

# Multidimensional Poverty in Northern Nigeria: Zaynab Alkali's Invisible Borders as an Extrapolative Treatise on Girl Child Education

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## Abstract

*With the rise in the number of Nigerians living in Multidimensional Poverty, it becomes imperative to project the progression of female literacy in Northern Nigeria. The girl child is encumbered with inimical constraints which impedes her access to formal education. Historicizing Alkali's Invisible Borders which captures the tenacity of a young northern female seeking to acquire formal education at all costs; this work attempted to examine the damaging outcomes and academic setbacks owing to multidimensional poverty to the girl child in Northern Nigeria. Using scholarly findings of previous research as primary and secondary literature, this article evaluated the gap in female literacy in Northern Nigeria. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Marxist Feminist theories were employed to examine where literacy fits into the Needs of a girl child from Northern Nigeria domesticated specifically for the purpose of earning and saving income, and how her patriarchal environment impedes these Needs under the yoke of capitalism. Ultimately, the Nigerian government should review economic and academic policies and, the Child Rights Act to eradicate poverty especially in the North, to accommodate the girl child with regards to access to formal/inclusive education.*

## Keywords

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs  
Multidimensional Poverty  
Female Literacy  
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## Introduction

As many countries battle multidimensional poverty, research efforts are continuously springing up to address its impact on the girl child's access to formal education in Northern Nigeria; irrespective of the menacing socio-cultural webbing that she is faced with. This research is an interdisciplinary effort at combining sociological and humanities ideologies to project female literacy in Northern Nigeria in relation with multidimensional poverty.

This as the Nigerian government discloses that about 133 million Nigerians are living in multidimensional poverty; 86 million of them in Northern Nigeria (Edeh, 2022, para. 1). UNICEF (2022) corroborates the estimation of the Ministry of Budget and National Planning that 54 per cent of Nigerian children are multi-dimensionally poor.

It is also estimated that the North-West has the highest out-of-school children that is 34.24 percent

(3,490,690) of the total figure, and the entire geopolitical region constituting about 3.5 million of the total number, the North-East 19.63 percent (2,001,038), the South-West 14.24 percent (1,451,739), South-East 7 percent (713,176), North-Central (1,329,112), and South-South (1,208,182) (Uduu, 2022, para. 1 - para. 4). However, the National MPI is calculated at 0.257 – indicating that poor people living in Nigeria are deprived of about one-quarter of all indicators (Ichedi, 2022).

Recent National MPI calculation erupts the need for a historical evaluation of the erosion of female literacy in Northern Nigeria; a prognostic evaluation of how multidimensional poverty likely positions the girl child, how the issues relating to multidimensional poverty can be tackled as soon as possible; and also, solving other consequences associated with the benefits of tackling the screaming issues identified. This work is a direct affront at bad leadership characterized by retrogressive economic policies which mar the academic goals of many females in Northern Nigeria. Alkali's work determinedly addresses trends surrounding the girl child's academic fate, while bearing great significance on the gapping consequences caused by multidimensional poverty. This is to "Ensure that all girls and boys complete free equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes" (Dominic, 2019).

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) clearly makes provision for inclusive education for children of school age, including those with disabilities. This indicates unrestricted access to functional, qualitative, and

effective basic education (Pinnock, 2020). Unfortunately, this overall goal is currently not realizable in Northern Nigeria, and such denial amputates the overall objectives of education. This research concentrated on multidimensional poverty as a factor that inhibits the access of the girl child to inclusive education, and how this can be surmounted.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The devastating reality of multidimensional poverty in Northern Nigeria calls for a holistic attention to the menace. This work attempted to bring to the fore, the staggering population of out-of-school girl children and interrogated the possibility of answering the question: what can be done in the face of multidimensional poverty?

### **Objectives of the Study**

This research foregrounded the complexities necessitated by multidimensional poverty in Northern Nigeria against girl child education. Despite this harrowing economic situation, Alkali dismantles these convolutions in her work, providing a reference point to the possibility of winning the war against the denial of formal/exclusive education for the girl child in Northern Nigeria. However, in carrying out this research, the following was ultimately interrogated:

1. The general devastating effects of multidimensional poverty on the region
2. How multidimensional poverty impedes her access to formal education so far
3. Salient Northern Nigerian concerns raised and solved by Alkali's work

4. How the government can give hope for access to formal education to the girl child in Northern Nigeria, irrespective of multidimensional poverty

### Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study was limited to a prognostic analysis of the furtherance of the girl child's literacy in the face of the dominance of multidimensional poverty in Northern Nigeria. This is especially of a region, which hardly ever recorded an epoch of economic relevance, despite producing the highest number of the country's leaders.

