

# CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF THE GIRL CHILD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

Nigeria signified her commitment to the right of every citizen to education with the National Policy on Education. The United Nations Convention on the Right of Child while stating the right of the child also proved that a child shall be a person below the age of 18 years. A girl child by this definition is a female below the age of 18 years. The education of the girl-child is sometimes hampered by challenges including family size, teenage pregnancy and preferential education of the boy child. The girl-child needs adequate education to enable her to be more effective in later years in the upbringing of the next generation. The education of the girl-child with its challenges still has prospects if effectively implemented by all relevant stakeholders.

Education is the pivot on which human resources of a nation is built leading to the contribution to social, economics, technological and even cultural development. Yahaya (2013) defined education as not limited to the ability to read and write since it involves total development of an individual at the levels of cognitive, effective and psychomotor domains.

Nigerian Universal Primary Education scheme of the 6-3-3-4 system was replaced with the 9-3-4 Universal Basic Education system in conformity with the Millennium Development Goals, and Education For All (Obasi, 2013). This scheme makes it free, compulsory and a right of every child. Nigeria signified her commitment to the right of every citizen to access education with the National Policy on Education (2004). The

United Nations Convention in 1989 (UNICEF, 1989) gave below 18 years as a child and also stated the right of a child to education. The child is a female child and so belongs to these Rights with Nigeria's enacted Act of the Child Rights Law in 2004. All these rights were derived from the Human Rights adoption of the Universal Declaration in 1948 in recognition of education as a basic human right (Wikipedia, 2015).

Obasi (2013) defined the girl child as a biological female offspring from birth to eighteen years (18) of age. At that period, the child is totally under the care of the adult who may be her parents or guardians and old siblings during when the girl child is malleable, builds and develops her personality and character. Despite remarkable gains according to UNESCO (2013) 57 million children remain out of school which has 31 million girls of primary school while age while in Nigeria five and half million girls are not in school.

This paper examines the challenges of the girl child education with some variables amongst others - family size, teenage pregnancy and preferential education of the boy. It also examines the prospects so far and advocates suggestions for parents/ guardians and the government in the advancement of the girl child education.

## **Challenges of the Girl Child Education**

### **Family size**

The family is the primary agent of socialization that introduces the child to other

agents of socialization as stated by Osunloye (2008). It also stated that the foundation of children's development is referred to as a group of people knitted together by blood ties, marriage bond or by adoption which maybe nuclear or extended. Green (2010) also stated that the number of children a couple would have is determined by many factors including health, region, cultures, economic status and the ability to have the number they wish to have.

In Nigeria, a large family size is generally associated with polygamy which is not always the case. Large families can mean the nuclear family, grandparents and relatives all living together. It can also be that there are many children from the nuclear family as Emereuwaonu (1984) posited in Nganga (2010). Owuamanam and Alowodu (2010) in their research in Ondo State stated that due to large family size, some children do not go to school and the girls hawk from an early age.

In a large family size according to Osunloye (2008) a child may not be given maximum attention especially in academics. This is in the issue of homework, providing of uniforms and books and attending Parents Teachers Association meetings as they have to cater for many children while children that are well catered for perform better in small size families. The not catering for the children usually affects the training of the girls that would dropout for doing badly in school.

A large family tends to lead to unequal treatment of children, jealousy and survival of the fittest. The fathers who are usually the breadwinners tend to cater for certain number of children from each wife especially in polygamous homes who often are the first sons. The other children have to struggle to succeed in life which may be detrimental to the academic performance since they would be catered for by their mothers who most times are financially incapable of their training. The girl child most times suffer in these situations.

In southern Nigeria, people tend to regard child bearing as the dominant and fundamental purpose of marriage as stated by Akpotu (2008). This transcends influencing large family size as men are polygamous since they divorce their wives either for lack of child bearing especially or for bearing only a sex of children especially female. Indeed, parents and family members tend to persuade their sons whose wives have either few or only female children or none to either marry or have children from women outside their marriage. The increase in procreation without concern for the moral, social, economic and educational wellbeing of the children has resulted in child labour and school dropouts to increase illiteracy of mostly the girl child.

