

# GENDER ISSUES AND CHALLENGES AS IT AFFECTS STUDENTS READING COMPREHENSION

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## **Abstract**

This paper is an examination of gender issues and challenges as it relates to students reading comprehension in Abakaliki Education zone of Ebonyi state. The descriptive research design was utilized. Two research questions guided the study. The target population was 2000 SS 3 students. A sample size of 100 students (43 females and 57 males) was selected through the simple random sampling technique. A structured questionnaire was the instrument for data collection. Scores obtained from the reading comprehension administered to them was also used for analysis. Simple percentages was used to answer research questions one while the T-test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference in the mean scores of the male and female students. The study found that female participants had statistically significant higher reading comprehension score ( $68.34 \pm 9.57$ ) at the end of the reading comprehension test, compared to the male participants ( $52.58 \pm 11.31$ ),  $p < 0.00$ . It also showed that girls performed better in English Language than other subjects while boys performed better in science subjects. It was recommended that the government and stakeholders in the education sector should create gender equitable policies that will enable all girls have uninterrupted right to learn.

**Keywords:** Gender, Challenges, Reading, Comprehension, Students

## **Introduction**

According to Akpabio (2005), gender refers to the socially and culturally defined and constructed roles that men and women play in societies; roles which are shaped by economic, historical and cultural determinants. According to WHO (2022), gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other and as a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time, ([www.who.int](http://www.who.int)). According to Ngwoke (2020), gender refers to societies division of their members into two classes and ascribing them with different roles. This division is the origin of gender inequality. Gender roles are attitudes and activities a society or cultural group ascribes to her members based on their biological difference as males and females. Culturally, males are viewed as being more superior to females. This is the foundation upon which gender inequality is built.

According to UNICEF (2021) sees gender equality as equal rights and opportunities for girls and boys which help all children fulfill their potentials. On gender issues and challenges, they observe that girls and boys see gender inequality in their homes and communities every day- in textbooks, in the media and among the adults who care for them. And in schools, discriminatory teaching practices and education materials also produce gender gaps in learning and skill development. As a result, nearly 1 in 4 girls between

the ages of 15 and 19 are neither employed nor in education or training compared to 1 in 10 boys. According to UNICEF, among those who reach secondary school, girls tend to outperform boys in reading across every country where data is available. Incidence of poverty is more rampant among the female-gender in Africa because of discrimination in educational opportunities.

Reading is an interaction between the reader and the text which results in comprehension. Wigfield, Gladstone & Turei (2016) see reading comprehension as the ability to gain meaning from a given printed text through the interaction between the reader's schema knowledge retrieval and semantic cognition. Jegede & Kolade (2017) define reading as the act of decoding symbols of a language in order to ensure intelligibility and understanding. It is a meaningful interpretation of printed symbols that is a kind of interaction between the author and the reader. Comprehension occurs in reading when the reader is able to decode, interpret and make meaningful connection between the text and the author's purpose for writing. In other words, the reading process involves the ability to decode and make meaning out of printed words. Comprehension is considered as the essence of reading as it accounts for the process that supports extraction of meaning from a written passage, (Alghonaim, 2020). Reading comprehension is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language, (Snow, 2002). Therefore, reading comprehension is a complex process that involves the integration and coordination of various skills including word decoding, the ability to recognize printed words and the ability to understand what is read. Comprehension takes place when the reader understands a given text. In other words, the reading process involves the ability to decode and make meaning out of printed words. Alderson (2000) observes that the gender of the reader is an important variable that determines the reading comprehension of the reader. According to Agus & Timo (2021) in foreign language learning, gender is believed to be one of the key factors that play a role in determining the readiness and progress of learning. How a language is learned can also be determined by gender.

Morris (2012) observed that males show unwillingness to read and low performance in reading because reading is considered a girl thing from the male point of view which is affected by the norm of the society they are in. The choices of girls and boys may reflect both the desire of a (gendered) subject curriculum to an individual with gendered interest. He emphasized that gender stereotyping does not begin in adolescence when students choose subjects on the basis of their perception of certain subjects as gendered. Learners start going to school with gender appropriate behavior ingrained. From birth parents treat boys and girls differently; girls are dressed in pink, boys in blue. They are given gender differentiated toys, dolls for girls and fruits and guns for boys. Boys are told that boys don't cry and are encouraged to be quiet and obedient. He further notes that young men prefer technical and science-oriented subject while young women typically go for caring or arts/humanities/social science subjects. He explains this to mean that boys and girls tend to enjoy and pursue different subjects because there are innate differences between males and female, differences in cognitive style, a masculinized educational environment that values the learning styles of boys over girls and gender stereotyping of differential constructions of gender among pupils and teaches literacy and teachers English. The African traditional gender ideology assigned separate roles to men and women; men provide for the family and women take care of the home, (Amah & Ogah, 2021). In a typical African family, household chores for males and females are distinguished at a very early age, such that the female children sweep the house wash plates, fetch water while their male counterparts wash cloths, make beds and lay the table for meals. Moreover, female students are expected to be gentle and quiet in the science classrooms while their male counterparts are expected to be very active, interacting with the teacher and other classmates. Literacy and English are often constructed as naturally female due to their feminine curriculum content. Girls may find themselves affirming to the constructions of family, while boys may find it challenging to their construction of masculinity.

