

Oil Pollution, Environmental Injustice, and the Crisis of Girl-Child Education in Nigeria's Niger Delta, 1956–2020

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Abstract

Oil extraction in Nigeria's Niger Delta has caused extensive environmental degradation, which disproportionately affected girls' access to education between 1956 and 2020. This study examines how oil spills, gas flaring, deforestation, and water contamination led to the collapse of agricultural and fishing livelihoods, thereby intensifying gender inequalities in schooling. Adopting a historical-descriptive approach and drawing on primary and secondary sources, the paper argues that environmental degradation deepened household poverty and compelled many families to prioritise boys' schooling. As a result, girls were frequently withdrawn from school to take on domestic labour, caregiving, farming on degraded lands, petty trading, and the task of sourcing water over long distances. In heavily polluted communities, especially in Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers States, girls experienced significantly higher rates of absenteeism and school dropout than boys. Although national programmes such as the Universal Primary Education (UPE) of 1976 and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) of 1999 increased overall enrolment, these policies largely failed to address the ecological barriers affecting educational access in oil-producing communities. The study concludes that environmental injustice remains a critical yet overlooked barrier to girl-child education and argues that achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 will require integrated environmental remediation, livelihood restoration, and gender-sensitive development policies in the region.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Oil pollution, Girl-child education, Gender inequality, Sustainable development

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Introduction

The Niger Delta is one of Africa's most resource-rich regions. Nevertheless, it presents a contradicting story, like what was stated in the Aghalino inaugural lecture titled "Crude but Sweet Anatomy of the Devil's Excreta", vast oil wealth coexists with deep-seated human and environmental crises (Aghalino, 2024). Since the inception of commercial oil extraction at Oloibiri, Bayelsa State, in 1956, the area has suffered

countless oil spills, persistent gas flaring, extensive deforestation, and chronic pollution of its waterways, mangroves, agricultural lands, and groundwater. These environmental harms have disrupted traditional community structures and forced households to adapt in ways that have unduly affected girls' access to education.

A substantial body of scholarship has explored the Niger Delta's oil-driven political economy, environmental degradation, and recurring conflict (Watts, 2008; Obi, 2010). The United Nations Environment Programme's pivotal 2011 report on Ogoniland offered robust scientific documentation of acute hydrocarbon pollution and its disastrous consequences for local ecosystems and livelihoods (UNEP, 2011). Nevertheless, much of the literature remains preoccupied with broader themes such as resource allocation, militancy, and state-corporate relations, often neglecting the nuanced social and gendered ramifications of these changes, particularly their lasting effects on girls' education.

Feminist and gender scholars have emphasized that women and girls bear the brunt of environmental decline (Olowu, 2012; Edewor, 2014; Akinwale, 2018). In the Niger Delta, girls' educational opportunities are shaped by a complex web of factors: worsening poverty from lost livelihoods, persistent patriarchal values favoring boys' education, increased domestic burdens, and the direct health consequences of pollution. While awareness of these issues has grown, there remains a lack of historical research tracing the long-term links between oil-induced environmental change and the educational marginalization of girls.

This work seeks to fill that gap by examining the historical interplay between oil-related environmental injustice and girls' education in the Niger Delta from 1956 to 2020. It contends that the persistent exclusion of girls from quality education is rooted not only in poverty and cultural norms but also, and fundamentally, in the region's prolonged ecological decline associated with oil production. The study employs a historical-descriptive approach, utilizing archival records, government documents, reports from international organizations, academic literature, and oral histories.

By highlighting the ecological underpinnings of educational inequality, this paper makes contributions to Niger Delta studies, gender and education research, and the discourse on sustainable development. It argues that meaningful advancement in girls' education and, more broadly, sustainable development depends on prioritizing environmental restoration in resource-dependent regions.

Historical Background of Girl-Child Education in the Niger Delta

The introduction of formal Western education to the Niger Delta began in the nineteenth century, primarily through the initiatives of Christian missionary organizations such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Roman Catholic Mission. These groups founded the region's first schools, which aimed not only to convert locals to Christianity but also to train a select group of literate Africans to assist with colonial administration and European commerce. From the outset, however, access to education was shaped by gender biases (Fafunwa, 1974).

