



Integration of Almajiri System of Education in Universal Basic Education Programs in Western Senatorial Zone of Nasarawa State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The Almajiri system of education, a traditional Islamic schooling model prevalent in Northern Nigeria, remains a critical yet contested component of the country's educational landscape. This study examines the roles and challenges of the Almajiri system in contemporary Nigeria, with a focus on the Nasarawa Western Zone of Nasarawa State. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates qualitative interviews with key stakeholders—including Mallams, parents, community leaders, and policymakers—alongside quantitative data from school records and government reports. Findings reveal that while the Almajiri system historically provided religious and moral instruction, it now perpetuates poverty, child labor, and insecurity due to systemic neglect and socio-economic pressures. The study identifies gaps in educational access, infrastructure, and teacher quality, exacerbating marginalization. However, opportunities for reform emerge through proposed integration with the Universal Basic Education (UBE) framework, emphasizing curriculum modernization, teacher training, and community engagement. The paper argues that holistic reforms, grounded in collaboration with religious and community leaders, are essential to transforming the Almajiri system into a viable pathway for socio-economic empowerment. Recommendations include policy alignment, sustainable funding, and robust monitoring to ensure inclusive, safe, and quality education for Almajiri children.

Introduction

The Almajiri system of education, once a prominent pillar of Northern Nigeria's educational landscape, has progressively become associated with several significant social, educational, and health challenges in recent decades. While the Almajiri system historically contributed to the moral and intellectual development of children through Qur'anic education and community involvement, it now faces considerable obstacles that compromise its effectiveness. The system, originally rooted in Islamic teaching and community-based support, has gradually evolved into a source of concern due to the socio-economic pressures of urbanization, poverty, and inadequate state support. As a result, Almajiri children are often subjected to street begging, poor living conditions, overcrowded schools, and an overall lack of access to basic education, including literacy, numeracy, and vocational training (Teke, Khalid, & Katami, 2022). At the national level, the Nigerian government has initiated several reforms aimed at integrating Almajiri children into mainstream educational systems. The establishment of the Almajiri Model Schools in 2012 and the inclusion of Almajiri children under the Universal Basic Education (UBE) framework were intended to combine Qur'anic education with formal schooling. These reforms aimed to provide these children with the skills necessary for socio-economic advancement, thereby addressing the issues of illiteracy, poverty, and marginalization. However, these efforts have largely faltered due to weak implementation, inadequate funding, political interference, and inconsistent policy execution (Abubakar-Abdullateef et al., 2024). Despite the introduction of these reforms, the Almajiri system continues to struggle with the same challenges that have plagued it for decades, such as overcrowded classrooms, the lack of qualified teachers, and inadequate infrastructure. In Nasarawa State, and particularly in the Western Senatorial District, the Almajiri system mirrors the national crisis. Almajiri schools in this region continue to face systemic inefficiencies, with most of the learners still subjected to the harsh conditions that have historically defined the system. Although local government and community-based initiatives have sought to support Almajiri children, these efforts remain fragmented and underfunded, often failing to address the root causes of the systemic deficiencies. The rapid urbanization of Nasarawa Western Zone has exacerbated these challenges, resulting in even more children engaging in street begging as their primary means of survival. The failure of government policies to fully integrate Qur'anic education with formal education, along with the lack of adequate welfare support, has meant that many Almajiri children remain excluded from both formal education and adequate social support systems (Dukawa, Usman, & Gwandu, 2023).



