

## PRESERVING THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES THROUGH GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*As globalisation, urbanisation, and the dominance of international languages threaten many minority languages, keeping indigenous languages alive has become a major global problem. Nigeria is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with more than 500 native languages. Even though there are many different languages in Nigeria, many of them are still not well-documented, not taught in schools, and are slowly fading from everyday use, especially among younger people. This study investigates the function of girl-child education as a strategic instrument for the preservation and maintenance of indigenous languages in Nigeria. The research is founded on the tenets of mother-tongue-based education, which underscores the significance of utilising learners' native languages in early education to foster cognitive development, cultural identification, and linguistic continuity. Utilising a qualitative descriptive research design, the study is based on literature review and analysis of academic publications, policy papers, and institutional reports pertaining to language preservation, girl-child education, and linguistic variety. The study shows that women, especially mothers and female carers, are very important for early language socialisation in the household. As a result, teaching girls enhances the ability to pass on traditional knowledge systems, cultural values, and indigenous languages to future generations. The study also shows that educating girls can help more people utilise indigenous languages by helping them learn to read and write, speak up for their culture, and take part in digital language projects. The report suggests that empowering girls via education is a long-term way to protect Nigeria's linguistic diversity and improve the passing down of languages from one generation to the next.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous languages, girl-child education, language preservation, linguistic diversity, mother-tongue education, Nigeria.

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## Introduction

Language is inseparable from human existence and represents a defining characteristic that distinguishes humans from other cognitive beings. It encompasses the diverse modes through which individuals communicate, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and visual systems such as sign language. Furthermore, language may be conceptualized as a structured code used for communication within specific groups of speakers. This explains the identification of languages based on particular speech communities, as reflected in expressions such as Yoruba language, Hausa language, and English language.

There are more than 500 languages spoken in Nigeria, and English is the language serves as a leverage (Ethnologue, 2021). Language allows people to talk about anything that has to do with them and how they connect with others. Language, whether spoken or written, is a fundamental aspect of human interaction and serves as a primary medium for communication that reinforces social connections. Language and humanity are interconnected; devoid of it, human experience regarding existence becomes illusory (Obadare, 2025). God has also gifted man with an unlimited, flexible language that he can use to say whatever he wishes.

Most of the languages spoken in the country have not been written down or recorded, and many of them are very close to extinction, while some are already dead. The UNESCO Atlas of Endangered Languages provides a list of 29 languages that are at risk in Nigeria. However, this does not always show the current situation. The figure could be greater or less than what is said since there isn't enough data or the data is old, if it is available.

The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 74/135 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples declared 2022 to 2032 as the International Decade of the Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022–2032), with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as its lead organization. This is because many indigenous languages around the world are in danger of going extinct. The Global Action Plan of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages contains a plan to meet this requirement. The statement says that indigenous languages are "languages currently or historically used by indigenous peoples and considered integral to their heritage knowledge systems or identity."

Even though Nigeria has many different languages, not much has been spoken about how educating girls can help keep indigenous languages alive. The educational empowerment of girls has important implications for language sustainability, particularly in multilingual societies where women often play central roles in early language socialisation.

## Language Policy and Planning

Language policy is a formal decision, usually made by the government, about language issues. These can include recognising a certain language as a national, regional, or official language, or providing the necessary support to make the policy work. When a government truly cares about the languages spoken in its own country, it may change how those languages are used, make rules, and reach its goals. Chukwukere and Ajileye (2024) define language policy as a systematic endeavour to address the communicative challenges of a region, significantly enhanced by the

compilation and analysis of its various dialects, alongside the collection and examination of different languages within the specified area. It is crucial to remember that a policy does not always mean the death of a language or dialect. However, such a policy or even the way people speak a language could lead to language attrition, linguistic shift, and finally, language death.

Nigeria has more than 500 languages spoken within its boundaries, because it was originally a British colony, it chose the language of the colonists as its official language. The colonists made English the official language because they needed to create a strong administration within Nigeria's borders. This wasn't really a policy; it was more of a useful way to build an interactive communicative uniformity that would make running things much easier. However, the British policies, which we may loosely term the British language strategy in Nigeria, are not the same in the north and south of Nigeria.