Missionary-run schools mirrored the Victorian-era beliefs about gender roles. Boys were educated for roles as catechists, clerks, interpreters, and traders, while girls' education emphasised domestic skills, hygiene, childcare, moral upbringing, and religious devotion. The curriculum for girls was intentionally crafted to prepare them for life as Christian wives and mothers, rather than for participation in the public or economic sphere. This early gender divide set the stage for enduring inequalities in educational opportunities and outcomes.

Before modern education, local cultural traditions reinforced these disparities. Akpubi Eunice, in an interview during fieldwork, emphasized that in most Niger Delta societies, including among the Ijaw, Itsekiri, Ogoni, and Urhobo, girls were brought up from childhood to focus on marriage, childbearing, farming, assisting with fishing, and household management (Akpubi Eunice, 2024). Education for girls was often seen as less important, especially in families with limited resources. Boys' schooling took precedence, as they were viewed as future providers who would carry on the family line. Consequently, even when mission schools were accessible, girls' enrolment and completion rates lagged far behind those of boys throughout the colonial era (Taiwo, 1980).

In the late colonial period (1940s–1950s), the British colonial administration began to show a slightly greater interest in widening educational access. This was partly due to the need for more skilled African workers in the growing colonial economy and partly due to rising nationalist movements. Some official reports from this time acknowledged the importance of girls' education, but real progress was limited. In the riverine and rural areas of the Niger Delta, factors such as long distances to schools, inadequate infrastructure, and parental concerns about girls' safety and morality continued to limit female enrolment. A shortage of female teachers further discouraged parents from sending their daughters to school.

Nigeria's independence in 1960 marked the beginning of a new era of educational expansion. Postcolonial governments saw education as essential for national development and economic growth. The Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme, launched in 1976 under General Olusegun Obasanjo, led to a dramatic rise in primary school enrolment nationwide. However, implementation in the Niger Delta was inconsistent due to poor planning, lack of trained teachers, inadequate facilities, and regional disparities in funding.

The discovery of oil at Oloibiri in 1956 and the subsequent oil boom of the 1970s brought mixed effects. On the one hand, oil revenues enabled increased government investment in education and infrastructure. On the other hand, the expansion of oil extraction disrupted traditional farming and fishing livelihoods. Environmental problems, such as oil spills, began to damage farmland and water sources. In households facing dwindling agricultural yields, girls were often the first to be pulled out of school to help with domestic chores or income-generating activities.

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) further hampered educational progress in the region. Many schools were destroyed or abandoned, teachers fled, and children were displaced. Although post-war reconstruction sought to rebuild educational facilities, recovery was slow.

For girls, the war's aftermath was particularly harsh, as instability tended to reinforce traditional gender roles and further restrict educational opportunities.

The economic downturns of the 1980s and the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) introduced in the mid-1980s made matters worse. Declining government spending on education led to deteriorating school conditions, shortages of materials, and the introduction of various fees. For Niger Delta communities already struggling with environmental damage from oil activities, these economic pressures made girls' education seem even less of a priority. The era also saw an increase in child labour, early marriage, and teenage pregnancies, all of which further disrupted girls' educational paths (Nwanna, 2004).

Nevertheless, the late 1980s and 1990s saw a growing movement advocating for girls' education. International organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF, along with various NGOs, began promoting gender equality in education as a fundamental right and a development necessity. Locally, women's groups, faith-based organizations, and community leaders launched initiatives to boost girls' school enrolment and retention. While these efforts had some positive outcomes, their overall impact was limited by ongoing environmental degradation, economic hardship, and weak government capacity.

By the end of the twentieth century, it was evident that traditional strategies focused mainly on poverty reduction and cultural changes were inadequate in addressing the challenges facing girls' education in the Niger Delta. The worsening environmental crisis caused by oil production introduced new, significant obstacles that required more comprehensive analysis and policy solutions.