### **Reading comprehension**

.Agus & Timo (2021) observe that when it comes to language learning, researchers believe that most male and female students have different styles and ways of thinking. Reading comprehension has to do with the ability to get meaning out of text. If the reader find the text monotonous, it will be difficult to concentrate and make meaning out of the text. Readers who have problems in decoding and recognizing

words find it difficult to understand meaning of passages than those without decoding problems. According to Shea & Ceptalo (2017:52) the general depth and breadth of one's background knowledge is a critical factor in comprehension; these have a significant impact on reader's ability to make gap-filling inferences, predict, make logical connections and perform other higher level thinking skills when interacting with texts. As students experiences differ, so too will the meanings they construct when engaging with text. Agus & Timo (2021) state that the ability to read in foreign language learning is a complex process that involves many variables, including the use of reading strategies and individual differences of readers. Individual differences such as gender and language proficiency level also play a role in the choice of reading strategy use and the ability to read foreign language where more skilled readers tend to use a wider variety of strategies than those with reading problems (Peart, 2017). Similarly, Tom (2015) observed that girls score higher than boys on texts of reading ability. It also shows that boys reading achievement lags that of girls in every country in the world on international assessments, ([www.bookings.edu](http://www.bookings.edu)).

According to Gamble & Hunter (1999) recent literacy assessments in Canada and other parts of the world reveal differential patterns in males and female achievement in reading and writing, females outperform males in all areas of reading and writing at the elementary, middle and secondary schools levels and this literacy gap does not narrow or close with age. According to them males are disadvantaged in literacy by the time they complete high school. Pagal, Miranfuentes & Ypanko (2017) observe that if students have high positive attitude towards reading, chances are that they can achieve comprehensibility and improve their academic performance in school. OECD Program for International Students Achievement (PISA) (2020) reported that boys were outperformed by girls in reading skills by an average of 30 points across the OECD nations. They also reported significant reading score gaps that favour girls across all OECD nations.

### **Gender issues and challenges**

Ngwoke (2020) notes that inequality in educational opportunities and attainment between males and females in Nigeria is gender-based among other factors such as family background, socio-economic factors etc. Omoregie & Abraham (2009) observe that this discrimination against women has grossly affected female enrollment in education especially in the Northern part of Nigeria. British council (2015) also note how marked the levels of gender inequality in Nigeria are. They reported that in Nigeria, 80.2 million girls and women had significantly worst life chances than men and women in comparable to other countries in Africa. They also reported that there is discrimination in access to land, in pay and in support to education, with some very marked regional differences; nearly three quarters of young adult women in the Northwest states cannot read, compared to only 81% in the Southeast; girls from the poorest north quartile are most likely to be out of school and parents say that cost is a major reason for withdrawing girls from education although the failure of poor girls to do well at school may contribute and teachers support or lack thereof may be a key factor. They also note that gender disparities exist at all levels of formal education in Nigeria. Adepoju, Ibhawoh & Fayomi (2020) observed that females still constitute around 56% of the 77 million youngsters not going to school, and women constitute 2 thirds of the uneducated adults. They further note that females are more probable to repeat school years, to drop out early, fail key subjects and in most countries girls are less promising to finish transition to secondary schooling. Ossai (2021) observes that girls in Nigeria face a distinctive set of barriers to formal education at all levels. Nearly 2 out of 3 (about 6.34 million) of the country's 10.19 million out-of school children in the country are girls, (<http://www.brookings.edu>). Similarly, United Nations Human Development Report (2005) classified Nigeria as a low development country in respect of equality in educational accessibility. They observe that female adult literacy rate (ages 15 and above) for the country was 59.4% as against male, 74.48% and the combined gross enrollment for primary, secondary and tertiary schools for female was 57% and male 71%. Furthermore, the World Bank Group (2022) notes the following persistent challenges:

**Health:** in spite of greater awareness of the sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents, some key issues have not improved. Adolescents are the only age group in which HIV-related deaths are

not decreasing and their levels of other sexually transmitted infections are high and growing. Also, a high proportion of them have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence. Education gives women the opportunity to be less dependent on men and to have more control over their sexual and reproductive health. Where women lack education and information about family planning and have a low social status, there is a much higher prevalence of unintended pregnancies, the biggest risk factor associated with this being unsafe abortion.