### **Mother-Tongue-Based Education Theory**

Mother-Tongue-Based Education stresses using students' first languages as the main way to teach them in the beginning of their education. Studies in educational linguistics indicate that children acquire knowledge more efficiently when instructed in a language they comprehend, especially during initial learning phases (UNESCO, 2016). Education in one's mother tongue improves understanding, cognitive growth, and academic success, all while strengthening cultural identity and linguistic pride.

The theoretical premise of this approach posits a strong correlation between language, cognitive development, and cultural identity.

When indigenous languages are incorporated into the educational system, students are more inclined to value their linguistic history and persist in utilising these languages across many societal contexts. On the other hand, when schools put more value on foreign or dominant languages than on native languages, students may start to give up their native languages in favour of languages that are more socially acceptable.

In terms of educating girls, teaching them in their native language not only helps them do well in school, but it also gives them the tools they need to learn to read and write in their own language. This lets people take part in language documentation, education, translation, and digital language projects in a meaningful way. So, educated girls can be cultural and linguistic keepers in their families and communities.

### **Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design, focusing on literature evaluation to investigate the correlation between girl-child education and the preservation of indigenous languages in Nigeria. The design permits the researcher to examine extant academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports concerning language preservation, female education, and linguistic variety in Nigeria. Documentary analysis enables researchers to systematically evaluate policy texts, institutional reports, and scholarly literature in order to identify patterns and thematic relationships (Bowen, 2009). This study integrates theoretical frameworks and empirical data from pertinent literature to build a holistic comprehension of how the educational empowerment of girls can enhance the sustainability of indigenous

languages. The research utilises secondary data sources, comprising scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles focused on language policy, sociolinguistics, and the preservation of indigenous languages.

## Discussion

### Dearth of Indigenous Language

Languages die not due to the extermination of all speakers through genocide, but because people have been assimilated into a prevailing language or cultural group. David Crystal (2003) says it well in the following words: It is like claiming that a person is dead when you say that a language is dead. Languages can't exist without humans, so it can't be any other way.

A language may begin to die when those who speak it are forced (either openly or secretly) to stop using it and learn or use another language. This can happen until there are no live speakers of that language. In this case, we can say that the government of the day has decided that language should die. The Hawaiian language is a good example. It was the main language spoken in Hawaii until the US took over the Islands in 1898. Before this, Hawaiian had been written down and utilised as the official language of the government.

After 1898, there were fewer native speakers. It wasn't until the 1980s that a group of professors at the University of Hawaii began the attempts to reclaim and revive the language. So, a preschool was set up where older Hawaiian speakers taught the kids the language. New grades were added each year, slowly but surely, until the project created an education system, from preschool to high school, where Hawaiian is the main language of instruction. Ibekwe (2006) correctly noted that the use of English among Igbo

people results in the erosion of indigenous language proficiency, paradoxically accompanied with an incomplete command of English. Conversely, individuals striving to preserve and reclaim their language are, as Zuckerman and Walsh (2011) assert, endeavouring to restore, enhance, and empower their cultural autonomy, spiritual and intellectual sovereignty, and general well-being.

### The State of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

Nigeria, which is sometimes called the "Giant of Africa," has a very rich cultural past. One of the most important parts of this heritage is the fact that it has many different languages. Nigeria is home to over 7% of the world's languages, with over 500 languages spoken (Ethnologue, 2021). This mix of languages shows how rich and complicated the country's culture is (Federal Ministry of Art, Culture, and the Creative Economy, 2024). Three (3) Major Nigerian Indigenous Languages are:

- i. Hausa: Hausa is one of the most commonly spoken languages in West Africa, with around 50 million speakers, mostly in the north. It's a language that is very important for business and trade in the area.
- ii. Yoruba: Yoruba is another important language in Nigeria. It has over 30 million speakers, mostly in the southwestern part of the country. Many famous Nigerian writers and philosophers speak it, and it has a rich cultural history.
- iii. Igbo: This language is very important to Nigerian culture. About 25 million people speak it, mostly in the southeast. It has complicated grammar and is a sign of who the Igbo people are.