Eamon (2005) and Marjoribanks (1990) all in Barry (2005) stated that small family size has been linked with higher academic achievement. Also students with fewer siblings were more likely to receive more parental attention and have access to resources than children from large families which would lead to better school performance. The study showed that an increase in number of siblings decrease test scores by 0.200 points.

Programme International Students Association (2000) in Akande (2007) revealed that home background influenced academic and educational success of students and school work. The study reported that parents in monogamous or nuclear family concentrate their income on their few children and immediate family. This makes their income manageable for the few in the family by providing their academic, social, and personal needs. Hence parents have time to monitor their children in school and at home while the polygamous or large families have the direct opposite where the girl child is mostly affected. Torto (n.d) in submission stated that research had shown that due to family size, girls are

usually pulled out from school for boys to continue.

Ihejirika (2003) studied the relationship between socio-economic background of secondary school students and the rate of dropping out of school in Rivers State. It was found that students from large family size do exhibit highest tendency to dropout than those from small and medium families. This may lead to the dropout of the girl child from school.

Research by Nnubia (1999) on the improvement of women to have less children was based on causes and solutions of poor access to family planning services as perceived by the Umunze rural women. The findings included lack of information of family planning, non existence of family planning services at the village level and lack of knowledge on modern contraceptives. It was stated that one of the effects to poor planning is the strain on the family resources that could cause female children to dropout from school due to large family size.

### **Teenage Pregnancy**

Teenage pregnancy is one of the hindrances of the girl child education in Nigeria as the girl child is very vulnerable especially where she becomes exposed by hawking in helping to get an extra income for the family. The girl-child suffers sex abuse even in her home from brothers, male cousins, uncles, and even fathers, neighbours, male school mates, male teachers, pastors and so on.

Ajayi and Bello (2011) and Ezio (2003) in Nzeako (2011), stated that teenage pregnancy accounts for 30 percent of school-age girls dropping out of school, while they also stated that the girls start bearing before they are 17 or 18 years which is becoming unfashionable in homes with educated parents. UNICEF (2007) stated that in Nigeria, the girls access to basic education especially in the northern states has remained low. One of the barriers to girl child education is teenage pregnancy which makes a lot of them to

drop out of school before reaching primary class six.

Teenage pregnancy is in the increase observed by Okojie (2001) in most African countries including Nigeria, which is causing the dropping out from school by girls. The study showed that it was highest in secondary schools where girls were put in the family way by their school mates, teachers and older men in the society. Girls were confined and fattened in preparation for marriage at an age when their counterparts were free to go to school in the south eastern Nigeria (Calabar, Ibibio, Oron and Annang areas) as stated by Akpan (1996), the males were free to go to school even after they had one or two children while the female would not be admitted back in school due to teenage pregnancy.

The dropout rate of the girl child is noticeable in the society especially in the Niger Delta Region where oil exploration is taking place in the communities. There is a high rate of teenage pregnancy (Niger Delta Environmental Survey, 2000). Teenage girls become vulnerable to workers in the oil companies (who lure girls with money). The girls that become pregnant are eventually abandoned to be girl-mothers (Spiff, 2000). These girls become half-baked in education without any sustainable means of livelihood while they continue to breed children as single mothers with different men.

Department for International Development (DFID, 2007) supported the fact that Nigeria, one of the priority countries has one of the highest rate of out-of-school girls. This could be attributed to pregnancy and care giving responsibilities on the girl. According to Children and Women's Right in Nigeria (2001) stated that one of the factors causing constraints on access to girl child education is teenage pregnancy. It further stated that the 1999 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) revealed that out of the women aged

20-24, 43 percent had given birth before they were 20 years, 28 percent before they were 15 and 8.5 percent before they were 15. The figure is higher in the northern part of the country especially the north-west where 55 percent of girls aged 15-19 were either already mothers or pregnant.

