

GIRL –CHILD EDUCATION: CHANGING TRENDS IN SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

Immaculata Gregory Umoh and Arit Okonobong Atakpa

Abstract

This paper discussed the topic, changing trends in societal attitudes toward Girl-Child education. Every citizen, irrespective of sex is guaranteed equality of rights, obligations and opportunities before the law and education. Generally because of gender discrimination and cultural barriers, the girl-child was not allowed the opportunity to go to school early in Africa. In Nigeria today, the inferior states of the girl-child is gradually diminishing. Nigerians are encouraging girl-child education today by setting up some strategies for co-ordinating efforts in this direction among many sectors of the society and at community and national levels. The following recommendations are made among others that: Parents should stop pressuring their daughters to early marriage as a source of income to the family, government should remove societal barriers to girl-child participation in school, parents should have the number of children they can carter for and be responsible for their proper upbringing until marriageable age.

Education for all children has long been the prime goal of Nigerian democracy. This may be so because the Nigerian Education policy has adopted education as an instrument par excellence for effecting National development. It is government's wish that any existing contradictions, ambiguities and lack of uniformity in educational practices in the different parts of the federation should be removed to ensure an even and orderly development of the country.

It is worthy to note that the National Policy on Education (1991) does not discriminate between sexes; rather it emphasizes freedom, equality and justice (STAND, 1992). Every citizen, irrespective of sex is guaranteed equality of rights, obligations and opportunities before the law and education. Despite the progress of the past years notably concerning laws that indicate the equality of the sexes in education and employment, much remains to be done. Culture and economic obstacles, values and cultural stereotype discourage girl-child from attending school.

The increased awareness about the need to mobilize more females to embrace education has been informed by several declarations and resolutions in recent times of a number of international conferences and workshops held in different parts of the world. These include Harare Conference of African Ministers of Education (1982) which recommended that education policies in Africa should give priority to women education. Similarly the level conference of 1994 recommended that barriers to women education should be removed and the education of girls encouraged.

Policies are being formulated by government that helps parents and communities to be willing to invest in girl/s education. As more women complete their education and hold paying jobs, the perception of women's potential have definitely changed helping to break the vicious cycle that held women back.

The Population Reports (1999) observed that attempts are made to improve the position of girls in the society. Increasing economic opportunities for women and raising the value of women's labour increase the likelihood that parents will see daughters as economic assets and not as liabilities.

It is obvious, therefore, that the awakening interests to have women participate more fully and achieve more creditably in education is a global issue. Hence, there is need for a serious focus on the changing trends in societal attitude towards the girl-child education.

Societal Attitude towards Girl-Child Education

Generally because of gender discrimination and cultural barriers, the girl-child was not allowed the opportunity to go to school early in Africa. They were patted, loved and kept back at home to cook, marry, bear children, keep the house and serve the men.

The National Report on Situation and Policy Analysis of Basic Education in Nigeria (SAPA, 1990) indicated that disparities in access to education persisted in favour of males while corresponding high illiteracy rate persisted among females. The literate females in 1990 were about 39.5% of the female population compared to 63.3% for males. The report further stated that 26.23% million women in Nigeria were illiterate (SAPA 1990). Dubacy (1980) pointed out that there were fewer girls than boys at all levels of education in Nigeria. He maintained that the lowest level attendance rate of girls in school occurred in those areas where attendance rate of children in school had been at its lowest; a situation prevalent in all the states in Nigeria. Equally, dropout rates tended to be highest among girls in primary schools in the rural areas and in areas of recent education expansion. In the past, African women were regarded by their male counterparts as mere chattels.

Some years ago education in Nigeria was directed at males only, due to the prevalent attitude in the society, which was male-dominated economically and politically (Ibrahim, 1999). It is sheer ignorance or a sign of ingratitude to God for anyone to complain about having only female children. Some men, out of ignorance for the gift and the purpose of God, have erred by throwing their wives out of the matrimonial homes for this reason. Some have turned their wives to punching bags, awfully making their lives miserable for giving birth only to female children.

The Christian Women Mirror (2003) pointed out that female inferiority syndrome has unfortunately ruined many children who could have attained better heights academically, socially, physically and spiritually. Most parents would have been reaping the glorious fruits of their female children if their training were not neglected or terminated in order that the male children, who were considered more important and useful to the home, could go to school. Ironically, many of these male heirs often turned out to be a source of disappointment to their parents.

The Population Report (1999:9) explained that around the world at least one girl in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused educationally in her life time. Most often the abuser is a member of her own family. Increasingly, gender based violence is recognized as major public human health concern and a violation of human rights.