Other important Nigerian indigenous languages are:

- **Fulani (Ffulde):** The language is spoken by over 15 million people, mostly in the north. It is closely linked to the Fulani people, who are a major ethnic group in West Africa.
- **Kanuri:** There are about 6 million speakers of Kanuri, mostly in the northeastern part of Nigeria. It is an important language in Nigeria's northeastern states.
- **Ibibio:** About 5 million people speak Ibibio, mostly in the south. It is an important language in the Niger Delta region.
- **Edo:** Edo is an important language in Nigerian culture and history, with over 3 million speakers, mostly in the south.
- **Nupe:** About 2 million people speak Nupe, mostly in the central region. It is a language that is strongly linked to the Nupe people, a large ethnic group in central Nigeria.
- **Tiv:** Tiv is an important language in Nigeria's central states, with over 2 million speakers, mostly in the central region.

The native languages of Nigeria are a treasure mine of cultural diversity, and it is important to keep them alive for Nigeria's cultural legacy and identity. We can learn more about Nigerian culture and help the country's linguistic variety by promoting and celebrating these languages.

### **Preservation of Nigerian indigenous languages**

It is very crucial to keep Nigerian native languages alive. It is important to protect both the endangered and the struggling languages. The languages ought to be employed across many societal areas. This kind of use shows how strong and healthy it is. The home is

the most important place to use it since it encourages passing it on to the next generation. If a language isn't spoken at home, it is in great danger of dying away. When the elderly who speak it die, the language will be buried with them if the following generation doesn't learn it. Other areas include communities, education, literature, ICT, media, government, business, and so on.

There is a place where every Nigerian language is spoken, yet not every Nigerian language is important to every Nigerian. In those locations, the languages that seem to be spreading should be given more power and encouraged to be utilised in the media, in government, in schools, and so on. The languages that seem to be state languages should be used at the state level in the same way, and the languages that seem to be Local Government Area languages should be given more power and used that way.

It is important to make sure that these languages are still useful. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should be translated into the languages spoken in the area, and the people who speak those languages should help with the translation and promotion. This manner, the communities will be part of the process of making plans and reaching the goals. There needs to be more advocacy at the community level. Udoh (2021) thought that diverse communities should form groups to get people to work on government initiatives. These languages are the best way to promote inclusive and integrated collaborations. They can develop stronger and more able to meet the needs of their speakers as they are utilised, and they can also be kept safe.

The necessity to utilise them across various fields will simultaneously drive funding for language projects and

generate interest in the languages. If some Nigerian languages are used for legislative business (even once a week, like Yoruba in the Ogun State House of Assembly on Wednesdays, which Lagos State House of Assembly has added to their legislative business), then the law makers will need to find linguists to help them come up with more words to use. We think that people who have the money to pay for these kinds of projects will do so if they really want to utilise the language correctly.

The Lagos State Yoruba Language Preservation and Promotion Law 2017 says that the Yoruba language should be kept alive and used more. The Bill says that all public and private primary and secondary schools must teach Yoruba. It further says that Yoruba must be included in the General Studies program in state-owned colleges and universities, and that laws must be translated into Yoruba. The law also punishes people who break it with fines and other punishments. In addition to this Bill, Yoruba was chosen for usage in the house's plenary session on Thursday. This is quite good.

### **The importance of preserving Indigenous Languages in digital age**

In the digital age, when globalisation and new technologies are making linguistic diversity less important, the preservation of indigenous languages has become an increasingly important problem. Indigenous languages are vital conduits of cultural identity, historical knowledge, and traditional values; nonetheless, many are endangered due to the prevalence of global languages like English, French, and Chinese (UNESCO, 2019).