Oil Economy, Environmental Degradation, and Gendered Obstacles to Education

The start of commercial oil extraction in the Niger Delta in 1956 dramatically altered the region's economic and environmental landscape. Before oil discovery in the region, the people relied on fishing, farming, palm production, and local trade; however, the Niger Delta has since become one of the world's most environmentally damaged regions. The region's contribution to Nigeria's natural gas production, constituting 80-90% of the national output, further highlights its economic importance. However, despite these substantial contributions (Akpotaire, 2018), the benefits of oil exploration and production have not been equitably distributed, particularly impacting women in the Niger Delta. While oil revenue has bolstered Nigeria's economic standing, its consequences have enormously burdened women in the oil-rich region. They bear the brunt of severe environmental degradation, economic marginalisation, and social disempowerment (Ileoje, 2016). A respondent in an interview described the devastating effects of oil spills, gas flaring, and the resulting infertility of land and water sources, which have disrupted traditional agricultural systems in which women play a crucial role in food production and household sustenance. Before oil was discovered in the Niger Delta, families depended on fishing and farming for their

livelihood. During my visit to Yenagoa, a local woman explained, “We used to harvest enough cassava for the whole family and pick periwinkles that would fill a big basin and catch enough fresh fish, but after the oil spill, we could hardly feed ourselves. Garri is very expensive in the market, and the large quantity of cocoyam in my backyard has decreased. You can see the yellowish color of the cocoyam leaves. This was not the case before the incessant oil spill in the locality” While oil revenues have boosted Nigeria’s economy, the benefits have not reached most women and girls in the region. Instead, they have faced worsening environmental damage, economic hardship, and social barriers. In an interview with Mr Barnabas Simon in Bayelsa stated that the loss of arable land has left many women unable to provide for their families, hindering their ability to afford necessities like education and healthcare (Barnabas Simon, 2024). The breakdown of traditional livelihoods directly affected families’ ability to support their children’s education. As incomes from farming and fishing dwindled, families struggled to keep their children in school. Patriarchal norms often prioritized boys’ education, while girls were pulled out of school to help with household survival and economic activities (Edewor, 2014; Akinwale, 2018). As a result, girls increasingly took on tasks such as working degraded land, fish processing, petty trading, caregiving, and domestic chores. In the most polluted areas, many girls spent between four and six hours each day on survival tasks, leaving little or no time for their studies.

It is important to note that environmental degradation worsened girls’ domestic responsibilities by causing water shortages. Pollution of water sources forced women and girls to travel long distances to fetch clean water for drinking and household use. In many communities, girls walked several kilometers daily to obtain water, cutting into their study time and leading to frequent school absences (UNICEF, 2015). Pollution-related health problems, such as those caused by gas flaring and contaminated water, also increased the need for home-based caregiving. Respiratory illnesses, skin infections, and waterborne diseases became more common, and girls were often expected to care for sick relatives (Fawole et al., 2024; Maduka & Tobin-West, 2017). In communities I visited, I was told that parents often had to pull their daughters out of school to help with chores and survival work. “Girls now spend hours every day fetching water,” one teacher told me, “and many miss school as a result.” As documented by UNEP (2011), over 13,000 oil spills have polluted the region’s rivers and farmlands since 1956, making agriculture and fishing increasingly difficult. This corroborate with the above statement.

Gas flaring made these challenges worse. The constant burning of gas releases hazardous pollutants into the air, causing acid rain, respiratory issues, reproductive health problems, and further environmental degradation. Girls often faced greater exposure because they spent more time outside doing domestic chores and economic activities. Health problems from pollution affected their school attendance, concentration, and academic performance.

Additionally, the oil economy altered social dynamics in the Niger Delta. The arrival of expatriate oil workers and migrant laborers led to new forms of exploitation and inequality. Many young girls became vulnerable

to promises of financial support, marriage, or opportunities from oil workers and expatriates, only to be abandoned after unplanned pregnancies. These girls were often forced to drop out of school permanently and take on adult responsibilities at an early age, further perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion from education (oral interview with Percy 2024).

The oil industry also fueled social unrest and conflict. From the 1990s onwards, anger over environmental harm, unemployment, and political marginalization led to increased militancy, protests, and violence. Schools were frequently disrupted or destroyed during these conflicts, and widespread insecurity discouraged parents from sending their daughters to school (Ojakorotu & Gilbert, 2010). Economic hardship also reinforced cultural practices such as early marriage, with some families marrying off their daughters to reduce financial strain during difficult times. As a result, many girls were withdrawn from school when they reached puberty.

