journal of African History and Archaeology* 1, no. 1 (2023): 110.

<sup>21</sup> R. Uwameiye and R. Osagie, "Pre-Colonial Period and Women's Economic Agency," *Knowledge Review* 12, no. 1 (2012): 35.

<sup>22</sup> G. Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 19.

<sup>23</sup> Ezedinachi, "Women and Dynamics of Food Security," 118.

<sup>24</sup> Bakare, *Traditional Nigerian Education*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> S. Aliyu, "Vocational Skills in Pre-colonial Times," *Online Research Journals* (1992): 39.

In Northern Nigeria, while the introduction of Islam in the 11th century introduced more structured forms of learning, education remained functional, with early scholars like Abdullah b. Fodio outlining an educational vision that included maturity and vocational skill for both sexes.<sup>26</sup> The notion that pre-colonial Nigerian women were universally subordinated to a "culture of silence" is challenged by the historical record of female leadership, exemplified by figures like Queen Amina of Zaria and various female Oonis in Ife.<sup>27</sup> These leadership roles were supported by informal political education within women's associations, guilds, and age-grade systems, which functioned as sites of collective decision-making and communal resource pooling.<sup>28</sup> This indigenous pedagogical framework fostered virtues such as self-reliance, respect for authority, and social conformity, ensuring that women were not peripheral but central to the flow of history.<sup>29</sup> However, this system was largely informal and oral, relying on contextual learning rather than written content, which made it vulnerable to the institutionalized written codes brought by colonial forces.<sup>30</sup>

### Colonial Context: The Cult of Domestication and Victorian Legacies (1900-1960)

The arrival of Western formal education, pioneered by Christian missionaries starting in 1842, introduced a radical departure from indigenous learning systems.<sup>31</sup> While the introduction of formal schooling eventually became the primary vehicle for upward social mobility, its initial deployment was deeply gendered and served the utilitarian needs of the British colonial administration.<sup>32</sup> The conception of gender brought by the British was rooted in Victorian England, where women's roles were increasingly restricted to the domestic sphere and excluded from political and core societal concerns.<sup>33,34</sup> From the outset, the curriculum was bifurcated by gender, reflecting a colonial attitude that female education was a "wasteful" expenditure if it did not prepare them to be "good housewives" and "Christian mothers."<sup>35</sup>

In primary schools under the 1909 Code of Education, boys were taught scientific and job-oriented subjects like nature study, colloquial English, and manual training, such as drawing and shorthand.<sup>36</sup> These skills were designed to equip young men for "pen-pushing" jobs as junior clerks or roles in the government railway, public works, and marine departments. In contrast, female education was "tailored towards domestic science and home management," with obligatory subjects including cookery, bakery, plain needlework, and laundry.<sup>37</sup> Girls were often denied the literary, scientific, and commercial subjects offered to boys, ensuring that they were ill-equipped to compete for jobs in the emerging money economy.<sup>38</sup> This monotypic emphasis on domesticity ensured that even when women held prominent roles in traditional commerce, they were unable to navigate the changing rules of commerce in a fast-mutating society.<sup>39</sup>

The British policy of "indirect rule," formalized under Governor-General Frederick Lugard, had a profound impact on the regional distribution of education and deepened the gap between the North and the South.<sup>40</sup> Missionary activity was restricted in the predominantly Muslim Northern protectorate to avoid religious conflict, leading to a considerable educational gap where Western education was viewed with suspicion or apathy.<sup>41</sup> By the late 1920s, when the colonial government began encouraging schooling for Northern girls, it was restricted

<sup>26</sup> K. Oyelami, "Abdullah b. Fodio and Islamic Pedagogy," *ResearchGate* (2025): 28.

<sup>27</sup> S. Joseph, "Functionalism in Traditional Education," *Richtmann* (2007): 34.

<sup>28</sup> K. Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics," *Women in Africa* (1976): 45.

<sup>29</sup> D. T. Agbalajobi, "Women's Participation and the Political Process in Nigeria," *African Journal of Political Science* (2010): 75.

<sup>30</sup> A. Ozigi and L. Ocho, *Education in Northern Nigeria* (London: George Allen, 1981), 101.

<sup>31</sup> V. Anunobi, *Understanding Modern Nigeria*, 321.