The advent of digital technology poses both obstacles and opportunities for the preservation of indigenous languages, as digital environments can either facilitate linguistic erosion or function as instruments for revitalisation and transmission (Bird, 2022). Researchers have long talked about how digitalisation affects linguistic diversity. Some say that technology causes language shift, while others say that it helps revive languages. Language shift happens when people stop speaking their original languages and start speaking languages that are more generally spoken.

In Nigeria, English is the main language used for school, government, and internet communication. This has caused younger people to stop using their native languages over time (Mekiliuwa, 2018). Research shows that a lot of Nigerian teens, especially girls, prefer to use English while they are online because their native languages don't always have a strong digital presence (Adewale, 2019). This reality makes people worry about how long indigenous languages will last and how they will be passed on to future generations.

Even while there is a chance that language loss will happen, digital technology has also shown to be a strong way to keep languages alive. The incorporation of artificial intelligence into language documentation has enabled the development of automatic translation systems, speech recognition technologies, and indigenous language databases (Mager et al., 2021). In Nigeria, there have been efforts to make language apps that help people learn and use indigenous languages, especially using mobile technology (Ojo & Adegbite, 2022). Digital tools like Learn Yoruba and Igbo Amaka have shown that they can help people learn new languages and

get younger people interested in their original languages. But these tools don't work very well because of things like slow internet connections, a lack of support from institutions, and not enough language resources for many under-represented languages (Aturamu et al., 2016).

### **Girl-Child Education: A Tool for Sustaining Indigenous Languages**

Education has been acknowledged for an extended period as a potent tool for social transformation, cultural continuity, and sustainable development. In the context of linguistic preservation, the education of the girl child is particularly significant, as women frequently serve as key transmitters of language and culture within the household and the broader community. Researchers in sociolinguistics have constantly underscored that the home constitutes the primary and most significant environment for language acquisition, wherein children learn their mother tongue through interactions with parents and carers (Crystal, 2003). In several countries, moms and female carers are instrumental in the initial language and cultural socialisation of youngsters.

As a result, educating girls directly helps keep indigenous languages alive, going, and growing.

Consequently, the girl child plays an important role in passing on language from one generation to the next. Language acquisition commences in early childhood through routine interactions within the familial context, where cultural values, oral traditions, proverbs, folktales, and indigenous knowledge systems are conveyed throughout generations. Fishman (2001) posits that the preservation of a language is predominantly contingent upon

effective intergenerational transmission within the family, especially via child-rearing behaviours. Girls are more likely to keep and pass on their native languages to their families and communities when they have a good education that encourages them to value and utilise these languages. On the other hand, if girls are not allowed to go to school or are taught to think that indigenous languages are not as good as global languages, the chances of language shift and eventual language extinction are up (Crystal, 2003).

Educating girls can help whole communities get better. We assist girls break free from the bonds of poverty and old ways of thinking by supporting their education. The World Bank's Girl Education Report 2020 says that if all girls finish high school by 2030, the average GDP of developing nations might go up by 10% over the next ten years. To appreciate how empowering girls helps families, communities, and the country, you need to know how important girls' education is.

Through education, scholarship programs, and gender-neutral parenting, Nigeria has made significant strides in improving the status of females. But a lot more work needs to be done, which can create opportunities for everyone and help the whole country get out of poverty (UNICEF, 2025). When we understand how important it is for girls to go to school, we see that they not only change their own lives, but they also benefit their families and communities by making them healthier, richer, and more advanced.

A girl who can go to school is healthier, more independent, and helps her family and community in a good way. This makes her a change agent who fights for better health and nutrition and keeps kids safe from the dangers of child

employment and marriage. Teaching girls makes a difference that lasts, making families stronger and whole communities healthier. It gives people the information, confidence, and chances they need to make long-term progress. UNICEF (2025) reports say that educated mothers make families healthier, better fed, and cleaner, and that girls with skills help the family make money and keep the economy stable.

