

GENDER AND THE EDUCATION OF THE GIRL-CHILD IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper submits that the concept of gender within Nigerian developmental context aligns with discrimination and derogation of the girl-child and women in education. The girl child and women have been known to be marginalised in education and national development. Therefore, the paper recommends a down-to-earth application of gender neutrality to all stages of education. This paper posits that the country will only make success of current efforts if there is the political will to learn from past mistakes and concentrate more on the girl-child education.

Introduction

In the pre-colonial era and the early post-colonial era, the typical African girl-child was not sent to school. It was believed that girls could only play the role of helping their mothers at home so that they can become good housewives like their mothers.

However, the story began to change after the introduction of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in the 1955. The fate of the girl-child as regards education positively increased again with the introduction of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme by the Nigerian Government in 1999.

In 2000, the Millennium Development Goals set up by the World Bank emphasized the girl child education in its goals 2 and 3. These are:

- Goal 2. A free and compulsory primary schooling for all children everywhere, boys and girls by 2015;
- Goal 3. Elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 and in all levels of education by 2015 (World Bank 2002).

Although Nigeria has had a National Policy on Education since 1981, it has not been implemented effectively and efficiently due to rapid population growth, insufficient political will, a long period of undemocratic governance and poor management of scarce resources. Women and girls have been most affected by these negative factors. The national literacy rate for females is only 56% compared to 72% for males, and in certain states, female literacy, enrolment and achievement rates are much lower. For example, girls literacy rate in Sokoto, one of the six target states under the UNICEF African Girls Education Initiative is 15% compared to 59% for boys (Population Briefs, 1999).

The situation of the girl child in a patriarchal society like Nigeria imposes a lot of constraints on the socio-economic situation of women. Women are generally disempowered as a result of their gender roles. The situation puts women in a state of poverty and a poverty stricken individual do not have access to good education. Consequently, the girl child is prevented from having good education like her male counterpart. It is against this background that this study investigates the influence of gender on the girl child's education in Nigeria.

Gender Relations in Nigeria: An Overview.

Gender relations in Nigeria are characterized by a lot of imbalance, to the disadvantage of women. Now, this is the twenty first century, yet tradition, culture, religion and other factors have continued to widen the disparity between Nigerian men and women, by keeping women in a subordinate position to men. Ojiakor (1997) effectively captured the master-servant relationship between the sexes when she stated "the Nigerian men have always believed that Nigeria belongs to them and women are at

best the rent – paying tenants’’. Over the years, women have been struggling to say no to these misconceptions. The end of this struggle is apparently not in sight, as culture and tradition continue to extend overbearing influences on Nigerian women and deny them their fundamental human rights. A good illustration is the negative effects of Sharia and customary laws on women. In Northern Nigeria where Sharia is practised, the Islamic legal code is taking its toll on women. For instance, the case of Safiya, a Moslem woman who was convicted of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning, is still fresh in the memory of Nigerians and indeed, the rest of the world. In her report on Safiya’s acquittal by an appeal court, Ikokwu (2002) drew attention not only to the discrimination against women under this legal system but also to the incongruity of such a system operating in a democratic society in the twenty first century. The equivalent of Sharia in non-Islamic parts of Nigeria is customary law, which also operates to the disadvantage of women. Writing about the all-embracing influence of customary law on the majority of Nigerians, Nwankwo (2001), posited that “customary law governs the life of the majority of the people. The effect is rooted in the customs, culture and tradition of the various communities from ancient times”. Customary law is conservative and significantly not giving to easy change. The effects of this law are particularly dehumanizing on women.

Girl – Child Education

Education does not refer to a single process. It means different things to different people. In thinking of the encompassing nature of education, Ibukun (1996) cited Castle who defined the term as what happens to us from the day we were born to the day we die. This definition appears to be encompassing, limitless and highly generalized. Also Fafunwa (1974) defined education as the sum total of all the

processes by which an individual acquires and develops skills, abilities and other know-hows in order to become an active and effective participant in any society. Education is, therefore, a process whereby an individual is being automatically prepared to live and participate in a given culture.

Whitehead in Ibukun (1996) conceived education as the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge. Emphasis here appears to be on the utility aspect of education. Thus, education is a process of teaching, training and learning in schools and villages to improve knowledge and develop skills necessary for preparing individuals for functional participation in society life (Omang, M. S. Borge, and J. Trulsen, 2002; Ibukun, 1996; World Bank, 2002).