Overview of the Almajiri System of Education in Nigeria

The Almajiri system of education remains one of the most resilient indigenous Islamic learning frameworks in Northern Nigeria. Historically, it was structured to promote Qur’anic literacy, moral discipline, and spiritual refinement through mentorship under Islamic scholars (Mallams), who trained children, known as Almajirai, in Qur’anic recitation, jurisprudence, and ethics (Auwal, 2021). The term “Almajiri” originates from the Arabic “Al-Muhajirun” (“migrants” or “seekers”), reflecting the itinerant nature of these pupils who often left home to pursue Islamic knowledge (Idriss & Hamzah, 2021). Traditionally, communities supported both teachers and pupils through food and shelter, ensuring a holistic model of moral and social development. However, modernization, urbanization, and poverty have disrupted this communal support. The breakdown of state oversight and economic hardship have left many Almajiri children exposed to street begging, malnutrition, and health risks (Muhammad et al., 2023). Empirical evidence suggests that the cognitive development of Almajiri learners remains significantly below that of their peers in formal schools, largely due to limited exposure to structured curricula and inadequate learning environments (Abubakar-Abdullateef et al., 2024). To address these deficiencies, the Nigerian government introduced integration initiatives such as the Almajiri Integrated Model Schools, combining Qur’anic instruction with Western education to promote literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills (Jimba, 2021). Yet, implementation remains uneven due to funding gaps, inadequate teacher training, and cultural resistance (Teke, Khalid, & Katami, 2022). Beyond state interventions, recent scholarship highlights the role of mosques (masajid) as community-based reform centers that can provide structured learning and welfare support for Almajiri children (Dukawa, Usman, & Gwandu, 2023). Furthermore, there is a growing consensus on leveraging technology to modernize Almajiri education. ICT-enabled teaching, digital Qur’anic learning tools, and community-based literacy applications have shown potential to improve engagement and inclusion (Fahm et al., 2021). Scholars also argue that reform must be underpinned by human-rights and child-protection frameworks to curb abuses and guarantee holistic development (Makama, Makama, & Waziri, 2024). In sum, while the Almajiri system continues to serve as a vital moral and spiritual institution in Northern Nigeria, its sustainability depends on coherent reforms that integrate modern education, community welfare, and cultural sensitivity.

Historical Development of Almajiri System of Education

The Almajiri system of education has a long and distinguished history that predates colonial contact, with its foundation deeply rooted in the Islamic educational traditions of the Western Sudan and Northern Nigeria. Its golden age came during the Sokoto Caliphate (early 19th century), when Qur’anic learning was institutionalized under state patronage. The Caliphate viewed the Almajiri system as essential to moral discipline, religious knowledge, and social cohesion, offering both political and financial support to sustain its institutions. Communities provided food, shelter, and resources for learners, while Islamic scholars (Mallams)—acting as teachers and mentors—were highly respected for nurturing piety, scholarship, and leadership (Jabbi & Kware, 2024). The British colonial era marked a major disruption in this model. With the introduction of Western-style education, colonial administrators deprioritized Islamic learning, leading to the withdrawal of state and community support that had sustained the Almajiri network. This neglect forced learners to depend on begging and menial labor for survival, eroding the system’s dignity and structure (Auwal, 2021). By the mid-20th century, the Almajiri institution had transformed from a respected center of Islamic education into a symbol of poverty and social marginalization. Post-independence reforms failed to fully revive its original intent. The Almajiri Integrated Education Programme (AIEP) introduced by the federal government sought to integrate Qur’anic and formal education to address issues of illiteracy and child welfare (Teke, Khalid, & Katami, 2022). Yet, implementation gaps, inadequate teacher training, and poor monitoring hindered success. Scholars note that the persistence of poverty, weak institutional support, and limited community involvement have continued to constrain reform efforts (Nmamor-Obari & Amugo, 2022). Recent studies underscore that the Almajiri system’s survival is a result of its adaptability and deep cultural roots. Despite its decline in prestige, it remains a vital mechanism for moral and religious instruction, particularly in rural Northern Nigeria (Muhammad et al., 2023). Understanding this historical trajectory is crucial for designing context-sensitive reforms that balance modernization with cultural continuity (Dukawa, Usman, & Gwandu, 2023).

Roles of Almajiri System of Education in the Society

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Challenges and Criticisms

The key challenges and criticisms include:

Street Begging

One of the most visible and persistent challenges facing the Almajiri system is the widespread practice of street begging among its learners. Many children enrolled in the system are compelled to solicit alms to meet their basic needs, owing to socioeconomic pressures, urbanization and declining communal support (Umar 2025). This reliance on begging exposes learners to physical risks, abuse, exploitation by adult actors, and diversion from instructional time (Suleiman 2024). It detracts from educational goals, while habitual begging generates negative public perceptions and social stigmatization of the Almajiri system (Jamri 2024). Further, empirical data indicate that prolonged street exposure adversely affects psychological wellbeing, leading to low self-esteem, anxiety and diminished motivation to learn (Garba 2025). These realities underscore the urgent need for systemic interventions, including strengthened community support, welfare provisions, and formal education integration, to reduce dependence on street begging.