The education of girls in Nigeria still has to deal with a lot of social, cultural, and economic problems. Early marriage, prejudice based on gender, poverty, and unequal access to school are all things that have made it harder for many girls, especially those who live in rural areas, to get an education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) says that gender gaps in education are still a big problem in many developing countries, including as Nigeria (UNESCO, 2021). These limitations not only make it harder for girls to get an education, but they also indirectly put indigenous languages at risk of dying out. Girls who are not allowed to go to school that appreciates and uses indigenous languages may start to use more dominant languages like English, which makes indigenous languages less important in the home. The family is still an important place for keeping languages alive, therefore using less indigenous languages at home speeds up language loss (Crystal, 2003).

Educating girls can be a strategic way to keep indigenous languages alive. Girls who go to school are more likely to learn to read and write in both their native and official languages. This lets them help with language documentation, translation, teaching, and cultural activism. They can also contribute to the production of literature, educational

materials, and digital content in indigenous languages, thereby expanding the domains in which these languages are used. Bamgbose (2019) said that it is important to broaden the functional areas of indigenous languages to keep them alive and useful in today's world. In this way, educating girls not only helps them learn how to speak and write, but it also makes them more aware of their culture and proud of their language history.

Also, include native languages in girls' education helps them feel more connected to their culture and makes learning more welcoming for everyone. Studies in educational linguistics have shown that kids learn better when they are taught in their first language, especially in the early years of school (UNESCO, 2016). Mother-tongue-based education improves understanding, cognitive growth, and academic success, while also strengthening cultural identification. Girls who learn languages that are relevant to their culture feel more connected to their culture and are proud of it. This makes them want to keep these languages alive and promote them in their families and communities.

In today's digital age, educated girls can also play a big role in keeping indigenous languages alive in digital form. The increasing availability of digital technologies and social media platforms offers potential for the production and distribution of indigenous language material. Bird (2022) says that internet platforms can help bring minority languages back to life by letting speakers record language resources, make multimedia products, and share cultural knowledge with more people. Educated women and girls may help indigenous languages become more visible and last longer online by writing blogs, telling stories, making language

tutorials, and creating instructional materials.

Educating girls is an important way to keep indigenous languages alive in Nigeria and other multilingual communities. By giving girls an education that honours their linguistic and cultural heritage, society can make it easier for indigenous languages to be passed down from one generation to the next and make sure they are still useful in both traditional and modern settings. Investing in the education of girls is not just an issue of gender equality and social fairness; it is also a crucial step toward protecting linguistic diversity and cultural identity for future generations.

### Conclusion

Language is still one of the most important parts of who we are, our culture, and how we communicate with other people. Nigeria is a multilingual country with over 500 languages spoken. Indigenous languages are important stores of cultural legacy, traditional knowledge, and a sense of community. However, the persistent dominance of global languages, especially English, along with poor policy execution, negative social attitudes, and technological marginalisation, has put many Nigerian indigenous languages in danger of dying out. When a language dies, it means that unique cultural views, indigenous knowledge systems, and historical memory are also lost.

In this context, educating girls is a smart and long-term method to keep indigenous languages alive. Women, especially mothers, have always been the main people responsible for raising and teaching youngsters how to speak. Educated and empowered females become active agents of language preservation, able to pass on indigenous languages, cultural values, and oral

traditions to future generations. On the other hand, when girls don't have access to education or when education systems don't value indigenous languages, the passing down of these languages from one generation to the next is made harder.

To protect Nigeria's indigenous languages, we need to take a broad and comprehensive approach that includes education, policy implementation, community involvement, and new technologies. When combined with culturally responsive and mother-tongue-based educational policies, educating girls can help keep Nigeria's rich linguistic diversity alive for future generations by making it easier for indigenous languages to be passed down from one generation to the next.

### Recommendations

This study's findings and discussions suggest that the government and educational stakeholders should make sure that mother-tongue-based education is put into practice effectively, especially in the early years of school. Policies and initiatives that help girls get an education should be made stronger all over Nigeria. Also, Indigenous languages should be better integrated into the national education curriculum at all levels.

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