Baraburu (2000) and Edaba (2000) stated that teenage pregnancy is still prevalent in our society which makes girls frequently sent out from school. They have the view that if the intrinsic drive is still there in any female to further her education after child birth, she should be encouraged to go back to school for completion. The United Nations Children's Fund (1995) in an article on Basic Education and Gender Equality buttressed the fact that girls are put at a disadvantage due to pregnancy which prevents them to further their education. The National Centre for Economic Management and Administration (NCEMA, 1991) also stated that sometimes girls are removed from secondary school due to unplanned pregnancy.

### **Preferential Education of the Boy**

In developing countries, one of the most considered basic cause of gender stratification is male preference according to Akman (2002). Cleland et al (1996) in Akman (2002) suggested that very high level of education is required in order to counter it in such societies. The birth of a daughter is viewed as a burden and rather than an occasion of joy. The reason is the low status of women in the society since the family would provide dowries when they are getting married. Chowdhury (1994) in Akman (2002) found that there was no difference in the views of educated and the uneducated women in preference of male children.

In most Nigerian communities, the male child is clearly an important object of huge social and emotional investment. The male is valued more than the female child (Izugbara, 2005). Male children are socialized to see themselves as

future heads of households while the females are taught that good women must be obedient, submissive, meek and humble housekeepers. This leads to discrimination with many parents preferring to educate their sons since they will remain in the family to help in its development and perpetuate its name while a highly educated girl is a loss since she will marry and benefit her family according to Okojie, Chiegwu and Okpokuru (1996).

Eboh (1996) expressed motherhood or childbirth as an experience which had turned to ashes of bitterness because the mother is disdained and tormented. This is simply so because she has added one more baby girl to the number of female offspring that she already has. However differential treatment starts at birth where blue colours are for male and pink for the female. Often times, the gender of the child evokes disappointment to one or both parents where the father needs an heir to take over in the next generation, the wife feels dejected for not being able to produce a boy even if she knows that it is the husband's chromosomes that determines the sex of the offspring. The practice of despising a woman who has only female children is what makes people assert "Nwanyi wu nwa" in Igbo land which means that "a baby girl is also a child". This seems to be done either as a consolation or out of frustration. The preferential treatment of boys come fore in education too since they get educated leaving the girls to get married.

Anugwon (1999) stated that patriarchy refer to male dominance and got its roots from the Greek word "patriarch" which means head of the tribe. It also owes its original prominence to the Old Testament accounts of the Bible where the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel were referred to as patriarchs. Africa is known mainly as a patriarchal society which did not dispute anthropological and contemporary evidence of matrilineal society. Matrilineal descent among members of the Ashanti of

Ghana as confirmed by Otite and Ogionwo (2003) is likened to that of the Nembe kingdom where the author comes from in Bayelsa state. The point is that despite the matrilineal tradition where one inherits through the mother's lineage, power still resides with the males. Chieftaincy titles are usually got through the matrilineal lineage in Nembe kingdom but only males are installed as chiefs because as stated in the communities that females cannot go to war. In identifying with patrilineal system, Agee (1996) described it as a factor that marginalizes women attributing it to their low esteem. It confers special attention to the male children physically, mentally, and psychologically in development which goes a long way in preparing them for adulthood while parents think that females do not need education since they would be married off.

In submission, Okojie (2001) stated that the patriarch attitudes classified males as superior while females are inferior based on age and sex. Female education is not regarded and a prerequisite for being a wife and a mother on the other hand, boys are expected to be future husbands and heads of house-holds and are favoured in access to educate. Girls are regarded as strangers or temporary members of the household as they would get married and leave their families. This means investing on girls is considered as a waste since it is the husband's family that will reap the benefits of such education.