The deprivation of education opportunity for girls is likely to exclude them from the mainstream of development in the future, increase the dependence ratio of the population and result in underdevelopment of a nation (Mbanefoh, 1995). Investment in children is an essential investment in the future of a society at whatever stage of development. Evidence suggests that early investment in the development of the child can bring improvement in the life of the child and also provide benefits to the entire society (Young, 1995). Surely, the girl-child’s education serves as an investment that will help facilitate the achievement of family planning objectives and the production of healthier children (World Watch Institute, 2002).

Education has been recognized as the most important weapon used by man to conquer his environment and chart his destiny. Although, there are schools established in the local communities, they are not enthusiastically patronized due to age-long culture barriers. Stories have been told of how some of the schools had to be shut down for sometime due to lack of patronage while others remain dilapidated and unkempt. While the male child has a choice

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to attend school, his female counterpart is strictly discouraged from pursuing even the basic elementary western education. Her ambitions are tied to the apron strings of culture and religion. This probably explains the lot and complete backwardness of these communities because mankind's immense progress, which is evident in many landmarks, is attributed to education. It is incontrovertible to suggest that when these communities shunned education, progress appears to have been kept out of reach for some time.

Educating girl child and women also gives them higher self-esteem, greater decision making power within the family, makes them more confident to participate fully in community affairs and the ability to, someday, become educated mothers who pass on their knowledge to their own daughters and sons (World Watch Institute, 2002). Educating the female child is a key to attaining a successful implementation of population policy.

World Watch Institution (2002) opined that as long as girls and woman are taught to be less able than boys and men to navigate human experience and forge their own paths in life, population policy will always be flawed. On the other hand, when girls go to school and when women reach economic, social and political parity with men, they have fewer children and give birth later on than their mothers do.

The fundamental importance of female education for raising children's nutrition is beyond question, partly because a mother uses her new knowledge to earn additional income, improve diets, and make life better for her children. Female education is probably the strongest instrument we have in reducing infant mortality and child malnutrition (Wamahiu and Hadad, 1999). Infact, the 1993 World Development Report noted that a 10% addition in female literacy reduced child mortality by some amount in 13 African countries between

1975 and 1985. An increase in male literacy had little effect.

According to Wamahiu and Hadad (1999), a significant population of women in Nigeria are illiterates, never having enrolled into schools or had access to literacy education. Many never have access to formal education during adulthood. It is, therefore, crucial that the status of adult literacy be raised by bringing it into the mainstream of educational development.

According to Ramachandran (1999), unless there is change in the mind set of the elites in power and unless we stop viewing women as recipients of welfare, perpetrators of the population problem and as a mass of ignorant housewives and mothers contributing only little to the evolution of our society and culture, we cannot make a breakthrough. This change can be brought about by intensive media campaigns targeted at the political elite and opinion – makers. Evidence across the country shows that where good quality and relevant education is available, children, including girls, go to school. Technically all the colleges and universities are open to boys and girls. It is the social barrier and, the cultural barrier which prevent girls and women from entering the educational mainstream.

Barriers to Girls' Education in Nigeria

Education empowers women and it is believed that if you educate a woman you educate a nation. This is because educating girls, carries with it, a wide range of benefits for girls and women, their families and societies in general. It reduces poverty, promotes sustainable development and ensures human rights of all citizens. A woman that is educated to a higher level in particular is looked upon positively by her society and community. She is empowered not only socially but also economically and politically.

A lot other benefits are attached to women education particularly if the breadth

(skills development and height (length of training) of her education are high, her productivity is increased so also her earnings and savings. An educated married woman has improved family survival rate, improved education of her children and improved health for the entire family.

Government has made efforts to reduce gender parity in education. There is government affirmative action on women education believing that this will pave way for a better welfare for women. In spite of government efforts there are still gaps due to certain barriers. These barriers include:

- Poverty and economic issues: Many families in Nigeria are living below poverty level and also the economic situation of the country is nothing to write home about. With 70% of the population living below the poverty line, girls are often sent to generate income for families by selling wares in the market or on the street.
- Early marriage and teenage pregnancy: As a result of the economic hardship in the Nigeria, many teenage girls are being forced into early marriage. For example, the case of Senator Yerima marrying a 13year old girl is still fresh in the memories of Nigerians. These have also militated against girls' attendance, retention and achievement in schools. About 30% of school-age girls drop out of school having already begun child bearing before the age of 18.
- Inadequate school infrastructure: There is dearth of facilities in our school system. Though the government has good intention for providing education for all, but neglected the provision of adequate infrastructure to accommodate the teeming population. Classroom space, furniture and equipment are lacking, many schools are in rugged and unsafe physical condition; water, health and sanitation facilities are inadequate, and pupil especially in schools in urban slums.
- Cultural and religious biases: In many communities in Nigeria, the cultural and religious practices have relegated the girl child to the background. Many Nigerian parents especially in large families with limited resources, enroll boys in school instead of or before girls. Some parents also keep their daughters out of school due to misinterpretation of the tenets of Islamic religion.
- Gender bias in the teaching and learning processes: In many schools in Nigeria boys are given more opportunities than females. For in mixed primary and secondary schools boys are usually made senior prefects while the girls are made to assist. Also boys are given more opportunities to ask and answer questions, to use instructional materials and to lead groups. Girls are given less time on task than boys in primary and secondary school science classes. Teachers' use corporal punishment and create an intimidating classroom environment (Ramachandra, V.K 1999).
- Poorly Qualified Teachers: Most teachers in our school system are not qualified to teach. These crops of teachers are found mostly in private schools and public schools in rural areas. By 1996, only 33% of all primary school teachers held the minimum certificate of education mandated by the Government in 1989. Up till now some primary school teachers are still struggling to acquire the minimum qualification.

The Need for Gender Parity in Education

Achieving gender parity in education has been a prime factor of the 1990 World

Declaration on Education for All, the Dakar framework for Action as well as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) endorsed in 2000, yet gender parity remains elusive, with girls making up 60% of all out-of-school children (UNESCO, 2003 – 2006) and women representing two thirds of illiterate adults. Roughly, 85% of boys complete primary school compared to 76% of girls. Yet education has been shown to trigger a wide range of benefits for girls and women, their families and society in general. Educating girls is an investment towards reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and ensuring the human rights of all citizens.

Education is recognized as important for the holistic development of the full potential of an individual. These benefits are as valid for girls as for boys giving both genders the tools and opportunities to make decision and choices that impact on their lives. Moreover, education helps society to view women positively, thus creating the conditions for their empowerment and full participation in public and private spheres.

Investing in female education has been shown to improve women's social and economic status, increasing their productivity, earnings and savings, improve family planning; and improve child survival rates; raise enrolment and school participation rates for children, lower the incidence of HIV and AIDS infection for all; and propel more women to decision-making positions.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the successes and disappointments as well as areas of needs of future policy action as far as attempts at gender equality in the education of the girl-child in Nigeria are concerned. If we desire a well positioned economy for Nigeria, then the education of the girl-child has to be encouraged and facilitated. It is hoped that there will be

opportunities for capacity – building and cultural and intellectual recognition for the girl-child and women in the not far future.

Recommendation

There is the need to address the obstacles to Girls and Women's education towards achieving this objective; the following strategies must be put in place by the Government, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders in education industry in Nigeria:

- ✓ There should be changing societal attitudes in favour of girls education. The society should attach more importance to the education of the girl-child. In fact, members of the public should change their uncompromising attitude towards women education..
- ✓ All the stake holders in the education industry should provide/ enrich school infrastructure to make them more gender friendly. Enabling environment should be provided for girls to enable them pursue their studies seriously.
- ✓ There should be gender awareness training for teachers and teacher trainees. Teachers should be made to understand that there is no disparity between boys and girls. Also both boys and girls should be assigned similar roles in the teaching/learning situation.
- ✓ Government and Non-governmental organizations should organize guidance, counseling and assertiveness training for girls. Girls should be exposed to the dangers of early marriages and early motherhood. Also they should be reminded that they have equal opportunities with their male counterparts.
- ✓ The practice of withdrawing girls from schools for the purpose of marriage should be discouraged. Those men that indulge in this naughty practice should

be made to feel the cool hand of the law, to serve as deterrents to others.

- ✓ Government should support women in basic science-based courses (mathematics, science and technology). They should be encouraged and supported both financially and morally.

Government should also increase the job opportunities for young female starters. Government affirmative action towards increasing massive support for access to and quality education for girls should continue. The need for intersectional collaboration on how to reduce the gender gap in education should evolve. Government and private sectors should also encourage researches on how to fill gender gaps while Continue Education Centres for girls and dropout should be established by various governments and the private sectors.

It is hoped that if all the above strategies are put in place by the concerned stakeholders, gender gap in education would be reduced.

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