### Research Methodology

This study adopted mixed qualitative (textual analysis) and quantitative (correlational) research designs. Textual Analysis was employed to connect Alkali's *Invisible Borders* to a broader socio-cultural context to explore potentially intended or unintended connections between Alkali's work and multidimensional poverty in Northern

Nigeria. Textual Analysis is "a methodology that involves understanding language, symbols and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences" (Hawkins, para. 1). Employing the correlational research design, this study recognized and established a *positive correlation* between multidimensional poverty and girl child's access to formal/inclusive education in Northern Nigeria, which can be reverted to *zero correlation* if the right policies are put in place.

### Theoretical Interrogations: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory and Marxist Feminism

Two theoretical frameworks were employed in this study to historicize the obstacles which the girl child suffers in Northern Nigeria towards obtaining inclusive education and how this can be obliterated using Alkali's prognostic work of fiction.

## Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

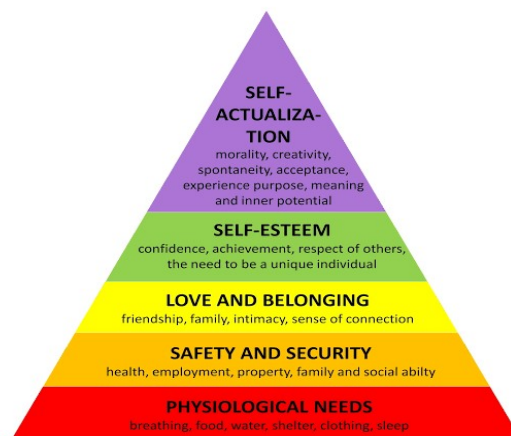


Figure 1: Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Mcleod, 2021)

It is natural to satisfy human needs. It is even more expedient to satisfy these

needs according to their order of priority. Although this may be relative, it

holds for most humans, especially the ones subsisting in the same ecology. Order of priority is what is referred to in Psychology (Human Learning) as 'Hierarchy of Needs' as expounded by Abraham Maslow. In other words, these needs are categorized and placed in a pyramid for emphasis on their hierarchical importance: "Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within the pyramid" (McLeod 2018). These needs, however, are categorized into two: *Deficiency Needs* which are deemed as primary needs, and growth needs which are deemed as secondary need.

*Deficiency Needs:* These refer to the basic needs of a psychologically balanced person; hence, they are called primary needs. They include physiological, safety, belonging, and self-esteem needs. The physiological needs occupy the lowest part of the pyramid, signifying the most basic needs of an individual. These include food, water, rest, shelter, emptying of the bowels, oxygen, and others. Maslow's theory posits that the Deficiency needs, with emphasis on physiological needs, must be met first, else the Growth needs recede to the background. Safety needs refer to security needs, including protection from physiological, psychological/emotional, mental and physical threats. An individual requires a safe environment to perform maximally, and for the child, complete security is required to motivate learning. Love needs or belonging needs refer to the desire to belong to a group or an individual; that is, the need to love and to be

loved by another individual. This need, when satisfied, improves social life, which positively shapes the personality of the individual. For a child of school age, love needs are owed them by their parents, guardians, teachers and other individuals who are positioned to make the right impact. When a child feels loved, learning becomes much easier and seamless.

*Growth Needs:* These are secondary needs because they are less significant than Deficiency needs. There are three kinds of Growth needs. First, is the Intellectual Achievement needs. Here, the individual craves for knowledge leading from one achievement to the other. Second, is the Aesthetic needs. This is appreciation for art and beauty. It also involves, good taste and a good quality of life. Ndifon (2017) observes rightly that, many Nigerian families do not find this need relevant because they are still struggling with Deficiency needs (p. 91). Third, is the Self-Actualization needs. Here, the individual desires to assert his achievements and, thereby, contribute to humanity using these achievements. Despite Maslow's demarcation, Hopper (2020, para. 14) rightly avers that "... one behaviour might meet two or more needs." This work examines the possibility of the Growth needs of the girl child in Northern Nigeria, despite the acuteness of the dearth of her Deficiency needs.