Hyde (1993) and Orubuloye (1987) in Ezeani (1996) stated that selective education would depend on the principal income-generating activities of the family. Since schooling entails buying of uniforms, books and transportation and comparing the monetary returns of both sex, the choice of whom to enrol in school is often made in favour of boys. In a study, Okezie (1999) in Izugbara (2009) found out that 85 percent adolescents of multiethnic society would want both their first and second

children to be males. Then 2 percent of the sample would prefer the remaining childless instead of having all female children. The male child is more valued than the female child and quite early in life, he is told of his worth and superiority over the female child. This gives the male child an advantage over the girl to be educated preferentially.

### **Prospects of the Girl Child Education**

Nigeria had made tremendous efforts with a lot of monetary investments on the education of the girl child. Obaji (2005) who was then Minister of Education stated that Nigeria had been a signatory to the major conventions for women. The government has been working in active collaboration with international development partners such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Department For International Development (DFID), United States Agency For International Department (USAID), Japan International Cooperative Agency (JICA), World Bank as well as Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to achieve the Education For All (EFA) / Universal Basic Education(UBE) goals.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF,2007) has made girls education a priority with the Girl Education Project (GEP) as a joint initiative between the Federal Government of Nigeria and Department For International Development to achieve the Millennium Development Goals to eliminate disparity in gender education by 2015. The project focuses on six northern states- Bauchi, Bornu, Jigawa, Kastina, Niger and Sokoto states. Then there is the regular information sharing, participation in planning capacity building and in mortaring and evaluation activities. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) support to the Millennium Goals in Nigeria for 2015 has eight projects

which the third is to promote gender equality and to empower women (UNDP,2012).

United Nations Children's Fund (2015) stated that in northern Nigeria, a little cash goes a long way towards getting girls to school. The newly launched initiative would get tens of thousands of girls in the north western Nigeria benefit from a cash transfer programme aimed at helping to cover the cost of sending them to school. The first output review (evaluation) of Girls Education Project (GEP) is encouraging with 15 percent or more in enrolment by girls by March 2006 and attendance by over 25 percent (with about 12,000 more girls regularly attending school than before. The gender gaps are about two thirds of their previous levels and the second review in 2007 was also positive.

The International Day of the Girl Child (Wikipedia,2015) was initiated at the 55<sup>th</sup> United Nations Commission on the status of women. On December 19<sup>th</sup> 2011, the United Nations General Assembly voted to pass a resolution adopting October 11<sup>th</sup> 2012 as the inaugural International Day of the Girl Child. This is in view to breaking the cycle of discrimination of the girl child amongst others and protecting their human right with their active support of their parents, legal guardians, families and care providers as well as boys and men.

Nzeako (2011) pointed out that private sectors can build homes where teenage pregnant girls should be housed for the period before they deliver their children. After delivery, the girl goes back to school without being exposed to any psychological trauma , like the one at Ehe-Alumona, girl child home established by the Catholic Dioceses in Enugu State.

The government established the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare now Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare in some states, to collaborate with the Ministry of Education in the promotion of the girl child education and other matters.

All these are the prospects to enhance the girl child education in Nigeria. United Nations Children's Fund (2007) assessed that girls' education empowers them and is seen as the best investment in a country's development as the girl child develops essential life skills, self confidence and the ability to effectively participate in the society.

### **Suggestions for the Enhancement of the Girl Child Education**

1. Parents need to be encouraged in health care to have the number of children they can cater for and be told that all children both girls and boys should be given equal rights to education.
2. Teenage pregnancy can be avoided to a great extent if parents especially mothers can educate their girl child on sex education and not the myth that if a man touches a girl that she would get pregnant. The schools should teach sex education too.
3. The government needs to have awareness campaigns to educate the masses, the relevance of education of the girl child.

In doing all these items, the enrolment and retention of the girl child would improve.

### **Conclusion**

The girl child is likened to a flower that the opposite sex wants to pluck within the house and the outer society. She is very vulnerable and needs much care from the parents, extended family and the society and so government needs to see that all policies and laws are effectively monitored and enforced so that the girl child education would be a reality.

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