

Child Poverty in Nigeria:

Unveiling Multidimensional
Challenges and Urgent Reforms



Background

The prevalence of child poverty in Nigeria has become an issue of major concern for development economists and policy makers. The focused attention on child poverty lies in the fact that children are the most vulnerable group in every

society. A recent study reveals the reality of child deprivation across dimensions, including education, health nutrition, child protection, water and sanitation.

Indeed, the problem of child poverty and deprivation are more evident in the rural communities and Northern Nigeria where children face adverse condition as a result of lack of basic infrastructure and socio-economic support.

Against this backdrop, it has become necessary for the Nigerian government to act fast and design a comprehensive measure to combat child poverty and eliminate all forms of deprivation, especially as it concerns basic needs.

Greater efforts in rural areas and the Northern region will be pivotal in addressing this precarious pressing issue. This policy brief explores the root causes of child poverty in Nigeria and outlines potential solutions to safeguard the well-being of the nation's most vulnerable population.



Victor Emeruwa
Executive Director

Fred Itua
Director of Communication

Joseph Ekeng
Chief Writer, Policy and Strategy

Introduction

Poverty constitutes a major impediment to human development and it manifests in various forms. In 1993, the World Bank characterized poverty as the inability of individuals or families to afford the minimum requirements for a decent living. Moreover, extreme poverty is defined by the World Bank as living on less than \$2.15 a day. Another common definition of poverty is a situation where people are not able to meet their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. They cannot satisfy social and economic obligations, lack gainful employment, skill, asset and self-esteem, which limits their opportunity to advance their welfare to their full potential (Englema 1995, Ajegi 2004).

Notably, approximately 7.9, % of the global population or 719 million people live on less than \$2.15 per day.

What is especially worrisome is that while the issue of global poverty affects people in almost every demographic, it is the children that are most vulnerable. Although children make up only a third of the global population, they represent about half of those struggling for survival on less than \$2.15 per day. Child poverty has far-reaching consequences for both children and societies. Tackling child poverty has been a fundamental aspect of international agreements, exemplified by the Sustainable Development Goals.

The challenges faced by certain children are particularly pronounced in developing countries, where poverty, political instability, hunger, internecine conflicts, and deprivation are prevalent (Makinde 2015).

Child poverty continues to rise in developing countries, despite the concerted efforts of international organizations

and nations worldwide, typified by initiatives such as the United Nations' MDGs 4 targets, aimed at reducing child mortality by 2015. Many children in developing countries lack access to basic sanitation and clean water in their households (UNICEF 2009). Disturbingly, developmental

research from 2009 reveals that approximately 600 million children worldwide live in absolute poverty, with an estimated 10 million children aged 0-5 succumbing to mostly preventable diseases annually (UNICEF 2011). These fatalities result from ailments such as diarrhea, respiratory infections,

conflict, protozoa infections, and HIV/AIDS. Stunted growth, malnutrition, poor hygiene, and inadequate sanitation are key factors contributing to these deaths (UNICEF, 2005).

Unfortunately, more than 93% of all child deaths under the age of five are traceable to Asia and Africa combined. And about 40% of these occur in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and India (UNICEF, 2008). This clearly presses home the urgent need for government and relevant stakeholders to provide sustainable solutions to the escalating problem of child poverty.



Child Poverty in Nigeria



In 2023, Nigeria topped the global ranking for the country with the largest number of extreme poor people with the poverty threshold set at \$1.9 per day (Statista 2023). And despite its oil wealth, the country is expected to experience the worse level of hunger by 2023 (Global Hunger Index 2023).

The report released in October, places Nigeria at 109th out of the 125 countries with sufficient data to calculate the global hunger score. Multiple factors are linked to increased poverty in the country, with critical situations like unemployment, education, malnutrition and conflict at the forefront.

The poverty situation in Nigeria is more worrisome when compared with other less endowed countries in Africa. For instance, Nigeria's GDP per Capita as at 2022 was \$2184. This is far below Seychelles at \$15875, Mauritius at \$10216, Gabon \$8820, Botswana \$7738 and Namibia at \$4911. A critical revelation is that children bear the brunt of the discomfort caused by these factors, as articulated by Gordon

et al. in 2003. To address the issue of child poverty, Section three of the Nigerian constitution has set forth essential milestones aimed at ensuring equal opportunities for every child. This includes striving for a higher standard of living and protection against neglect, abuse, maltreatment, and child labor, but the reality has failed to match up with the good intention of the constitution (Ogwumike and Ozughalu in 2018).