In the most heavily polluted areas of Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers States, girls consistently experienced higher rates of absenteeism, grade repetition, and dropout than boys (oral interview, Grace 2024). Although policies like the Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Basic Education (UBE) programmes increased access to schooling nationwide, they often failed to address the specific ecological challenges that shaped families' educational choices in oil-producing communities. In the Niger Delta, exclusion from education was not only a matter of poverty or tradition, but also a direct outcome of environmental degradation, collapsing livelihoods, and gender-based inequality.

Table 1: Environmental Degradation, Oil Economy, and Girls' Educational Exclusion in the Niger Delta (1999–2020)

Structural Factor	Impact on Livelihoods and Social Conditions	Gendered Burden on Girls	Educational Consequences	Key Sources
Oil Spills	Destruction of farmlands; sharp decline in crop yields and household income	Girls are increasingly engaged in farming, food processing, and informal labour.	Higher dropout and absenteeism rates, especially during planting/harvest seasons and market days	UNEP (2011); Akinwale (2018); field interviews
Water Contamination	Pollution of rivers/creeks; reduced fish catches; scarcity of potable water	Girls walk long distances (often several km daily) to fetch water for the household	Increased lateness and absence from school; less time for studies	UNICEF (2015); Edewor (2014); field interviews

Gas Flaring	Rise in respiratory illnesses and environmental decline	Girls often care for sick relatives, adding to household burdens	Missed classes, declining academic performance	Fawole et al. (2024); Maduka and Tobin-West (2017)
Livelihood Collapse and Poverty	Falling agricultural/fishing income, increased economic stress on households	Girls engage in petty trading, domestic labor, and survival work; boys' education is prioritized.	Increased dropout, repetition, and reduced transition to secondary school	Akinwale (2018); Edewor (2014); field interviews
Influx of Expatriate Oil Workers and Migrant Labour	Unequal social relations, new risks and dependencies	Teenage girls are at risk of exploitative relationships and early pregnancies	Early pregnancy, school withdrawal, early motherhood, long-term exclusion	Ojakorotu and Gilbert (2010); UNICEF (2015)
Conflict and Insecurity	Violence, community disruption, and damaged school infrastructure	Parents fear for girls' safety; they keep girls home or withdraw them from school	School closures, irregular attendance, and permanent dropout for girls	Ojakorotu and Gilbert (2010); field interviews
Patriarchal Cultural Practices	Economic hardship reinforces early marriage and gendered domestic expectations.	Girls are expected to give up school for marriage, caregiving, and household duties.	Reduced female enrolment, higher withdrawal at puberty	UNICEF (2015); Edewor (2014)

Note: "Field interviews" refers to discussions with teachers and parents in Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers States (2022–2024). All statistics are grounded in the cited published sources where available.

The table shows that, from 1999 to 2020, in the oil-producing areas of Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers States, girls experienced much higher rates of absenteeism, grade repetition, teenage pregnancy, and dropping out of school than boys. This was largely due to environmental damage, economic hardship, gender inequality, insecurity, and changes brought by the oil industry.

State, Institutional, and Community Actions on Girls' Education in the Niger Delta

Over the years, multiple actors at the national, regional, and community levels have introduced policies and interventions to improve girls' access to education in the Niger Delta. National programs such as the Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Basic Education (UBE) schemes increased overall school enrolment rates, signaling progress towards greater educational inclusion. However, these initiatives largely overlooked the unique environmental challenges facing the Niger Delta, most notably, frequent oil spills and ecological devastation that eroded agricultural livelihoods and family income (Unterhalter, 2014). As a result, while more children (including girls) were initially enrolled in school, many were unable to complete their education due to persistent economic instability and environmental hardship.

At the regional level, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was established to foster development and address the region's specific needs. The NDDC invested in building new schools and rehabilitating old ones in communities grappling with severe environmental degradation. Despite these efforts, the impact of these investments was undermined by widespread corruption, poor project execution, and a lack of alignment with the everyday realities and needs of local communities (Ibaba, 2011). Too often, resources were mismanaged, and school buildings were left underutilized or in disrepair, failing to translate into real educational opportunities for girls.