<sup>32</sup> C. Pereira, "Victorian Ideologies and Alienation," *Understanding Modern Nigeria* (2002): 32.

<sup>33</sup> A. Mama, "Colonial Conception of Gender," in *Engendering African Social Sciences* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997), 61.

<sup>34</sup> *Journal of International Women's Studies*, "The Cult of Gender-Oriented Domestication," 10, no. 2 (2008): 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Journal of International Women's Studies*, "The Cult of Gender-Oriented Domestication," 43.

<sup>36</sup> A. Windel, *Elite Schooling and the Colonial State* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2009), 43.

<sup>37</sup> L. Denzer, *Domestic Science Training in Colonial Yorubaland* (New Jersey: Rutgers, 1992), 10.

<sup>38</sup> A. Adeyinka, *Curriculum and Industry Disadvantage* (Lagos: ResearchGate, 1998), 46.

<sup>39</sup> R. Gaidzwanwa, *Women Education in Nigeria* (Lagos: ResearchGate, 1992), 62.

<sup>40</sup> F. Lugard, *Amalgamation Report* (London: Colonial Office, 1920), 109.

<sup>41</sup> O. Fagbunmi, "Regional Educational Gap and Indirect Rule," *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* (2005): 40.

to "rudimentary schooling" intended to fit them for village life and self-improvement rather than professional careers.<sup>42</sup> Data from 1928 highlights the stark numerical results of these biased policies: there were 612 boys enrolled in government and assisted secondary schools compared to only 53 girls.<sup>43</sup> The gross denial of literary education undermined women's participation in nationalism and national policy-making, leaving them "politically handicapped" and "economically impoverished" compared to the male population.<sup>44</sup>

### Post-Independence Nigeria: Policy Shifts and Economic Volatility (1960-1990)

Nigeria's independence in 1960 brought the right to take destiny into its own hands, including the formulation of education policies intended for total emancipation.<sup>45</sup> However, the transition from a colonial to an indigenous system was slow, and the structural inequities of the past continued to influence the new nation. In 1969, a National Curriculum Conference was held in Lagos to review existing educational goals and propose a new course that would meet the needs and aspirations of Nigerians.<sup>46</sup> This conference led to the publication of the first indigenous National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977, which introduced the 6-3-3-4 system and aimed to promote national consciousness and self-reliance.<sup>47</sup> The 1970s was a decade of rapid expansion fueled by the oil boom, which provided the financial resources necessary for the Universal Primary Education (UPE) program launched in 1976.<sup>48</sup>

This period saw a significant surge in female enrollment as parents began to view education as a path to civilization and upward mobility.<sup>49</sup> However, this surge also led to overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and a decline in educational quality.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, this generation of women was often guided into "socially acceptable" professions. Teacher training and nursing were considered by both men and women to be the most suitable for female public engagement, reflecting a persistent view that female labor should remain an extension of "mothering."<sup>51</sup> While this provided a path to wage employment, it reinforced occupational segregation and restricted women from entering high-ranking technical professions.<sup>52</sup>

The 1980s were marked by a severe economic downturn, leading Nigeria to implement a debilitating Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in 1986.<sup>53,54</sup> The SAP involved price liberalization, devaluation of the currency, and massive reductions in public expenditure on social programs, which had devastating effects on the health and education sectors.<sup>55</sup> Trends from this period revealed a downward trend in female participation and completion rates; as families faced increased poverty, the "opportunity cost" of educating girls became prohibitive.<sup>56</sup> Women were invariably the first to lose their jobs in the teaching and nursing professions during massive public sector retrenchments, driving many into the informal economy characterized by low wages and poor structures.<sup>57,58</sup> This "feminization of poverty" drive saw women increasing their participation in unrecorded informal work while standards of living for girls fell due to the reallocation of intra-household resources.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Journal of International Women's Studies*, "1928 Education Report" (2008): 43.

<sup>43</sup> *Journal of International Women's Studies*, "1928 Education Statistics" (2008): 43.

<sup>44</sup> *Online Research Journals, Social and Political Backwardness* (2012): 39.

<sup>45</sup> *Dialnet*, "1960 Independence Acts" (2015): 31.

<sup>46</sup> E. A. Yoloje, *Seminar on National Policy on Education* (Lagos: NERDC, 1999), 230.