### **Marxist Feminism**

Marxist Feminism, developed by August Bebel and Friedrich Engels around the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is a combination that is better described as

‘an intersection of Marxism and Feminism’. These both wrote extensively on the oppression of women by the society that was typically capitalist at the time. Women were employed and exploited unconscionably. Other notable Marxist feminists include Angel Davis, Clara Fraser, Claudia Jones, Chizuko Ueno, Silvia Federici, Raya, Dunayevskaya, Evelyn Reed, and many others (English Summary, para. 1, & para. 10). Marxism from the onset encompasses the struggle between the bourgeoisie class and the proletariat; the former exploiting the latter; while Feminism insists on gender equality that rightly places the female gender as the other gender(s). However, Louis Althusser developed aspects of Marxist concepts which found relevance in Feminism in the latter’s preoccupation of better working conditions and equality in gender that accommodates the female gender (Mambrol, 2018). The main objective of Marxist Feminist theory was to create a classless society in which every member of the society is treated without preference by gender.

Consequently, the girl child in Northern Nigeria deserves to be given equal opportunity to access formal education like her male counterpart; instead of being subjected to only reproductive, domestic and commercial (hawking/trading) purposes. However, the “intersectional (interconnection between different sections of society on basis of gender, caste, or race) organizing of the women from the different castes, communities, or regions is a significant feature of Marxist Feminism” (Verma, 2022, para. 14).

### Synopsis

Zaynab Alkali’s 2016 bildungsroman, *Invisible Borders*, set in Alkali’s imaginary terrain (Northern

Nigeria) using the narrative technique, flashes back to the emotional journey of the protagonist, Safia. At twelve, she is betrothed by her father, Maaji to Sam Tilla, a 19-year-old medical student. Shortly after her Maaji’s demise, Sam falls into temptation with an older lady who becomes pregnant. This results in a bitter divorce, leaving Safia heartbroken at fifteen. Two efforts to reconcile with Sam, who had become a politician and irresponsible, failed. She remains steadfast in her academic pursuit and finally qualifies as a medical doctor, with the support of the funds which Maaji had left for her, in the care of his best friend, Dr Maclean (Alkali, 2016, p. 27). Safia, after graduation, finds a good man who marries her.

### Conceptualization of Multidimensional Poverty

Multidimensional poverty, about Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory, refers to the near absence of Deficiency Needs. Previous research efforts have produced reports regarding Multidimensional poverty globally, nationally and locally (Northern Nigeria). Not much has been done on the possibility of improving female literacy in the epoch of multidimensional poverty. Multidimensional poverty refers to the state of lack of several deprivations. “Multidimensional poverty is the condition of suffering from multiple disadvantages such as lack of clean water, poor sanitation, poor nutrition, lack of electricity, limited schooling, and household unemployment” (Akinyetun, 2021, para. 1).

An estimated total of 356 million children globally may be living in chronic poverty, about 1 billion children are thrown into multidimensional poverty; 100 million of them as a result

of COVID-19 (UNICEF, n.d., para. 3 & para. 2); while another report estimates an additional 150 million children living in multidimensional poverty (UNICEF, 2020, para. 2). This is because their parents lost their means of livelihood and poverty set in.

Multidimensional poverty is established using the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). It vividly illustrates the level of poverty. The MPI shows who are poor and using different range of indicators like job/business/work, education, health, food, safety, and other indicators, portrays how poor they are. Using this, it is established that multidimensional poverty in children is more prevalent in the rural (65.7%) than in urban areas (28.4%). There are also high state disparities, ranging from 14.5% (Lagos) to 81.5% (Sokoto). In Nigeria, according to the report, 24.56% of children face extreme poverty by living in households that spend less than \$1.90 a day (UNICEF, n.d., para. 1). Another report avers that about 7 million Nigerians fall below the poverty average because of the high 40% rate of inflation which hit the country in 2020 and persists (Ayomide, 2021, para. 3).

About 74.6 percent of Gombe state residents in North-East Nigeria are poor; specifically placing the analysis of multidimensional child poverty at 71.9 percent, and also indicating that "...majority of children in the state don't have access to nutrition, healthcare services, education, housing, sanitation, water, and information" (Ramalan, 2021, para. 9). A more recent report to mark the 2022 International Children's Day accentuates that about 47.4 percent of Nigerian children live in households that spend less than N400 daily (Nwaozor, 2022, para. 1). This comes on the heels of an observation by the

UNICEF representative in Nigeria, Peter Hawkins that about 54 percent of Nigerian children were multi-dimensionally poor. In a part of the three reports presented recently and launched by Vice-President Yemi Osinbajo, it is estimated that about 29 million Nigerian children will be child brides by 2050 (Ogunlowo, 2022, para. 1).