Various interventions from state agencies, international organizations, NGOs, and community groups have sought to close the gender gap in education. These efforts included scholarships, community outreach campaigns, and support services to encourage girls to stay in school. While such initiatives contributed to modest improvements in enrolment, they did not adequately address the deeper, structural ecological factors that continued to exclude girls from education. Persistent issues such as the collapse of traditional livelihoods, ongoing environmental pollution, and the increased domestic responsibilities placed on girls as a result of economic hardship remained largely unaddressed.

National Policy Efforts: Expanding Access, Ignoring Ecology

The UPE program of 1976 and the UBE policy introduced in 1999 were landmark initiatives that made primary and basic education free and compulsory for all Nigerian children. These programs were influenced by international frameworks such as Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goals, reflecting a global push for universal access to education (Unterhalter, 2014). Although these policies led to a surge in enrolment, their impact in the Niger Delta was short-lived and uneven. Many schools in the region lacked sufficient teachers, adequate infrastructure, and essential learning materials. More fundamentally, the policies failed to recognize the environmental and economic realities of oil-producing areas. By framing educational exclusion primarily as a matter of poverty, culture, or parental attitudes, policymakers neglected

the profound effects of pollution, land degradation, and livelihood loss on families' ability to keep girls in school. As a result, the expansion of physical schools did little to improve educational outcomes for girls in communities where environmental crises had already upended daily life.

Regional Institutional Initiatives: The NDDC

The formation of the NDDC and later the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs marked a shift towards more targeted regional development. These bodies rolled out a variety of projects, including school construction, scholarship schemes, and educational rehabilitation programs, some of which were specifically aimed at supporting girls' education (Ibaba, 2011). However, systemic issues such as corruption, mismanagement, and limited local community involvement hampered the effectiveness of many of these projects. In some cases, schools were built without considering whether local environmental conditions and economic realities would allow girls actually to attend and remain in school. Without addressing underlying issues such as pollution, livelihood collapse, and the additional survival burdens shouldered by girls, these infrastructure-focused interventions often failed to produce lasting improvements in girls' educational participation and achievement.

International Interventions

International organizations, notably UNICEF and UNESCO, also launched complementary initiatives to promote girls' education in the Niger Delta. Their efforts included training teachers in gender-sensitive approaches, organizing community sensitization campaigns, distributing learning materials, and offering conditional cash transfers to incentivize school attendance (UNICEF, 2015; UNESCO, 2020). While these programs had some positive effects in regions less impacted by environmental damage, their overall influence in the Niger Delta was limited. Short funding cycles, weak coordination with national agencies, and a lack of environmental remediation components reduced the sustainability of these interventions. Critically, most international efforts did not confront the environmental crises, such as oil pollution and the collapse of rural livelihoods, that were at the heart of girls' continued exclusion from education. As a result, the root causes of educational disadvantage in the region remained largely unaddressed, and progress towards gender equity in schooling was slow and uneven.

Community and NGO Responses: Localized but Limited Interventions

At the grassroots level, women's associations, faith-based groups, and civil society organizations have played a vital role in promoting girls' education in the Niger Delta. Their efforts include providing scholarships, mentorship, advocacy against early marriage, and establishing safe spaces for girls, particularly during times of conflict and violence. Some NGOs also supported mothers' livelihoods, recognizing that higher household

income could reduce the likelihood that girls would be pulled out of school. These community-based initiatives often enjoyed more trust and cultural acceptance than government-led programs. Nevertheless, their reach and impact remained modest compared to the scale of environmental and economic crises facing the region.

Structural Constraints and Policy Disconnect

Despite the variety of interventions, a fundamental weakness persisted: most approaches failed to link educational policy with the environmental degradation and economic collapse caused by oil extraction. Many programs treated girls' educational exclusion as an issue of poverty, culture, or access, while overlooking the ecological realities, such as persistent oil spills, infertile farmlands, polluted water, and the necessity of child labour for household survival, that directly influenced families' decisions about girls' schooling.

Additionally, the arrival of migrant and expatriate oil workers brought new challenges, such as increased rates of teenage pregnancy, which forced many girls to leave school and take on adult responsibilities prematurely—in states like Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers, girls' dropout rates remained three times higher than those of boys even after the introduction of national education policies like UPE and UBE (UNICEF, 2015). By the 2010s, it was clear that conventional educational interventions had reached their limits. While national enrolment improved in some areas, girls in heavily polluted communities continued to experience much higher dropout rates.