**Education:** globally, they note that girls continue to lag substantially behind boys in secondary education completion rates, and gender bias in the education system reinforces occupational segregation. According to WBG, when gender stereotypes are transmitted through the design of classroom learning environments or through the behavior of faculty, staff and peers, it has sustained impact on academic performance and field of study, especially in STEM fields.

**Poverty:** They note that poverty remains the most important factor for determining whether a girl will access an education. Recent research looking at data from 24 low-income countries show that on average, only 34% of girls in the poorest-quintile households in these countries complete primary school, compared with 72% of girls in the richest-quintile households. Studies consistently reinforce that girls who face multiple sources of disadvantage such as income level, location, disability, and/or ethno-linguistic background are farthest behind. In the society, the girl child is usually discriminated against in various areas such as the reading classroom, late payment of school fees, non provision of English textbooks and writing materials to even withdrawal from school to give room for the training of boys in the family.

**Economic opportunities/jobs:** Women have lagged behind men in terms of employment opportunities, in most countries, as well as wage gaps and occupational sex segregation which push women toward lower productivity jobs, ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)).

**Gender inequality:** Makama (2013) notes that women in Nigeria are harder-hit than men by poverty due to the nonchalant emphasis placed on female education and the prevalence of early marriage which tend to further impoverish the womenfolk and subject them to statutory discrimination. He observes that lack of education has been a strong visible barrier to female participation in the formal sector. The social pressure on women such as early marriages and other extraneous factors as well as consideration of female education as secondary to that of boys and certain inhibitive religious practices in some parts of Nigeria are the major causes of the high illiteracy rate among women. As the impact of teenage pregnancy and early marriage makes it clear girls are at a double disadvantage in educational access especial in the north, where these practices are widespread.

**Gender stereotype** also exist in the school curriculum and the academic streaming process where certain subjects and courses such as the sciences, mathematics and other technical disciplines are tagged masculine while secretarial studies and home economics are tagged feminine thereby denying both sex the opportunities of being exposed to all subjects. He also observes that the female inferiority complex established from childhood through social interaction in the home, including the differential levels of support and motivation, influence the aspirations and eventual learning achievement of boys and girls. Hence, Jeff (2021) observed that girls performed better than boys in reading comprehension performed better. Chauhan & Kumar (2022) observed that at college level, financial problem is the major factor affecting girl's education followed by transportation, co-educational problem, gender discrimination and physical harassment. They also noted that poor family status, care of siblings and household chores at home, early marriage are factors affecting education of girls.

### **Gender issues and students' reading comprehension**

Reading and comprehension are interrelated without comprehension; reading will be a task in futility. To read correctly one must have to uncover the meaning of each vocabulary word in the context and be acquainted with the grammatical relationships among the words. Extracting the superficial meaning of the sentence, involves reconstructing the writer's exact thought (Pagal, Mirafuentes & Ypanto 2017). They observed that boys usually show unwillingness to read than girls. Gender stereotyping is one of the cited

causes of this occurrence. This is based on the concept of appropriate characteristics and behavior or traits that are for females and males. Hence, it is observed that as the child comprehends the idea of gender differences, he or she will actively seek stereotypes of sex-appropriate behavior in daily interaction with others,

Yadollah, Afsar and Manouchehr (2015) carried out an investigation on whether learners' gender could make a difference in their reading comprehension and use of reading strategies in descriptive and narrative macro-genres. A reading tests were constructed and administered to a total of 50 EFL, intermediate male (n = 21) and female (n = 29) students. Result of the study indicated there was no statistically significant difference between male and female learners in the overall use and employment of reading strategies in the descriptive and narrative macro-genres. Ngongare, Samalo & Rettob (2020) carried out a study on the influence of gender in reading comprehension. The study involved 60 grade students purposely selected based on their gender as the sample. Result showed that female students outperformed the male counterparts in reading comprehension. In other words it can be stated that gender differences affect reading comprehension. Oda & Kadhim (2017) carried out an investigation into the relationship between gender and reading comprehension achievement at college level. Findings showed there was no statistically significant differences between the two groups of gender on three levels of reading comprehension (literal, inferential and appreciative), but for the critical level, females outperformed males to a statistically significant level. Jeff (2021) carried out a study on gender differences in reading comprehension achievement at IAN SyekhNurjati Cirebon. The result showed that gender differences influence reading comprehension achievement. It was found that 25% of boys participants got high score in reading comprehension test and 335 girls participants got high score in reading comprehension test and those differences were caused by different traits of their family and society toward reading.