In addition, Nigeria ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991 and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of a Child (ACRWC) in 1999, underscoring its commitment to safeguarding children's rights. The country is also a signatory to the International Labour Organization (ILO) convention on child labour, which emphasizes the importance of ensuring access to quality education and an improved standard of living for children. Also, over the decades Nigeria has been a major recipient of aids and support from development partners like the United Nations and other non-governmental bodies, designed to tackle the prevalence of child poverty, yet, millions of Nigerian children are still deprived of the most basic necessities.

Child poverty is not confined to specific areas; it is a pervasive issue,

with children living in overcrowded households, lacking access to clean water, proper healthcare, sanitation, education, and information.

This grim reality was made known in a 2022 report by UNICEF which revealed that about 47.4% of children in Nigeria reside in households that spend less than N400 per day. The report also showed that 54% of children in the country face "multi-dimensional poverty." To be multidimensionally poor means facing at least three deprivations across seven dimensions of child rights including nutrition, healthcare, education, water, sanitation, adequate housing, and information. While multidimensional poverty cuts across children in both rural and urban areas, it is more prevalent in the rural (65.7 %) than urban areas (28.4 %). There are also high state disparities ranging from 14.5 % (Lagos) to 81.5 % (Sokoto) (UNICEF 2022).

The findings also show, that child poverty rate is highest among children aged 16–17 years and least among children aged 0–5 years.

Addressing the root causes and consequences of child poverty is imperative to safeguard the well-being of these vulnerable children. Experts believe that the country would need as roughly as 1 trillion naira in targeted investment to lift children out of poverty.

The Face of Poverty

- A Case Study: Abuja

In Nigeria's federal capital city, Abuja, the abysmal socio-economic push factors pummeling the country and its citizens, are birthing a generation of children making a living on the expansive streets of the well-heeled city. While Abuja is known as one of the wealthiest cities on the continent, poverty is ubiquitous on its outskirts as well as in the countryside. Vast inequality of income is highly visible in the capital city. According to SOS Children's Village Gwagwalada, children as young as 2 years old; begging in the streets are a common sight in Abuja; often the entire family makes a living this way. These children do not attend school and will most likely continue their lives in the streets once they have a family of their own.

The street children hawking and begging all over Abuja has now become alarming. They are all over the traffic light junction, begging and trying to clean the windscreen of passing vehicles who stop to obey the traffic light. These kids are very young, sometimes as young as 10 years. The Minister of the FCT and the people who manage the city have quietly ignored the influx of street kids



into Abuja. Some of these children are supposed to be in school and it is the duty of the FCT administration to make laws to keep children in school. Abuja's street children work as car-washers or scavengers. They beg for money to buy food, and when there is none, they eat leftovers from restaurants and passers-by or scavenge from bins. Many inundate car drivers at varied stops to solicit for money to subsist.

Aliyu is from Zamfara in the extreme northwest of the country. In fast-paced Hausa, he said he was seventeen and came to Abuja four years ago to seek his fortune in the city. He has never attended a school aside the local Islamiya in his natal birth place, Maradun. Banditry in Zamfara State has continued to cost lives and displace thousands of families from their towns and villages. Illegal mining of huge gold deposits has been identified as one of the underlying causes of the region's conflict. Security officials insist that a strong and glaring nexus has been established between the activities of bandits and illicit mining.

Aliyu ekes out a living by washing cars alongside hundreds of other street kids in the city. He says he works under an 'Oga,' and makes an average of one thousand naira a day. "Wallahi, I sleep outside somewhere in Dei Dei. There are many of us that sleep outside like that. It doesn't bother me. I am used to it," he said.

11-year-old Musa Bala, who hails from Dutse, told a national daily in June that he escaped from the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camp in Zamfara. "I am from Zamfara, I left the camp in Gummi after our village was attacked and we were forced to leave. Begging here in Dutse market is more profitable than staying in the training school at Dawaki, no adequate feeding for all of us in the school," he said. Damaraya Idris, 10, in Dawaki, also told the daily that he was

one of 60 children apprehended by the Social Welfare Department of the Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA), but he left the school to be on the street. "In Islamiya, we are not allowed to go outside and make money. I had to find an escape route. My father chased us out of the house in Kano, and my four brothers went to fend for themselves," he said.