<sup>47</sup> Federal Ministry of Education, *National Policy on Education White Paper* (Abuja: FGN, 1977), 49.

<sup>48</sup> B. Arulogun, *Analysis of National Policy on Education 1977-2013* (Lagos: Scribd), 1.

<sup>49</sup> *GJournals*, "UPE Launch September 6, 1976" (2025): 167.

<sup>50</sup> M. Faseke, *The Nigeria Women: Economic Status* (Ibadan: Agape, 2001), 29.

<sup>51</sup> M. T. Oladejo, *Women's Professional Trends* (Lagos: LASU, 2012), 29.

<sup>52</sup> George et al., "Gender and Industry Relevance" (2021): 486.

<sup>53</sup> A. Anah et al., *SAP and Graduate Unemployment* (Abuja: ResearchGate, 2017), 52.

<sup>54</sup> V. N. Udeogalanya, "Nigeria's Structural Adjustment Programme and its Impact on Women," *Nigerian Journal of Economic and Social Studies* 36, no. 2 (1994): 413.

<sup>55</sup> D. Elson, *Structural Adjustment Programs and Gender in Africa* (Toronto: York University), 53.

<sup>56</sup> E. Obasi, "Structural Adjustment and Gender Access to Education in Nigeria," *Gender and Education* 19, no. 2 (1997): 161.

<sup>57</sup> L. Haddad, "Retrenchment and Women's Jobs," *York University Journals* (1994): 53.

<sup>58</sup> Boyi, S. "Feminisation of Poverty and the 1980s," *MDPI* (2019): 55.

<sup>59</sup> Cornia, G. et al., "Standard of Living for Girls," *York Journals* (1993): 53.

## Contemporary Context: The UBE Act and The Digital Divide (1990-2024)

Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has undertaken renewed efforts to address educational disparities through the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, launched in 1999 and given legal backing by the UBE Act of 2004.<sup>60</sup> The Act requires every government in Nigeria to provide free, compulsory, and universal basic education for every child of primary and junior secondary age.<sup>61</sup> However, despite this framework, Nigeria continues to record one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children globally, estimated at approximately 14 million, with girls constituting roughly 60% of this population.<sup>62</sup> Regional disparities remain extreme; while Southern states show net attendance rates above 90% for girls, Northern states continue to lag, with literacy rates in some areas falling below 40%.<sup>63</sup>

The contemporary labor market reveals a significant paradox: while female students often outperform their male counterparts academically in higher education, this does not always translate into industry relevance.<sup>64,65</sup> Studies indicate that female graduates spend more time in libraries and achieve higher grades, yet male graduates are viewed as more "prominent, daring, and risk-taking" in the labor market.<sup>66</sup> As of 2023-2024, the female adult literacy rate stands at 62.4% compared to 78.4% for men.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, 78.9% of employed women are in "vulnerable employment" work that lacks formal arrangements, safety nets, and social protection.<sup>68</sup> The National Bureau of Statistics (Q3 2023) reports a 3.3% gap in labor force participation between men and women, and an unemployment rate for women in formal employment that is 2.9% higher than for their male counterparts.<sup>69,70</sup>

The contemporary era has also seen a push for digital inclusion under the administration of President Bola Tinubu, which has set a target of 95% digital literacy by 2030.<sup>71,72</sup> Programs like "Girls in ICT" aim to close the gender digital divide, but barriers in STEM education remain formidable. Female students are often guided toward "feminine" areas of study, and technical occupations like engineering are still largely viewed as male domains.<sup>73,74</sup> This exclusion has economic implications, as STEM careers generally pay higher salaries than non-STEM fields, and the lack of women in these sectors contributes to the widening income differential between sexes.<sup>75</sup> Women are also restricted from senior positions by the "motherhood penalty," where unwritten workplace policies in sectors like banking discourage female employees from conceiving within their first year of hire.<sup>76</sup>

## Historical Patterns and Continuities: The Weight of The Past

Reflecting on the period from 1960 to 2024, several historical patterns and continuities emerge that define the Nigerian gender question in education and employment. The most resilient pattern is the continuity of domestication introduced during the colonial era; the early curricula that emphasized "Domestic Economy" for girls have evolved into a contemporary societal perception that women are most suited for care-giving professions like teaching and nursing.<sup>77</sup> This persistent perception continues to define the career paths of women regardless of their academic qualifications, often relegating them to the margins of the formal labor market or

<sup>60</sup> *Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act, 2004* (Abuja: National Assembly), 33.