### **Statement of Problem**

In the Nigerian society, one finds out that the overall mindset of the people fuels and impacts on gender inequality. Societal expectations, norms and values inadvertently determine the differences and value placed on boys over girls. Beliefs about gender have eaten deep like a cankerworm into the fabrics of the society culminating in the marginalization of girls and women in all sectors of life especially in education. Both girls and women are flagrantly discriminated against at home, in school, in work places, in the market and even in churches. Women and girls have less access to education than boys. The rate at which young girls drop out of school is alarming. Of all the illiterate people in Nigeria, one observes with dismay that most of them are girls. Therefore, this research is poised to examine gender issues and challenges as it affects students' reading comprehension.

### **Research questions**

1. What are the challenges faced by the students as it pertains to gender?
2. Are there any statistically significant differences between male and female students in reading comprehension?

### **Hypothesis**

There is no statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the female and male students in reading comprehension.

### **Methodology**

The study utilized the qualitative research design. SS 3 students in all the public secondary schools in Abakaliki education zone constituted the population of study. The target population of the study was 2000 students. A sample size of 100 respondents (43 female students and 57 males) was selected through the simple random sampling technique. A structured questionnaire was the instrument for data collection. A reading comprehension test was also administered to the students. Students were given 45 minutes to read a comprehension passage and answer 10 questions under it. Simple percentage was used to score the questionnaire items while the comprehension passage carried 10 marks each. T-test was used to find out if there was a significant difference in the reading comprehension test between boys and girls.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1: Challenges faced by the students as it pertains to gender**

SN	Item	Female	%	Male	%
1.	I am expected to clean the house, wash plates and cook food before going to school.	34	79.07	3	5.26
2.	My school fees are usually not paid on time.	13	30.23	29	50.88
3.	Most terms, I am sent out of school due to late payment of fees.	35	81.39	13	22.81
4.	I prefer reading English language to other subjects.	37	86.05	21	36.84
5.	My parents attach more importance to boys than to girls.	14	32.56	9	15.79
6.	I usually go to school late due to house chores.	40	93.02	14	24.56
7.	Teachers show partiality towards boys.	31	72.09	38	66.67
8.	Both boys and girls are given equal opportunities in the classroom as well as in school.	41	95.35	45	78.95
9.	Boys are usually selected to represent the school in competitions outside the school.	33	76.74	50	87.71
10.	In my school, most students that drop out of school are girls	36	63.15	40	70.17

Table 1 shows the challenges faced by students based on their gender. 34 (79.07%) out of the 43 female respondents said they clean the house, wash plates and cook food before going to school unlike their male counterparts where only 3 (5.26%) do the same. Similarly, in questionnaire item 10, 36(63.15%) of the female respondents and 40 constituting (70.17%) of the male respondents believe that most students that drop out of school are girls. It can be seen that out of the 43 females used in the study, 37 (86.05%) indicated that they prefer reading English Language to other subjects as against 21 (36.84%) out of the 57 male respondents. These findings agree with that of Adepoju et al (2020) and Ossai (2021) that 2 out of 3 (6.34 million) of the country's 10.19 million out of school children in the country are girls.

**Table 2: Average scores of female and male students in the 10 subjects and reading comprehension**

	Female	Male
English Language	76.74	60.09
Mathematics	65.21	77.01
Physics	55.89	69.43
Chemistry	64.01	71.98
Biology	52.11	59.28
Geography	59.08	63.21
Economics	64.22	58.22
Commerce	69.81	58.98
Government	66.11	52.88
Literature in English	80.20	48.91
Reading Comprehension	68.34	52.58

Table 2 shows the average scores of female and male students in the 10 subjects and reading comprehension.