Another child in Bwari, who simply identified himself as Abubakar also said: "I am from Jigawa. I don't know my age. A relative took us away from our parents with a promise of taking us to school, but when we came to Abuja we were subjected to begging."

In difficult circumstances, children often see living on the streets as a better way to exist. The bright lights of big cities appeal to those living in hardship in rural areas and many flee to the urban areas looking for work, opportunities, or simply adventure. They can be found sleeping on pavements, cardboard boxes or bare ground. They come together under bridges and trees, their belongings in plastic bags or broken retail trolleys, symbolising lives on the move.

Majority lack basic education. They also have no access to school so fall behind in their studies, meaning they have little or no chance of ever improving their situations and finding new opportunities. Many children are keen to gain an education, but have no way to do so.



Profile of Child Poverty: Multidimensional Childhood Poverty in Nigeria



Childhood poverty is a pressing issue in Nigeria, and a closer look at the data reveals some compelling insights:

According to the UNICEF report, there is a stark contrast between rural and urban areas, with a significant **65.7%** of children in rural settings experiencing multidimensional poverty, while the figure is notably lower at **29.7%** for urban children. Certain areas stand out with higher rates of multidimensional poverty. Sokoto, Kebbi, and Zamfara exhibit alarmingly high rates at **80.4%**, **74.9%**, and **74.0%**, respectively, in contrast to the lower rates in Edo and Lagos at **19.0%** and **17.3%**, respectively.

Also, larger households with more members, especially children, tend to experience higher levels of multidimensional deprivation than smaller households. Children living in households where parents lack basic education are more likely to encounter multidimensional poverty compared to those with heads or mothers who have achieved at least a secondary education. The UNICEF study also found out that households in the poorest wealth quintile report higher levels of multidimensional deprivation than those in the richest quintile. Another

interesting discovery from the research was that the literacy status of mothers plays a crucial role, with children of mothers without education more likely to experience multidimensional poverty than those with literate mothers.

The research also showed that children **aged 0-4** without birth certificates are at a higher risk of multidimensional poverty, with **74.6%** experiencing deprivation compared to **42.2%** for those with birth certificates. Gender is also a factor in multidimensional child poverty, though they are minimal. Among older children (**12-17 years**), slightly more boys (**53.8%**) experience at least three deprivations simultaneously compared to girls (**51.4%**).

The research also affirms the link between child poverty and child labour. For instance, children engaged in economic labor (**5-17 years**) are more likely to be multidimensionally poor, and girls who are or were married and/or pregnant (**15-17 years**) face significantly higher multidimensional poverty rates compared to girls who have not experienced early marriage or pregnancy (**79.3% versus 45.4% for early marriage and 78% versus 46.9% for early pregnancy**). These findings underscore the complexity of child poverty in Nigeria and emphasize the need for targeted interventions to address the unique challenges faced by children across different demographics.

Nigeria's Palliatives vs. US Stimulus

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light significant weakness in Nigerian poverty reduction mechanism.

Nigeria's COVID-19 measures was labeled as "Palliatives,". Typically, this means actions meant to make a problem seem less serious without focusing on solving it. On the contrary, the USA and other advanced nations referred

to their efforts as "Stimulus," as they were designed to encourage growth and activity. This distinction reflects the intentions and the level of seriousness both governments attach to elimination poverty in household and in extension child poverty. In Nigeria, the palliative program attracted numerous complaints and criticisms from both citizens and non-governmental organizations.

Despite claims that the palliatives were aimed at the most vulnerable in society, the criteria for determining beneficiaries were unclear. The Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development was tasked with distribution, but transparency became an issue. And there were widespread allegation of corruption and mismanagement of the resources.

Meanwhile, the USA swiftly distributed stimulus packages to over 120 million qualified Americans, providing substantial support for the duration of the pandemic and its aftermath. In stark contrast, Nigeria's cash transfer program reached only a fraction of the impoverished population due to issues like the lack of a robust national information management system and corruption.

