

The potential of male engagement and allyship

For girls' education in Nigeria

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Image source: Ahmad Tijjani for Bridge Connect Africa



Girls' education in northern Nigeria is in crisis.

Girls' primary school attendance

Out of school

- Northeast: 50%
- Northwest: 41%
- National average: 26%

Net attendance rate:

- Northeast: 48%
- Northwest: 56%
- National average: 68%

Girls marrying early

Married before age 18

- Northeast: 55%
- Northwest: 60%
- National average: 34%

Married before age 15

- Northeast: 25%
- Northwest: 30%
- National average: 15%

Data source: 2021 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)

More recent data from the 2024 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey show a decrease in girls' net attendance rate to only 38% in the northeast, 43% in the northwest and 47% nationally. These figures reflect a worsening trend driven by restrictive gender norms within a wider context of chronic poverty, insecurity and reliance on the Tsangaya system — traditional Islamic schools often not integrated into formal education.



Image source: James Roh for Pura

In northern Nigeria, fathers and husbands often make the final decision about whether a girl enrolls in school, stays in school or leaves school. Traditional, cultural and religious leaders set the terms of what is locally acceptable. Educators, traditional leaders and policymakers — often men — play key roles in shaping whether schools and education systems are safe, supportive and responsive to girls. In short, male engagement can have a profound impact on whether systems realise girls' right to education in practice.

Government, civil society, development partners and educators increasingly agree that restrictive gender norms are among the most significant barriers to girls' education, and that engaging men and boys may be an important lever for change.

Engaging men meaningfully, while still centring girls

And yet, across the field of girls' education in northern Nigeria, engaging men — deliberately, strategically, with clear expectations and accountability — remains largely underdeveloped. Making the case for engaging men on girls' issues is challenging in patriarchal settings such as northern Nigeria, where men often hold disproportionate decision-making power over women and girls. Programme managers may fear that engagement centres men and boys above girls, resulting in ad hoc and selective approaches in practice. At the same time, the research suggests that more effective engagement depends on working with men not only as part of the problem, but as part of the solution. This includes meeting them where they are, creating buy-in and helping them see how rigid gender norms limit their own roles, wellbeing and relationships, as well as girls' opportunities and the wider community's advancement.

A more difficult and tactical approach in designing male engagement interventions is to ensure girls remain central as rights holders, with voice, choice and leadership, while at the same time creating the conditions for men and boys to challenge rigid norms and shift their attitudes and behaviours. The value of effective male engagement lies in challenging the norms and unequal power relations that restrict girls' education, not in reinforcing men's authority over girls' lives. A feminist approach offers a pathway towards male allyship that keeps girls and women at the centre, while engaging men with clear limits to roles, accountability, safeguarding and structured opportunities for reflection, change and allyship.

Building the evidence base

What should a feminist approach to male allyship look like? Until now, the girls' education field has lacked a clear, consolidated evidence base to guide answers to this question. It is a significant, structural omission in how the field approaches change. This study, a first step in filling this evidence gap, addresses important questions around male engagement and allyship in northern Nigeria:

1. Which approaches are most useful for girls' education, in which areas and under what conditions?
2. What would it take to strengthen the most promising approaches?

The study draws on three sources of evidence:

A systematic review of 385 peer-reviewed and organisational sources on gender equality programmes with male engagement components across northern Nigeria since 2016

A review of 76 reports and evaluations of donor-funded girls' education programmes over the same period, including a detailed analysis of 28 flagship projects

Interviews with 63 practitioners, including programme managers, government officials, educators, male champions and MenEngage Nigeria network members