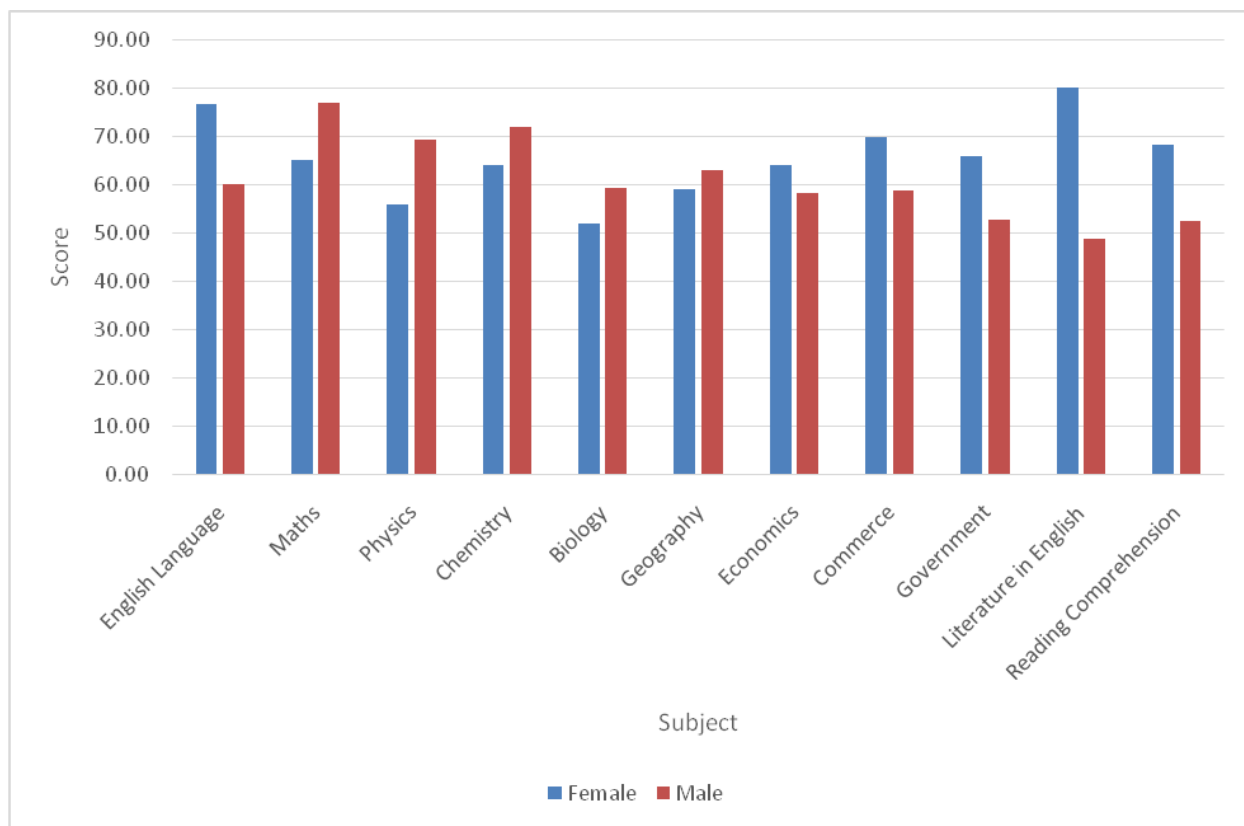


Figure 1 shows that girls performed better in Literature in English and English Language than other subjects while boys performed better in science subjects.

**Table 2: Group Statistics for the Reading Comprehension Test**

	Gender	N	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	Female	43	68.3416	9.57203	1.45972
	Male	57	52.5789	11.31047	1.49811

Table shows that 43 female students and 57 male students participated in the reading comprehension test. The female students scored 68.34 on average with a standard deviation of 9.57 while males scored 52.58 on average with a standard deviation of 11.31 in the reading comprehension test.

**Table 3: T-Test Result of the Reading Comprehension Test**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Score Equal variances assumed	4.336	.040	7.362	98	.000	15.76268	2.14117	11.51361	20.01175
Equal variances not assumed			7.536	96.652	.000	15.76268	2.09168	11.61109	19.91427

Table 3 shows that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of female and male students in reading comprehension ( $p=0.000$ ). Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected. The findings of this study is corroborated by the findings of Jeff (2021) which shows that gender differences influence reading comprehension achievement. It also agrees with the findings of Ngongare, Samalo & Rhettab (2020) which revealed that female students outperformed their male counterparts in reading comprehension.

### Recommendations

Based on data analysis and findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Parents should treat their children equally without discrimination based on gender.
2. Government should make education free at the secondary school level, so that both male and female students will have equal right to access education.
3. The Federal Ministry of Education should work in collaboration with the ministry of Education at all levels to provide English language textbooks and writing materials for secondary school students.
4. Government and stakeholders in the education sector should create gender equitable policies that will enable girls have uninterrupted right to learn.

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