Rethinking the Link between Girl-Child Education and Sustainable Development

In the Niger Delta, the relationship between girl-child education and sustainable development exposes deep contradictions in Nigeria's development model. For decades, education has been promoted as a driver of national advancement. However, in the context of environmental devastation caused by oil extraction, the transformative power of girls' education has been severely constrained. This calls for a new approach, placing girls' education at the center of any genuine sustainable development strategy for the region.

Mainstream development thinking often sees education as a neutral tool for building human capital, assuming that increased enrolment and gender parity will naturally lead to economic growth and social progress. However, in the Niger Delta, this assumption has proven false. Gender norms, ecological destruction, economic instability, and the oil economy interact in complex ways, limiting the benefits of education. Excluding girls from quality education not only represents a social deficit but also actively undermines the region's prospects for sustainable development. From a social perspective, investing in girls' education brings numerous long-term advantages: delayed marriage and childbirth, improved maternal and child health, greater participation in community governance, and the challenge of harmful traditions. In a region marked by inequality

and uneven oil wealth, expanding girls' access to education is key to achieving social equity and empowerment.

Economically, the exclusion of girls from education represents a significant loss of human capital, hindering the Niger Delta's capacity for innovation, entrepreneurship, and diversification beyond oil. In a global economy that increasingly values knowledge and skills, suppressing female potential perpetuates the so-called "resource curse," where natural wealth coexists with widespread poverty and underdevelopment. Investing in girls' education is not just a gender issue—it is an economic necessity for the region's long-term prosperity.

The environmental dimension is also crucial, yet often overlooked. In Niger Delta communities, women and girls are the main managers of natural resources: fetching water, collecting firewood, farming, and processing fish. Oil pollution has made these tasks far more demanding, forcing girls to spend long hours securing necessities. This "time poverty" reduces their chances of attending school. Limited education, in turn, restricts girls' ability to engage in environmental advocacy, participate in decision-making, or contribute to ecological restoration, creating a cycle where environmental decline and low educational attainment reinforce each other.

The adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 highlighted the interconnectedness of education (Goal 4), gender equality (Goal 5), climate action (Goal 13), and life on land (Goal 15). However, in the Niger Delta, treating these goals in isolation has led to fragmented, unsustainable outcomes. Educational programs that ignore environmental challenges and environmental initiatives that overlook gender and education remain limited in their impact.

A more effective approach demands integrated, context-specific solutions. Educational policy should go hand in hand with environmental remediation, sustainable livelihoods, and economic diversification. For instance, linking girls' scholarships with income-generating projects for mothers, or embedding environmental education in school curricula, could have broader community benefits. Clean-up initiatives, such as HYPREP, should include robust educational and gender components.

Importantly, girls in the Niger Delta are not passive victims. Despite significant barriers, many have shown resilience and agency by participating in community groups, informal education, advocacy, and creative ways to balance learning with home responsibilities. Recognizing and supporting this resilience is crucial for moving beyond paternalistic policies toward truly empowering and sustainable solutions.

Conclusion

This study has explored the intersections of oil pollution, environmental injustice, and girls' education in Nigeria's Niger Delta between 1956 and 2020. The findings reveal that the exclusion of girls from education is less a result of poverty or cultural norms, and more a consequence of ongoing environmental damage caused by oil extraction. Since oil operations began at Oloibiri in 1956, the region has suffered extensive pollution from oil spills, gas flaring, and water contamination, which have devastated

traditional farming and fishing livelihoods. With declining household incomes, families have increasingly kept girls out of school so they can contribute to subsistence activities such as farming, caregiving, trading, and fetching water. While initiatives such as the UPE (1976) and UBE (1999) programmes broadened educational access, their effectiveness was limited in oil-producing areas because they failed to address the underlying environmental challenges. Similarly, efforts by government bodies and international organizations to improve education infrastructure had minimal impact when not integrated with environmental solutions. This has resulted in persistent gender disparities in education, with girls in polluted communities facing higher rates of dropout, absenteeism, and educational stagnation compared to boys. To achieve Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5, and 13, it is essential to align education policies with environmental restoration and support for family livelihoods.

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