Key findings



1. MALE ENGAGEMENT NEEDS CLEARER GOALS, ROLES AND ACCOUNTABILITY.

Male engagement in northern Nigeria sits along a continuum. At one end, programmes include men largely as gatekeepers, participants or visible supporters of girls' education, with little clarity on what should change in their attitudes or behaviour. In the middle, programmes engage men through community dialogues, school-based structures or training, with some exposure to gender equity messaging. At the far end sits allyship: a more intentional approach where programmes decide which men matter, set expectations for what they should do differently, prepare them for that role and track changes in relation to girls' education outcomes. **Allyship differs from other forms of male engagement through the transformation that occurs when programmes create space for men and boys to reflect on masculinity, power and accountability — not just participate differently. It is this personal commitment, which goes beyond the course of a programme, that leads to impact and sustainability.**

None of the 28 flagship girls' education programmes reviewed for this study included male allyship as a goal in its own right. Some positive stories came from 17 projects that combined involvement (fathers' clubs, social mobilisers, boys as the targets for messaging and information) with engagement (men in school-based management committees, community dialogues) that may be useful for girls' learning. However, these programmes did not ask what should change in men's behaviour, or define how to track that change in relation to girls' education outcomes. Deeper investment in allyship calls for more work at the design stage of girls' education interventions. Such intentional design can incorporate a logical framework that links the activities of engaged males to girls' education outcomes. It can include opportunities for flexible learning and training to catalyse personal transformation among engaged men.

2. POLICY ADVOCACY NEEDS INTENTIONAL MALE CHAMPIONS AND FOLLOW-THROUGH ON IMPLEMENTATION.

Policy change is one of the most important ways to shift the structural conditions that limit girls' education, yet the research suggests this remains one of the least developed areas of male engagement practice. Men are present in girls' education advocacy coalitions, but usually without a clear strategy for why they are there, what influence they are expected to use or how their role should support girls' education outcomes.

Lessons from gender equality advocacy show what stronger practice could look like: identifying which male actors hold influence, preparing them for specific roles and using them intentionally in relation to defined policy goals. In girls' education, the literature



Image source: Jide for CODE



Image source: James Roh for Pura

remains thin on how organisations identify, train and support male allies for advocacy on re-entry, child marriage, safe schools or gender-responsive financing.

This gap matters because weak strategy at the advocacy stage often leads to weak follow-through. Male leaders are brought into coalitions, but their involvement tends to support short-term outputs — such as policy launches or domestication meetings — rather than sustained pressure for implementation. As one Adamawa NGO put it, “Policy on paper is strong, but policy implementation is weak. It’s very, very weak.”

The same pattern appears in education financing. All five states covered by the study had gender-responsive education sector plans (GRESPPs), yet practitioners rated them among the weakest enabling factors for girls’ education in practice. The issue, then, is not only whether policies and plans exist, but whether there are credible actors — including well-prepared male allies where useful — helping to drive implementation, accountability and course correction over time.

The wider lesson is clear: male engagement in policy advocacy should not stop at representation or endorsement. It should be designed intentionally, linked to clear girls’ education priorities and focused as much on implementation as on policy adoption.

3. WORK TO ENGAGE MEN AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL REQUIRES BETTER SUPPORT AND CLEAR STRATEGIES TO SHIFT NORMS.

Across both the gender equality and girls’ education literature, the community level emerges as one of the most important spaces for shifting the norms and behaviours that affect girls’ school enrolment, re-entry, retention and safety. The evidence points not only to the value of peer-to-peer communication, trusted messengers, familiar community spaces and collective dialogue, but also to the importance of how those are used.

Stronger practice tends to engage men as part of the solution rather than simply as obstacles to be managed: meeting them where they are, drawing on values and identities they recognise and creating space for reflection rather than defensiveness. In girls’ education, this often means working through fathers, male peers, traditional and religious leaders, educators and local champions to help men see how rigid gender norms limit girls’ opportunities and narrow their own roles, relationships and potential. This combination of legitimacy, reflection and challenge appears most likely to open men up to more meaningful and lasting change.