Moreover, many of the stimulus measures in the USA are legally established, ensuring fairness and accountability. Nigeria's palliatives, on the other hand, lack legal backing. The proposed Economic Stimulus Bill 2020 by the Nigerian House of Representatives, which primarily focuses on formal sector businesses, has not yet been enacted. This omission is particularly concerning given that 65% of Nigeria's GDP comes from the informal sector, employing over 90% of the workforce.

Nigeria's palliatives also fail to acknowledge the importance of the family unit in society. In contrast, the USA passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, allocating \$3.4 billion as a relief package, underscoring the role of family support in their response.

The contrast between Nigeria's palliatives and the USA's stimulus measures reveals a significant disparity in intention and effectiveness. While Nigeria appears to offer temporary relief, the USA's comprehensive approach seeks to stimulate economic growth and provide long-term support.

These differences emphasize the urgency for Nigeria to reassess its crisis response and prioritize sustainable solutions over short-term palliatives, as the failure of these initiatives perpetuates poverty in the country and worsens the level of child poverty in Nigeria.



Causes of Child Poverty

Household Size and Income

One of the key factors contributing to child poverty in Nigeria is household size. This issue arises when larger families rely on the income of a single household member, in most case, for sustenance. Consequently, children that come from these kinds of families will most likely suffer from malnutrition because the limited income is primarily spent on food. The consequences of this household size issue are notable, as it has led to a surge in the urban population and an increase in both immigration and emigration flows. Over the years, researchers have been able to establish that there is a link between household migrants and remittances, which directly impact poverty levels (Chiwuzulum Odozi et al. 2014; Kihangire & Katarikawe 2008). Furthermore, research has also explored the impact of household size on food security.



Marital Status and Gender

In Nigeria, like most emerging economies, marital status plays a significant role in child poverty. This is more so among single parents. Research conducted by Anyanwu (2014) revealed that almost 77.36% of polygamous families, 69.80% of monogamous families, 61.89% of divorced families, and 54.74% of co-habitant families in Nigeria live in extreme poverty. And the death of husbands in many cases leaves a financial burden on wives, often pushing their children into labour to contribute to the family's income. In some regions, women are prevented from working as a result of cultural and religious factors. This usually exacerbates the issue of child poverty, especially among divorced parents or widows with husbands who practiced polygamy, a common phenomenon in Nigeria (Anyanwu, 2014). Early marriage, prevalent in northern Nigeria, is another factor contributing to child poverty. Some studies have suggested that marriage has a positive impact on poverty reduction and labor market participation (Okojie, 2002; White & Rogers, 2000). On the gender side, studies have demonstrated that child poverty is more pronounced in households led by women (Dauda, 2017). Breaking the cycle of poverty in Nigeria is seen as more of a man's responsibility, with men regarded as the family's foundation. Gender inequality in Nigeria, predominantly linked to the feminization of poverty (Okojie, 2002), results in job insecurity, wage gaps, and an increased likelihood of single parenthood among women (Pearce, 1978).

Household Head Educational Status

It is a universal fact that the educational status of parents is a crucial determinant of child poverty. Research has indicated a high rate of illiteracy in northern Nigeria compared to other regions, contributing significantly to child poverty (Ogwumike & Ozughalu, 2018). Educated parents are most likely to embrace family planning so as to have fewer children and allocate more of their income to their children's education. In contrast, less-educated families tend to spend less on child education and have higher fertility rates (Anyanwu, 2014). Education is also intertwined with gender inequality, especially in terms of women's education. This bias is more pronounced in northern Nigeria, where religious beliefs influence gender education. More attention is usually given to male education, while female counterparts may be married off at an early age. Also, the prevalence of illiteracy in the North is a driving factor for early marriages and child labor, contributing to the sight of children begging on the streets and the prevalence of child poverty.

Unemployment

Nigeria, endowed with abundant human and natural resources, has unfortunately witnessed persistent poverty among a large segment of its population. The mismanagement of proceeds from crude oil by political elites has given rise to high-level corruption and the deprivation of citizens' basic needs, further exacerbating the issue of poverty. Poverty, in turn, impedes industrialisation and economic development, resulting in a high rate of unemployment (Ogbeide & Agu, 2015) and a weakened economy (Innocent, 2014). Unfortunately, the government's efforts in addressing unemployment have been insufficient, and this has been a major contributing factor for child poverty.