### Gender Ratio

It is notable to observe that formal education in Northern Nigeria is gender-driven (Izam, 2023). This is to say that the male child will easily be provided access to formal education by the society than the female child can access it because, gender roles place the female in a position whereby formal education is excluded. This is demonstrative in a Hausa proverb giving a peek at the cultural outlook: ... *karatun ya mace yakare a kicin ...* loosely translated as *the woman's education ends up in the kitchen*. A research report observes that, "The National Policy on Education provides that education must be inclusive and that all children including those with disabilities have the right to qualitative, functional and effective education" (Ademefun, n.d., para. 4).

Dominic (2019) recognizes the appalling level of illiteracy of the girl-child in Nigeria, especially in the North and attributes this to factors of poverty, among other causes (para. 4 & para. 5). Similarly, another research establishes that over 70 percent of girls attend secondary school in Southern Nigeria; while only around 30 percent of girls attend secondary school in Northern Nigeria: "Poverty adds to the trouble of girls' access to education in Northern Nigeria ..." (Borgen Magazine, 2020). Dominic (2019) also, insists that extreme poverty may influence citizens

to make unhealthy choices; placing inappropriate priorities in place. Unfortunately, the choice is always to leave the girl child at home to hawk wares to feed the family or/and handle other chores; while the boy child is sent to school. Occasionally, she is given in early marriage for economic benefits. In fact, it is possible to find a congenitally disabled male child sent to school in Northern Nigeria, instead of an intellectually sound girl. In Cardozo

(2006), Amuda (2011) further accentuates, “Due to discrimination between boys and girls, many Nigerian girls achieve lower levels of education, and for that reason, many enter into business, trade, and also, early marriage (p. 3028).

Quite relevant to this study is the gender ratio of out-of-school children. Akinpelu (2021, para. 23) randomly summarizes the out-of-school girl children as follows:

S/N	State	Females
1.	Akwa-Ibom	298,164
2.	Sokoto	270,586
3.	Katsina	267,132
4.	Niger	257,165
5.	Taraba	246,123

Babangida (2022) estimates that currently, out of 18.5 million out-of-school children in Nigeria, about 10 million are girls, especially from Northern Nigeria, making up 60 percent of the entire population (para. 1).

### **Female Illiteracy and Multidimensional Poverty in Northern Nigeria**

Globally, poverty is one of the prime and ‘obstinate’ barriers to children’s access to formal education. In fact, “Children living through economic fragility, political instability, conflict or natural disaster are more likely to be cut off from schooling – as are those with disabilities, or from ethnic minorities. In some countries, education opportunities for girls remain severely limited” (UNICEF, n.d., para. 4). It was not the focus of this research to distribute/categorize the girls who live in Northern Nigeria in terms of sub-ethnic affiliations. If education can reduce poverty and educating women is

a primary way to eradicate poverty (Khoo, n.d., para. 1), then multidimensional poverty drastically impedes the female literacy, especially in Northern Nigeria – a terrain which already records poor female academic enrolment from time.

Furthermore, the major reasons for the female out-of-school situation in the North is economic barriers. Earlier researchers attribute the girl child’s inaccessibility to education in Northern Nigeria to major reasons, which include poverty. Citing UNICEF (2018), Idoko (2021) poverty is a ‘cardinal factor’ that impedes the girl child’s access to education in Nigeria, especially in teenage girls are subjected to hawking to make a living for their family (p. 64)

Citing Alabi and Alabi (2013), Ogbe (2020) avows that only about 20 percent of females from the Northeast and NorthWest of Nigeria are literate (pp. 54 & 58). Ogbe further observes that one of the ways that poverty has depleted female literacy in Northern Nigeria is child marriage.

About 70% of adolescent girls are in marriages in the NW, 68% in the North East, and 35% in the North Central, incidentally where poverty is highest in Nigeria. Whereas the statistics for other zones are: SS 18%, SW 17% & 10% SE ... Poverty plays a central role in causing and perpetuating child marriage ... (p. 2).

In the educational dimension of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), it is established that out of children of school age in Nigeria, about 29 percent do not attend school due to the poverty. However, 94 percent of out-of-school children are poor. Narrowing down the research to gender ratio, it is also a fact that 8 out of 10 girls who are between the ages of 12 and 17, are poor. More importantly is that 8 out of 10 girls in child marriages are poor.