Poor Living Conditions

Many Almajiri learners endure harsh and unsanitary living conditions, which undermine their health, development and educational engagement. Recent studies show that Almajiri children regularly face overcrowded sleeping-quarters, inadequate sanitation, limited clean water, and poor nutrition (Muhammad 2023). These conditions raise the risk of communicable diseases, malnutrition, cognitive delays and psychological stress (Christianah 2025). In extreme cases, children sleep outdoors or in makeshift structures with minimal protection, further impeding their ability to focus on learning. The cumulative effect of sub-standard living conditions is reduced capacity to engage effectively both in Qur’anic and conventional instruction. The challenge therefore calls for multi-actor coordination, state agencies, community organisations and NGOs, to address infrastructure, health, sanitation and nutrition tailored to Almajiri learners (Sakaba 2025).

Inadequate Funding

Inadequate financial support remains a central impediment undermining the Almajiri system’s capacity to deliver both religious and secular education. Many Almajiri centres operate on minimal resources, lacking classrooms, instructional materials, accommodation, trained staff and welfare support (Muhammad 2024). Government-initiated reforms, including model schools and integration programmes, remain constrained by limited budgets, delays in fund disbursement, weak monitoring and ineffective implementation (Teke 2022). This funding gap perpetuates systemic inefficiencies, affecting both instructional quality and learner welfare, thereby undermining the sustainability of the system. Sustainable financing models, drawing from state support, private sector engagement and community contributions, are therefore critical if the system is to fulfil its educational and social mandate.

Mallam–Child Welfare Gaps



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The welfare of Almajiri learners is closely tied to the capacity, commitment and moral-pedagogical competence of the Mallams (Islamic teachers). Yet significant gaps exist in this relationship: Mallams are frequently overburdened with large cohorts of students, minimal welfare resources, and limited formal training in child welfare, pedagogy or inclusive education (Teke 2022). As a consequence, learners may experience neglect, inadequate guidance, or exposure to physical and psychological hardship. The absence of structured support frameworks for health, nutrition, supervision and child protection undermines the aim of providing a holistic education that balances religious, moral and social development. Addressing these gaps therefore requires targeted capacity-building for Mallams, better supervision, provision of welfare resources and training in modern child-protection and educational practices.

Lack of Integration with Western Education

A major criticism of the Almajiri system pertains to its insufficient integration with formal, secular education, including literacy, numeracy, vocational and life-skills training. While the system excels in religious instruction and moral formation, the absence of structured secular curricula limits learners' future opportunities in the broader socio-economic environment (Gambo 2025). Consequently, many Almajiri children face marginalisation in the labour market, low literacy/numeracy skills and limited vocational self-reliance. Although reform efforts (such as model schools and UBE integration) have shown promise, persistent obstacles remain: shortages of qualified teachers trained to deliver dual curricula, poor infrastructure, community resistance to curriculum change, and weak supervision (Muhammad 2024). Successfully bridging this gap therefore requires collaborative planning, culturally-sensitive curricula, sustained teacher development, stakeholder buy-in and robust monitoring to ensure reforms enhance, rather than erode, the system's traditional values.

Reforms and Initiatives

In response to the persistent educational, welfare and social challenges confronting the Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria, a multifaceted reform agenda has emerged, encompassing policy integration, model schooling, non-governmental organisation (NGO) engagement, and community-state partnerships. One of the most significant policy interventions has been the embedding of Almajiri education within the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme framework. Studies indicate that this integration is designed to grant Almajiri children access to formal literacy, numeracy and vocational skills alongside Qur'anic instruction, thereby addressing their longstanding exclusion from mainstream school systems (Muhammad, 2024). However, empirical evaluations of the UBE-Almajiri interface reveal implementation gaps, weak administrative alignment and stakeholder unawareness which limit its effectiveness (Aliyu et al., 2024).