Our Recommendations

The analysis presented in this policy brief sheds light on the critical issue of child poverty and its implications for child well-being, development, and deprivation. Child poverty is a global concern, drawing the attention of both national and international stakeholders dedicated to combating child labor and human trafficking in developing nations.

A Broken System

One of the sad realities of Nigeria is the prevalence of deep-rooted corruption in the political and governance system. Those who are charged with managing the system and overseeing the use of resources meant for poverty alleviation programs in Nigeria have demonstrated lack of capacity and integrity. Corruption and a lack of effective policies have led to the misdirection of resources that were meant to provide relief to struggling households, as evident during the Covid palliative distribution. This misallocation of funds perpetuates the underdevelopment of the country and showcases the apathy of political elites towards the needs of their citizens and the urgency to eradicate child poverty.

Urgent Need for Reform

For Nigeria to make significant progress in addressing issues of child poverty there must be comprehensive reform and action. The government must jettison the old approach riddled with corruption and inefficiencies, and prioritize programs and policies that monitor fund disbursement and hold those who divert funds for personal use accountable. Government and other stakeholders must be laser-focused on education, healthcare, housing, sanitation, and other essential social amenities that are vital to alleviate the multidimensional poverty that affects so many children in the country.

Urgent Need for Reform

Research have clearly established that the size of households is a primary contributor to child poverty in Nigeria. This does not only lead to population growth but also a high rate of illiteracy among children. The responsibility is on the governments at all levels to establish programs that directly impact its citizens, providing access to basic amenities and social intervention for both parents and children. There must also be closer working relationship between government and development partners to facilitate effective monitoring.

Education

Education should be made a top priority, following UNESCO guidelines, with free education available from preschool to secondary levels. Special intervention funds can be provided for those who cannot afford higher education, making education accessible for all. Adult education should also be promoted to reduce illiteracy rates. The Universal Basic Education Act already provide a solid framework for this. By ensuring that the provisions of the Act is strictly complied with, government can begin to build a solid foundation for an empowered educational system that will provide the antidote for child poverty.

Tackling Unemployment

Addressing youth unemployment is not only essential, it is mandatory. The government should promote technical education and self-reliance, shifting the focus from traditional white-collar jobs to more diverse and sustainable employment opportunities.

Early Marriage and Family Planning

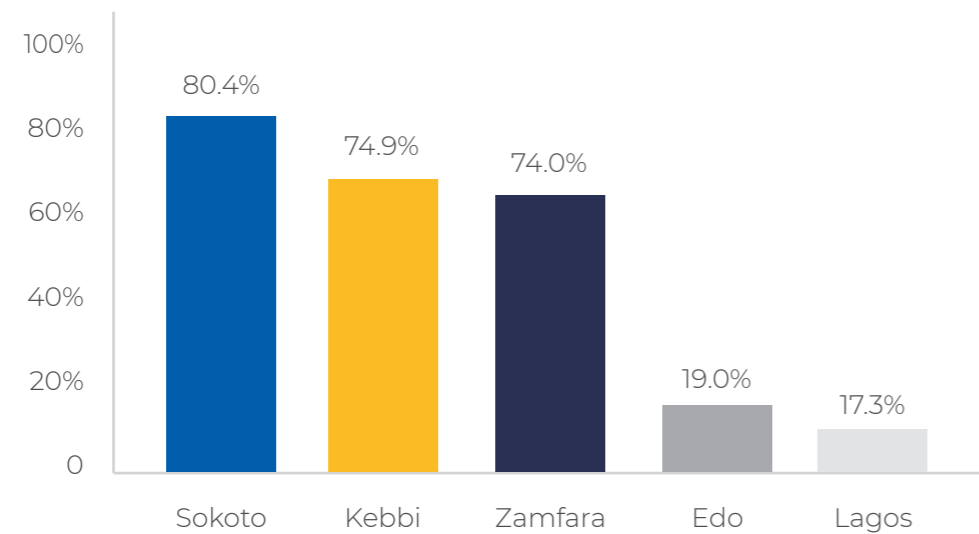
The issue of early marriage, especially in Northern Nigeria, calls for urgent attention. Up until now, the government has not matched its public declaration with firm action. Despite the religious and cultural attachment to early marriage, a strategic plan by the government in collaboration with development partners can provide sustainable solutions. Also, the judiciary and legislative arms of government must collaborate to enact laws that will discourage child marriage. Also, there is a need for robust awareness campaigns to educate families on the dangers of early marriage and the need for family planning.