### **Inhibitions and Alkali's Predictive Opinion**

Zaynab Alkali, through her work, defies many summations regarding female illiteracy in Northern Nigeria, and completely obliterated the notion that parents in Northern Nigeria do not send their children to school due to their inability to pay school fees. Despite Maaji's decision to betroth Safia to Sam at a young age, he makes financial/tactical provisions for Safia's continued academic pursuit. Peculiarly, the narrative would have been strange if the case of Alkali's Safia were not different from the experience of many a young girl in Northern Nigeria. The emotional, environmental and familial obstacles involved in obtaining formal education are typical of the situation in Northern Nigeria; yet Alkali documents this hurdle as an extrapolative possibility that the North can draw inspiration from.

By chronicling Safia's journey to academic and career excellence despite

cultural and emotional entanglements and challenges, Alkali's ingenuity in projecting a similar plot with a different outcome in *Invisible Borders*, marks a great development in fostering and sustaining girl child literacy in Northern Nigerian; irrespective of multidimensional poverty. Saliu and Aleru (2018) rightly observe that, "The history of education in Nigeria is the history of discriminatory practices against women education" (p. 20). This discrimination, in this case, takes root from cultural practices in which a family would rather expend meagre resources to develop an uncoordinated male than on a brilliant female; typical of Northern Nigeria.

Citing Moja (2002, p. 78), Saliu and Aleru (2018) corroborates that between 1979 and 1990, there is a record of low rate of female enrolment in schools, and also a massive drop out of female students from schools in Northern Nigeria (p. 21). In fact, the average of female enrolment within the years mentioned was 18.64 percent; while the percentage of female drop out from school was 80.16 percent at the time. However, there was a remarkable improvement in female enrolment into schools between 1990 and 1995; ranging between 67.7 and 80.6 percent between those six years (UNESCO, 2000, p. 35).

Zaynab's adaptation of alien ideologies in her projection of patriarchal influences and paucity of resources to sustain academic pursuits of the girl child in Northern Nigeria, adds significance to the progression of the plot of her novel. Alkali establishes a different trajectory to feminist tendencies, using Safia as an evolved version of the girl child in contrast with her protagonists in her earlier works. She comes to terms with the hindrances lying ahead of her, and prepares



perfectly to take her destiny in her hands, no matter the prize she has to pay. Alkali (2016) ardently records a historical yet relatable development in Safia's unceremonious betrothal to Sam by Maaji, (pp. 23-24). The failure of Safia's marriage to Sam, including other attempts at remarrying him, (Alkali, pp. 37-40) takes a toll on Safia's young personality, yet she resurrects miraculously to excel academically while letting Sam go (pp. 91-94).

### Findings

Basic education, which is basically free, is inaccessible to the girl child in Northern Nigeria. They are culturally yoked under certain expectations, and multidimensional poverty worsens her state. Although Zaynab Alkali's book was published at a time that Northern Nigeria was not fully overtaken by multidimensional poverty, she presents a new dimension to doing what is right according to the provisions of the law establishing the National Policy on Education. Maaji's ability to commit reasonable funds in the care of his friend Dr Maclean for Safia's education, marks Alkali's very good intent in proposing a new narrative in the academic journey of the female in Northern Nigeria (Alkali, 2016, p. 27).

### Conclusion

The research revealed the extent to which measures can be taken to spike up the access of the girl child in Northern Nigeria to formal education despite multidimensional poverty. Alkali using *Invisible Borders* provides a prognostic view of this possibility.

### Recommendations

1. The government should revamp the nation's economic policy to lift her from the mire of illiteracy and forestall future disasters.

2. Ingrain the motto that "All girls have much to offer to find solutions to Nigeria's challenges – and we have to nurture their creativity and innovation" (Daily Trust, 2022). Every home and institution in Nigeria should imbibe this motto. Conscientization efforts must be put in to dissipate this message nationally.
3. Governments in the northern states should emulate Maaji's action in setting funds aside to foster the academic progression of girl children in Northern Nigeria to university level, so that children do not necessarily depend on their parents for sponsorship.
4. Private concerns and international organizations should be encouraged to provide aids and create employment of some sort for casual and skilled workers in Northern Nigeria.
5. Government through the State Ministry of Governments in northern states should enforce free education and other educational policies as applicable.

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