At the same time, community-level work carries a high risk of backlash, stigma or resistance, especially when projects lack supportive structures and clear strategy. Engaged men report feeling “used” when they are pulled in only to manage a crisis rather than treated as partners from the start. Scaling this work calls for programme designs that include values clarification, power mapping and facilitated dialogue — established practices in gender equality programming that the girls’ education field has a clear opportunity to adapt more intentionally.



Image source: Tobi Onibokun for Malala Fund

4. ORGANISATIONS ARE ENGAGING MEN, BUT THEY SHOULD ALSO MEASURE IT.

Across the 28 flagship projects analysed, only one measured male engagement activity. Projects routinely credit male engagement as part of why norms or outcomes improved, but the vast majority lacked any indicator that tracked what actually changed in men's attitudes or behaviour. **Without indicators, organisations cannot say with confidence what is working, for whom or why — weakening the case for sustained investment.**

When asked how they measure the success of their male engagement initiatives, the 20 civil society organisations (CSOs) interviewed referred primarily to qualitative evidence rooted in strong narrative feedback and visible community shifts rather than formal indicators.

UNICEF's Girls' Education Project Phase 3, funded by the UK's FCDO, demonstrates that this data issue is solvable. The project's evaluation tracks — with real numbers — whether fathers support girls' secondary education, male leaders speak up for enrolment and male educators change how they teach. But this exists only in one project out of 28, suggesting the gap lies in whether organisations prioritise male engagement as something worth measuring from the outset.

5. THE MALE ENGAGEMENT COMMUNITY NEEDS SHARED LANGUAGE AND STANDARDS TO IMPROVE PROGRAMME DESIGN, MEASUREMENT AND LEARNING.

Nigeria's male engagement community is broad, diverse and still evolving. It includes a strong research community studying gender norms, donor working groups, girls' education learning networks and men-engaged platforms such as MenEngage Nigeria. But they do not yet connect consistently enough to generate shared language, cumulative learning and stronger field-wide standards. **Eighteen of the 20 girls' education CSOs interviewed, and all five MenEngage Nigeria network members,**

are already operating within a gender equality framework. The connections are there, but infrastructure is needed to translate them more deliberately into stronger practice.

Girls' education CSO leaders told researchers plainly that they have male supporters, but do not have allies. This points less to an absence of committed male allies in the wider ecosystem than to a gap in how they are identified, prepared and integrated into girls' education work. Gender equality programmes have spent more than a decade building male champions, managing backlash and, in some cases, tracking behaviour change. The experience and institutional memory exist, but learning must translate more consistently into supporting girls' education in practice.



Implications for action

The evidence points to a clear opportunity for male engagement to positively impact girls' education outcomes. Five implications for the girls' education sector follow:



Programmes need to decide — from the start — how to prioritise male engagement, who their target male participants are, what they are expected to do differently and how that change will be tracked and supported. Organisations also need to consider the risk of backlash and treat male participants and allies as genuine partners as they design programmes.



Through values clarification, power mapping and training on gender roles, surface-level male engagement approaches can evolve to more transformative ones. Programmes that encourage men and boys to reflect on how rigid gender norms disadvantage girls, and shape their own lives, can generate more meaningful, lasting change.



Engaging male policymakers in a structured way, rather than as passive audiences for advocacy, and working with male allies committed to monitoring implementation can help close the policy-to-practice gap in areas such as GRESP.



Using indicators that track men's attitudes and behaviour alongside girls' education outcomes as a technical design requirement in projects is important to build the evidence base for male allyship. Organisations can complement these with success stories grounded in evidence.



Strengthening the male allyship field requires answering more consistently across projects what changed for girls when men were engaged — and using that learning to build shared language, stronger definitions and better links between girls' education actors and the wider gender equality and male engagement ecosystem. It also requires greater investment in practitioner capability, design quality and the resourcing needed to support more coherent, cumulative practice across the field.

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can have a profound impact
on whether systems
realise girls’ right to
education in practice.”**

This executive summary is drawn from research commissioned by Malala Fund and conducted by the development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC), with technical input from MenEngage Nigeria.



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