<sup>61</sup> UBEC, *Objectives of the Programme* (Abuja: UBEC, 2004), 4.

<sup>62</sup> Centre for African Justice, *Out of School Girls Statistics* (2024): 58.

<sup>63</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, *Literacy Scope and State Rankings* (Abuja: NBS, 2023), 60.

<sup>64</sup> George et al., *Academic Performance vs Industry Relevance* (2021): 488.

<sup>65</sup> Covenant University, *Study of Graduates 2006-2018* (Ota: ResearchGate), 490.

<sup>66</sup> A. Sulaimon and O. Adekola, "Skill Mismatch in Nigeria," *JEDA* (2018): 10.

<sup>67</sup> World Bank, *Human Capital Index: Nigeria* (Washington: IBRD, 2019), 62.

<sup>68</sup> World Bank, *Nigeria Vulnerable Employment Data* (Washington: World Bank, 2023), 62.

<sup>69</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force Survey Q3 2023* (Abuja: NBS), 63.

<sup>70</sup> *Open Edition Journals*, "Workplace Practices and Conception Bans" (2024): 63.

<sup>71</sup> *Wikipedia*, "President Bola Tinubu Literacy Initiatives" (2024): 61.

<sup>72</sup> HUAWEI, *Girls in ICT Training* (Lagos: Ministry of Communication, 2024), 40.

<sup>73</sup> Nnaka, C. and Anaekwe, M. "Gender and STEM Fields," *NED Journal* (2006): 65.

<sup>74</sup> Crawford, T. and Cribbs, J. "Low Female Participation in STEM," *NED Journal* (2013): 65.

<sup>75</sup> *Open Edition Journals*, "Strategies for Bridging Employment Gaps" (2024): 63.

<sup>76</sup> Strauß, S. & Boncori, I. "Stereotypes in the Banking Sector," *Hertfordshire Repositories* (2020): 19.

<sup>77</sup> O. Olaniyi, "Postcolonial Dialectics in NPE Revisions," *UN T-Dissertations* (2019): 67.

the unrecognized agricultural sector.<sup>78</sup> The second major continuity is the resilience of regional gaps, particularly the North-South educational divide that originated in the colonial policy of indirect rule.<sup>79</sup> Successive governments have attempted to address this through nomadic education and cash transfer schemes, yet the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and language in the North continues to limit access to broader economic opportunities for Hausa Muslim females.<sup>80</sup>

Furthermore, history reveals a pattern of ambitious but inconsistently implemented educational reforms; the National Policy on Education has been updated multiple times, yet each revision has struggled with common hurdles of inadequate funding, corruption, and a lack of data for planning.<sup>81</sup> The failure of the UPE and UBE schemes to fully bridge the gender gap is rooted in these systemic administrative lapses.<sup>82,83</sup> Finally, the "androcentric" outlook of Nigeria's governance architecture remains a formidable barrier. The near absence of women in both electoral and key appointed positions strips Nigerian democracy of its majoritarian character.<sup>84</sup> Patriarchal power dynamics and hegemonic masculinities have historically marginalized women from the decision-making bodies that manage national crises and allocate resources.<sup>85,86</sup> Achieving a truly majoritarian democracy requires more than tokenism; it necessitates the dismantling of the patriarchal architecture of power that treats half of the population as a "Cinderella" in the corridors of power.<sup>87</sup>

### Policy Implications and Recommendations

Based on the historical analysis of the education-employment nexus in Nigeria, the following recommendations are provided to bridge the gender gap and foster a more inclusive workforce. Addressing the gender gap requires moving beyond "paper commitments" toward constitutional mandates and structural reformation. A fundamental requirement is the statutory institution of gender quotas for both elective and appointive positions, following models successfully implemented in other African nations like Rwanda and South Africa.<sup>88</sup> This would help overcome the failure of internal party democracy where male leaders often sideline female candidates during primary elections.<sup>89</sup> Secondly, there is a pressing need for a radical reformation of political finance and labor laws to prevent the "capture" of economic opportunities by wealthy male elites. Legislation such as the Personal Income Tax Act of 1993, which requires women to provide marriage certificates for tax relief a burden not placed on men must be repealed to ensure equal status under the law.<sup>90</sup>