Complementary to policy alignment is the establishment of Almajiri Model Schools. These serve as pilot institutions where traditional Qur'anic education is deliberately combined with conventional secular curricula in structured settings with classrooms, trained teachers and improved living conditions (Umar, 2025). They are intended to reduce the incidence of street-begging, improve learner welfare and create viable pathways for transition into mainstream or vocational education. Notwithstanding, research into these model schools reports challenges in funding, infrastructure maintenance and full stakeholder buy-in (Okoro, 2025).

NGOs have likewise played a pivotal role in supporting Almajiri reforms, contributing to advocacy, resource mobilisation and programme implementation. For example, NGOs provide educational materials, feeding programmes and health services, effectively complementing governmental efforts and functioning as monitoring agents for learner welfare (Gambo, 2025). Their participation underscores the recognition that meaningful reform requires more than top-down policy, it demands grassroots support and sustained non-state investment (Inde et al., 2024). Finally, community, state partnerships constitute another critical dimension of reform. These collaborations bring together local communities, religious leaders, Mallams, state actors and civil society organisations to mobilise resources, monitor school operations and ensure accountability. By anchoring reform in culturally-sensitive and community-owned processes, these partnerships help bridge the divide between traditional practice and modern educational standards while preserving the religious and cultural identity of the system (Umar & Maaji, 2025). In sum, the array of reforms and initiatives comprises a multidimensional strategy to revitalise the Almajiri system, improving learner welfare, integrating secular education, curbing street-begging, and enabling social mobility. Yet, the success of these interventions hinges upon sustained funding, rigorous monitoring, community engagement and alignment of religious-educational values with formal schooling objectives.

Research Design



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The study adopts a descriptive survey research design to investigate the roles, challenges, reforms, and impacts of the Almajiri system of education in Nasarawa Western Zone, Nasarawa State. A descriptive survey design is appropriate because it allows for the systematic collection of data from a large and diverse population, providing a comprehensive understanding of the current status and perspectives of stakeholders involved in the Almajiri system. This design enables the researcher to describe phenomena as they exist, without manipulating variables, which is critical for capturing the authentic experiences and opinions of Mallams, teachers, learners, community leaders, and policymakers. Through the survey approach, the study will gather both quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for the identification of patterns, relationships, and trends regarding the functions, challenges, and reforms within the system. Moreover, this design facilitates the assessment of stakeholders' perceptions of the effectiveness of reforms and interventions, providing evidence-based insights that can inform policy, planning, and implementation strategies aimed at improving the welfare, educational quality, and social integration of Almajiri learners.

Instrumentation

The instruments for data collection in this study will include a questionnaire, interview guide, and observation checklist, each designed to capture comprehensive information regarding the roles, challenges, reforms, and impacts of the Almajiri system of education in Nasarawa Western Zone. The questionnaire will be structured to collect quantitative data from learners, teachers, and other stakeholders, with items focusing on perceptions of educational roles, welfare conditions, the effectiveness of reforms, and challenges encountered. This instrument allows for the systematic measurement of opinions, attitudes, and experiences across a large sample, providing statistically analyzable data. The interview guide will be used for in-depth qualitative data collection from key informants, including Mallams, community leaders, and policymakers. It will contain open-ended questions designed to explore nuanced perspectives, personal experiences, and contextual factors that may not be captured through structured questionnaires. The observation checklist will enable the researcher to directly record tangible aspects of the Almajiri system, such as the learning environment, instructional materials, classroom interactions, sanitation, and welfare conditions of learners. This triangulation of instruments ensures that both subjective experiences and objective realities are documented, enhancing the reliability and validity of the study. By employing multiple instruments, the study captures a holistic view of the Almajiri system, allowing for robust analysis of the interplay between educational roles, reform initiatives, and practical outcomes.

Data Collection

Data for this study will be collected through a combination of field visits, structured questionnaires, and interviews to ensure a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the roles, challenges, reforms, and impacts of the Almajiri system in Nasarawa Western Zone. Field visits will provide the researcher with first-hand observations of the learning environment, facilities, instructional practices, and welfare conditions of learners, allowing for a practical assessment of the system. Structured questionnaires will be administered to learners, teachers, and other stakeholders to gather quantitative data on perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding the effectiveness of educational reforms, the challenges faced, and the roles of the Almajiri system in the community. Interviews, particularly with Mallams, community leaders, and policymakers, will enable the collection of in-depth qualitative data, offering insights into policy implementation, institutional support, and contextual factors affecting the system. By combining these data collection methods, the study ensures triangulation, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings and providing a holistic view of the contemporary Almajiri educational landscape.

