
THE GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.

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Abstract

Education is the bedrock of national socio economic and cultural development. Sustainable development depends on the number of male and female citizens who have adequate knowledge skills and innovative capabilities in all areas of the economy. However, if the girl child is denied the opportunity to be educated, the development of her nation and community will be jeopardized. This paper seeks to review the factors underlying poor access of the girl child to education in developing countries and the way forward to remove all the limitations imposed on them.

Keywords: Girl-Child, Education, Challenges, Sustainable Development.

It is no longer news but a known fact that education is the bedrock of human development and advancement in all facets of life. Education at all levels can shape the world of tomorrow, equipping individuals and societies with the skills, perspectives, knowledge and values to live and work in a sustainable manner. Education for sustainable development is the kind of education that provides solution to both today and tomorrows problems without compromising the integrity of the beneficiaries in any way (Inyang 2012).

It is that development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the abilities of the future generation in meeting their own needs. Education for sustainable development also means promotion and improvement of basic education or access to basic education which remains a problem for many especially the girl child.

It is believed that education is an instrument of national development and as such it could be employed to achieve political, economic and social developments.

According to Oniye (2008), Nigeria and indeed other developing countries are craving for patriotic citizens to develop their potentials politically, economically, socially and technologically. The actualization of these wonderful goals is dependent on the provision of functional education to the citizenry especially the girl children who are future mothers, future teachers of children. Thus, unless the mother herself is enlightened, she cannot inculcate in the child the spirit and principles of true patriotism which is a basic requirement for national development.

The development of any nation requires the collective efforts of all its citizens and residents. More importantly, to achieve national development, both male and female citizens of the society need to be carried along. In fact there is need for gender equity as stressed by the 1990 world conference on education for all held in Geneva. Education is the process through which individuals are made functional members of the society (Ocho, 2005). It is a means through which the young acquire knowledge and realizes his or her potentials and uses them for self actualization (Offorma 2009). Education has been described as the most important aspect of human development, a key to a successful living especially the girl child education (Michael 2011). Denying the girl child access to education implies making her a dysfunctional member of the society.

The girl-child situation has been reported by many researchers. From such researches, it is known that the inferior economic, political and social status of the girl child shows her state from infancy stage through youth to her adult state. The girl child problem around the different developing countries of the world has many dimensions but the root cause of all discriminations and views against the girl child depends on the customs, traditions, religion and mindset of the people of these countries. Women and girls have been treated in the most inhuman ways from the inception of human civilization (Fishio-Orideji 2001 and Igube 2004). The injustice against the girl child has been observed till date in some parts of the developing world especially in Africa and Asian countries. Against this backdrop, this paper discusses the state of the girl-child education, states the values derived from their education, highlights those factors militating against it and recommends the way forward for sustainable development.

The Concept of the Girl-Child Education.

The girl-child, within the context of the Nigerian and other underdeveloped environment, is a young female person who would grow up to become a woman and marry. The concept of her education incorporates the necessary attitudes, cultural, and behavioral training which parents give to their daughters at home to enable them become useful, resourceful and respectful citizens of their countries. She is conditioned by her parents to undergo teaching or training in skills acquisition which many girls undertake in the shades of seamstress or in computer training centers, weaving and fashion designing centers as well as catering and interior decoration centers etc. She is also given the responsibility to look after the young ones, the home, and the kitchen. The parents, teachers and other members of the society see the girl-child's place to be curtailed to housekeeping jobs. This stereotypical classification and orientation is given to her right from birth. The parents at birth give the impression that the girl-child is

inferior to their male counterparts and this makes them prefer training the boy first. Even when the boys return from school, they do not take part in the so called jobs meant for the girls.

Consequently, the home background also affects the child's access to education. However, girl children from affluent homes get education, while those from the lower income groups are heavily discriminated against and therefore likely to be deprived of the opportunity of acquiring specialized and highly controlled trainings acquired in schools, colleges and other institutions of higher learning (Chidebelu 2009).