Furthermore, the government must strictly enforce the Universal Basic Education Act of 2004, applying penalties to parents who fail to enroll their children while simultaneously providing social safety nets to mitigate the impact of poverty on girl-child enrollment.<sup>91</sup> Education policies must also be tailored to the demands of the 5th Industrial Revolution (5IR), moving away from purely academic models toward skill-based Technical and Vocational Education (TVET).<sup>92</sup> Finally, long-term strategies must prioritize early STEM outreach and digital literacy programs for girls to disrupt early occupational stereotyping. Mentorship groups and scholarships for girls in mathematics, engineering, and digital marketing should be established to build a pool of female leadership for the knowledge-based economy.<sup>93,94</sup> Engaging traditional and religious leaders is also vital for

<sup>78</sup> USAID, *Cross-Cutting Barriers to WEE* (Washington: BanyanGlobal, 2024), 68.

<sup>79</sup> C. O. Taiwo, *The Nigerian Education System* (Lagos: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 40.

<sup>80</sup> M. Salmon-Letelier and J. Russell, "Hausa Muslim Females and Inclusion Barriers," *ResearchGate* (2025): 28.

<sup>81</sup> TETFund, *Allocations from 1999 to 2024* (Abuja: TETFund, 2024), 60.

<sup>82</sup> Okebukola, *Nigerian Education Delivery System*, 31.

<sup>83</sup> UNESCO, *Education for All Development Index (EFA)* (2015): 8.

<sup>84</sup> Popoola, O. et al. "The near absence of women gives Nigerian democracy an androcentric outlook," *AJRH* (2019): 36.

<sup>85</sup> Raifu, M. et al. "Governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic," *IJB&ES* (2024): 15.

<sup>86</sup> Adesote, S. A., & Olalere, T. O. "Governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic," *Slovak Journal of International Relations* (2025): 15.

<sup>87</sup> Badom Porbari Monbari & Ndeue Kuapie, "Gender Inequality and Women Participation," *European Review of Applied Sociology* (2024): 25.

<sup>88</sup> *European Review of Applied Sociology*, "Quota Models in Rwanda and South Africa" (2024): 25.

<sup>89</sup> *Biblioteka Nauki*, "Lack of internal democracy in party machineries" (2022): 10.

<sup>90</sup> *Open Edition Journals*, "Personal Income Tax Act 1993" (2024): 18.

<sup>91</sup> *UBEC penalties Section 2(2)* (Abuja: UBE Act, 2004), 69.

<sup>92</sup> Agbovu, D. and Asagba, F. O. "Educational Policy Adaptation for the 5IR," *JEDA* (2025): 70.

<sup>93</sup> Ekine, A. "STEM Knowledge Creation and Girls," *NED Journal* (2013): 65.

<sup>94</sup> Crawford, T. and Cribbs, J. "STEM Earnings Gap" (2013): 65.

fostering a cultural reorientation that recognizes women as equal agents of national development.<sup>95</sup> By eliminating unwritten "motherhood penalties" and ensuring paid maternity leave across all sectors, Nigeria can retain its best female talents in the professional workforce and achieve a truly inclusive and resilient future.<sup>96</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The historical journey of education and employment in Nigeria from 1960 to 2024 is a testament to both the remarkable resilience of Nigerian women and the enduring weight of structural inequality. While the expansion of educational facilities has raised literacy levels and created a class of female professionals, the translation of schooling into economic leadership remains hindered by historical legacies of domestication and implementation gaps. The pre-colonial functionalist model, which valued female economic agency, offers a philosophical blueprint for a more inclusive future. However, correcting the course requires a radical break from the Victorian and neocolonial educational frameworks that have restricted female potential for over a century. By dismantling discriminatory laws, investing in digital and technical literacy, and enforcing gender-sensitive workplace policies, Nigeria can ensure that its "other half" is no longer left on the scrap heap of development, but is instead an equal partner in the nation's socio-economic restoration.

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<sup>95</sup> Usman, M. & Yakubu, S. "Advocacy for Gender Equality in Northern Nigeria," *ADSU* (2024): 18.

<sup>96</sup> *Open Edition Journals*, "Strategies for Bridging Employment Gaps" (2024): 63.