Data Analysis

The data collected for this study will be analysed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques to ensure a comprehensive interpretation of findings. Descriptive statistics, including mean scores, frequencies, and percentages, will be used to summarise and present quantitative data obtained from structured questionnaires. These statistical measures will help to identify patterns, trends, and levels of agreement among respondents regarding the roles, challenges, and impacts of the Almajiri system, as well as the effectiveness of reforms implemented in Nasarawa Western Zone. For qualitative data collected through interviews and observations, thematic analysis will be employed to identify recurring themes, categories, and patterns within participants' responses. This method allows for the extraction of meaningful insights from textual data, highlighting perceptions, experiences, and contextual factors that influence the functioning and reform of the Almajiri system. By combining descriptive statistics with thematic analysis, the study ensures a holistic interpretation of both numerical trends and rich qualitative narratives, enhancing the reliability, validity, and depth of the research findings.



Summary of Findings

The journal article "Roles and Reforms in Almajiri System of Education in Contemporary Nigeria: Perspectives of Nasarawa Western Zone, Nasarawa State" explores the challenges and proposed reforms for integrating the Almajiri system into Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (UBE) framework to enhance educational access and socioeconomic opportunities for marginalized children. The study highlights historical evolution, contemporary challenges like poverty, child labor, and insecurity, and proposes a holistic integration strategy including curriculum reform, teacher training, infrastructure development, and community engagement. The article emphasizes the need for government policies, sustainable financing, and collaboration with religious and community leaders to transform the Almajiri system into a modern, inclusive educational model. Sources.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Almajiri system of education in Nigeria, particularly in the Nasarawa Western Zone, remains a critical but contentious component of the country's educational landscape. While the system has traditionally served as a means of religious and moral instruction, its contemporary relevance is undermined by systemic issues such as poverty, child labor, and insecurity, which have transformed many Almajiri schools into sites of vulnerability rather than empowerment. The study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive reforms that integrate Almajiri education into the formal UBE framework, emphasizing curriculum modernization, teacher training, infrastructure development, and community engagement. Successful implementation of these reforms, however, hinges on sustained government commitment, adequate funding, and collaboration with religious and community leaders. Ultimately, transforming the Almajiri system is not merely an educational imperative but a societal one, requiring collective action to ensure that marginalized children are afforded dignity, safety, and opportunities for holistic development. Sources.

Recommendations:

1. **Curriculum Modernization:** Integrate secular subjects (e.g., mathematics, science, English) alongside religious instruction to equip Almajiri pupils with marketable skills. Align the curriculum with the UBE framework to ensure certification and mobility within formal education pathways.
2. **Teacher Training and Incentives:** Provide systematic training for Mallams on modern pedagogical methods and child-centered learning. Offer stipends, healthcare, and recognition to retain qualified teachers and reduce reliance on unqualified instructors.
3. **Infrastructure Development:** Construct safe, well-ventilated classrooms, sanitation facilities, and boarding accommodations to replace overcrowded, unsafe learning environments. Ensure access to clean water, electricity, and digital tools where feasible.
4. **Community and Religious Leader Engagement:** Involve traditional and religious leaders in sensitization campaigns to shift perceptions about formal education. Foster partnerships with NGOs and CSOs to mobilize resources and monitor program implementation.
5. **Government Policy and Funding:** Enforce existing policies (e.g., the Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act) and allocate dedicated budgets for Almajiri schools. Explore public-private partnerships to fund infrastructure, teacher salaries, and nutrition programs.
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish a robust M&E system with clear indicators (e.g., enrollment rates, literacy levels, transition to formal schools). Conduct regular audits to ensure transparency and accountability in fund utilization.
7. **Economic Support for Families:** Introduce poverty alleviation measures (e.g., cash transfers, vocational training for parents) to reduce child labor and encourage school attendance.

By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can transform the Almajiri system from a marginalized, informal network into a modern, inclusive educational model that empowers vulnerable children and contributes to national development.

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