Combatting Insecurity

Insecurity remains a major challenge in Nigeria and it is a consequence of poverty and government neglect. And no nation can thrive in an atmosphere of lawlessness, where the safety of citizens is not guaranteed. To this end, social investments in education and security must be encouraged, and existing poverty alleviation programs should be restructured and closely monitored to ensure effectiveness.

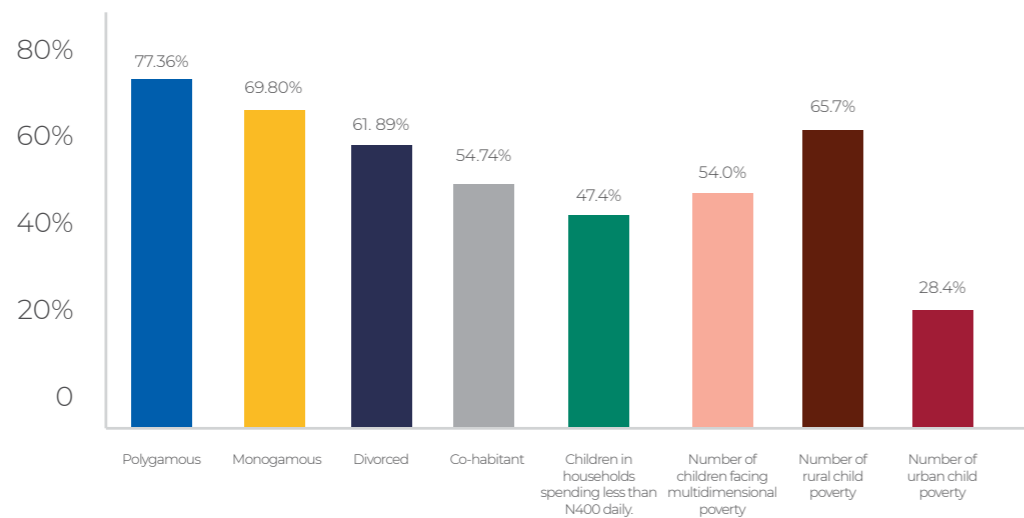
Child Poverty Situation in Nigeria

Rates of child multidimensional poverty

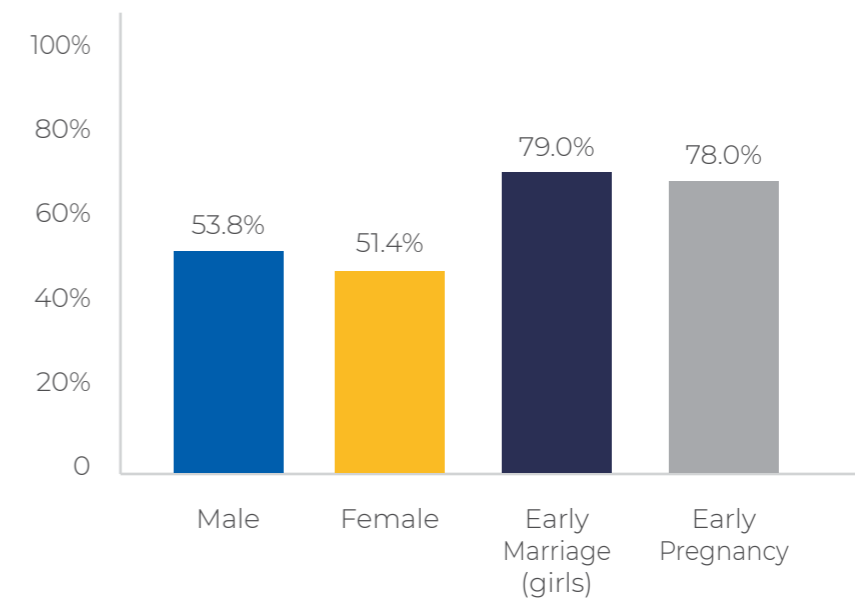


Sokoto, Kebbi, and Zamfara have elevated rates of child multidimensional poverty, while Edo and Lagos exhibit comparatively lower rates.

Families living in Extreme Poverty



Gender (12 to 17) years



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