Education is one of the fundamental rights of every child. Unfortunately, the right of the girl-child to access quality education has been denied for many years and this has adversely affected her nation. (Mangvwat 2005) agrees with this when she said that operation and discrimination against women and girls have been so deeply ingrained for so long in virtually every culture.

Concept of Gender Inequality

The concept of gender disparity dates back to colonial rule era. According to Mangvwat (2005), gender disparity in education is the most pervasive violation of human rights. Its forms, according to her, are both subtle and flagrant and its impact on the socio-economic political and cultural development of the people of a nation is very great. She also said that a number of factors have been identified as being responsible for the low enrolment, poor retention rate, poor performance and general neglect of the girl-child in early childhood education programme.

The National Report on Situation and Policy Analysis of Basic Education in Nigeria (SAPA, 1990) showed that differences in access to education persisted in favour of male students while corresponding high illiteracy rate persisted among female students in 1990. The literate female students in 1990 were about 39.5% of the females population compared to 63.3% for males. The report further stated that 26.23 million women in Nigeria were illiterate (SAPA, 1990). Dubacy (1980) opined that there were fewer girls than boys at all levels of education in Nigeria. He maintained that the lowest level attendance rate of girl children in school occurred in those areas where attendance rate of children in school had been at its lowest; a situation prevalent in all states in Nigeria.

Benefits of a Girl-Child Education.

The contributions of women today who were girls yesterday in the development of any nation are very obvious. These contributions begin from the family which is the nucleus of the society. Hence, there is need to give them all the needed and necessary support for their empowerment so that they will make positive contributions towards the development of their countries. These can be achieved through education which is regarded as the major instrument for the development of human resources of any nation of which the girl child is a part. The education of the girl child today empowers her for a better position tomorrow when she becomes a woman. When a girl child is exposed to good quality education, her potentials are developed. This gives her a voice in her family and in the society. She stands a better chance of getting good employment like her male

counterparts thereby contributing economically, socially and otherwise towards national development. The popular saying that if you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation explains the importance of the education of the girl child. This must be the reason why the girl child and her right to education should be given a core place of prominence on the human development plan, since it is clear that human capital development is one of the developmental agenda as recommended by UNICEF.

Challenges in Girl-Child Education

The challenges faced by the girl-child education are enormous. Prominent amongst them are: societal beliefs, poverty or socio-economic status of parents, early or forced marriage, religion, child labour etc.

Societal Beliefs: Nigeria is a country with ethnic groups that speak different languages, practice different religions, and have different customs and traditions. These differences have adversely affected the education of a girl-child. Before the advent of western education in Nigeria, traditional education was all about learning a trade and character building for young children.

Learning a trade was a way to make a living, therefore parents played an important role in determining what trade children began to learn at a very tender age in order to support the family when they grow up. Boys were exposed to different trades outside the home, while girls were limited to activities within the home to prepare them to be good mothers and obedient wives and sisters (Zuga, 1998). These practices favoured one gender group over the other, not because of the group's interests or abilities but rather because of the belief system concerning what role each gender group should play in the society.

The society also believed that a girl-child is inferior to a boy-child and so when the western education came through the missionaries, highly technical courses were for boys while vocational home economics courses were for girls. This separation was by design for many obvious reasons, one of which was to show a pattern that conformed to the belief that a girl's position is in the kitchen and nursing of babies.

Poverty or Parents Socio-Economic Status: Parents play a significant role in shaping the direction or path the children follow in their later years. (Otto 2000) investigated young people's perceptions of parental influence on their career development and concluded that both boys and girls look to their parents when they make career choices.

The socio-economic status of the family will determine the education of the family especially the girl-child. Poor parents will not afford the children's education and the girl-child in this family will be disadvantaged. She will be sent into child labour in order to raise funds for the family and the education of the boys. This could lead to early pregnancy.

Early or Forced Marriage: Early or forced marriage is one of the factors that limit the girl-child education. The girl-child is seen as not important therefore, she can easily be given out for marriage as early as 10-15 years of age. Awoniyi (2003) pointed out that 46.2% of girls between 15 and 19 have already begun child bearing.

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This marriage could be contracted between a 15 years old girl and a 70 years old man who does not know the way withal of developing the girl. This early marriage into which the parents would force the girl-child prevents them from having formal education.

Religion: Nigeria is one of the most unequal countries in the world where there are many faces of religion. The northern part of Nigeria is heavily dominated by muslims where women education is not taken as a necessity. Some muslim parents believe that when their female children are sent to school, they could become promiscuous and would not respect their husbands and might even deviate from their faith. The result is that there is social inequality and gender discrimination which are the problems faced not only in Nigeria but worldwide.

Child Labour: The girl-child's chances of education are limited by child labour in most families in Nigeria. Togunde and Cartar (2008) asserted that child labour is a wide-spread problem throughout the world and especially in the developing countries like Nigeria. It is stated that African and Asian countries account for as much as about 85% of total child employment in the world (UNICEF 2004). It is observed by researchers that majority of child labourers, especially, domestic or house helps are girls. International labour organization (I.L.O. 2006) reported that child labour has been made worse in recent years because some of these children have no solid background, no education and no parental care.

Incidentally, these children become street hawkers, prostitutes, robbers and people who can easily be used during political and religious crisis. They work on the street, even late into the night and have no time for formal education or training.

The Way Forward For Sustainable Development

Education is important in liberating and correcting the societal and institutional injustice against the girl-child. To enhance the girl-child education, a comprehensive approach must be taken beginning from the family.

The South African approach is worth emulating. South Africa changed their educational curriculum to meet the demand of their nation after the post apartheid era. The Nigerian value and education system must change to suit the educational need of a girl-child. The South Africa curriculum is developed to be child centered and no more teacher centered. It is advocated that this idea could be borrowed by other developing countries especially Nigeria.

In Kenya, the government took some steps in promoting children education by enshrining this right in the children act 2001. The same should be done in Nigeria. In Kenya, the children required the creation of a department for children to deal with their right and welfare.

The Nigerian government should formulate such laws so as to improve the girl-child access to education. NGO's as well as government agencies should embark on educating the people on the importance of girl-child education and dangers of marrying them off to older men at younger age.

Academic Excellence

Braun et al (2004) noted that feeding children in school has enormous educational benefits in Bangladesh, such should be encouraged also for rural and urban poor children in Nigeria.

All round girl-child empowerment from the grass root level is also recommended for the girl-child in Nigeria. Efforts directed at increasing girl-child rights, privileges and opportunities should be aggressively pursued by individuals, organizations and government agencies. Such efforts should include: free and compulsory education for girl children, organizing girls' movement, girls' forum and gender sensitive activities that tend towards promoting the rights and privileges of girl children.

The society is more civilized today than what it was some years back, therefore, should learn to do away with the old beliefs and customs which were militating against the girl-child education and give them equal access to education. It is quite glaring that education has positioned some women in positions where their outstanding contributions to nation building cannot be denied. Women like Indira Ghandi of india, the present president of South Korea Parkgeun-Hye, the former Nigerian Petroleum Minister Diezane Alison-Maduekwe, the former Finance and Economic Minister, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iwealla, the former vice chancellor University of Uyo, Prof Comfort Ekpo just to mention but a few.

Conclusion

Education is important for the girl-child especially now that Nigeria and other developing countries are striving to achieve higher level of sustainable development in all spheres of life. The education given to the girl-child will enable her fit properly into the rapidly changing world. The effectiveness and efficiency of education as regards the girl-child can only be achieved if we eliminate the factors militating against it.

The co-operation of the government, private sectors, parents, teachers and members of the general public in the implementation of the measures stated above is therefore needed if the concerned nations are to succeed in educating the girl-child to enable them contribute their quota in national development.

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