In most Nigerian societies, it is believed that education of female children does not have anything to contribute to their world. It is also believed that no matter the level of educational attainment of women, she will end up in the kitchen, which is referred to, as her office (Hall, 2008).

Girl –Child Education: Changing Trends in Societal Attitudes

Women, on the other hand, who have to ensure good social relationship, are stereotypically seen as sympathetic with people and their concerns. These differences in roles may account for attitudes of society towards girl-child education.

Apeji (2003) remarks that in Nigeria the myth of women inferiority continues to flourish because traditional beliefs, customs, and educational biases have conditioned both sexes to believe that the male is superior both mentally and physically. Men and women are defined not only by their external physical characteristics, but also by their tangible personality. Much of what are considered to be inherent differences are more of the result of cultural conditioning.

Newland (2000) went further to state that even if education were made universal, the institution, sexism in the formal education system would still be a barrier to girls achievement of equality for education, unless attitudes are greatly changed.

Discussing parental attitudes towards girls education in Northern Nigeria, Hake (2000) stated that the problem of allowing girls to attend school is significant for parents living in Northern Nigeria. Islam entreated women to be humble and subservient towards men especially towards their husbands. Parents fear that when a girl receives even an elementary type of education, she would no longer be submissive to her parents as well as to her future husband. This is a serious matter which contributes to societal attitude towards girl child education. Recently, in the Northern part of the country, a senator married a thirteen year old girl and wished to legalize the marriage.

Article 2 of the United Nations Declaration explained that societal attitude towards girl-child education is always negative but the community encourages traditional practices harmful to girls, such as Female Genital mutilation (FGM), intimidation at work and in school, trafficking in girls, forced prostitution and so on. In some societies there are cultural institutions, beliefs and practices that undermine girls' autonomy and contribute to gender-based violence. Certain cultural attitudes towards female chastity and male honour also serve to justify violence against the girl-child.

A study of female homicide in many countries has shown that many of the girls killed were murdered by their relatives (males) after they had been found violating the laws of their societies. A women rights activist by name Rosemary (1991) argued that many societies possess a typical culture and tradition that will not make any room for the girl-child education. She explained that some cultures were of the opinion that girls' education was an abomination because of the following reasons:

- (i) A girl who is educated will not like to get married at a younger age for family to depend on her for survival.
- (ii) Any educated girl will go to the husband's house with the certificate and money.
- (iii) These girls will not be allowed to hold any post in the society because of gender based problems. So their education will end in the kitchen.
- (iv) Any girl sent to school will have opportunity to engage in sex or to be raped outside marriage which can bring unwanted pregnancy and shame to her family.
- (v) Educated girls will bring much trouble to their families. Since it has been the custom that no girl is allowed to have education, it will mean the family offering a kind of sacrifice to appease the gods of that land.

Other related factors affecting girl-child education are: Religion, childhood marriage, female child labour, discriminatory employment, degrading traditional practices, sexual harassment/rape, negative cultural attitude and girl-child trafficking.

Parental Perception of Male and Female Child Education

The reason why female school enrolment remains low is that most of the girls who are supposed to be in school are engaged in one form of domestic service or the other. Despite great encouragement by government, many girls still drop out of school under one guise or the other. Even in our tertiary institutions, the boys still outnumber the girls. The national commission for women has done something to help close this gap in form of awarding scholarships to women who are determined to pursue higher education. Also the national council for women society has helped in conducting women education campaign currently going on in the country.

To understand why parents continue to favour their sons over-their daughters when it comes to who to educate, men see education as investment. And it is investment of time as well as money for many parents. Although there have been relative increase in the enrolment of women in education over the years, available data, according to Euler- Ajayi (2001) reveal the following-trends with regards to women participation:

- a. Fewer girls of school age go to school than boys
- b. Female enrolment diminishes as we move up the educational hierarchy.
- c. Anumu's (2006) work also showed that enrolment of females in higher institutions (1979/1991/92) was far below that of their male counterparts. However, the case of gender difference in education is not peculiar to Nigeria alone.

Factors Affecting Girl-Child Education

When one walks into a classroom of an educational establishment and glances through the attendance register, in most areas, one observes that male enrolment far exceeds their female counterparts.

While emphasizing the value of women education, Lemu (1977) said,

I have encountered many daughters of highly educated women and illiterate mothers who find education as difficult and dull as any backward child from rural areas. But I do not recall a single case where a girl with a well-educated mother did not do well in school.

Thus, the mother or parent's education level may be a factor promoting or hindering girl-child education in the society. The socio-economic status of the family also influences parents' attitude towards female education. That is those parents with low income earning cannot afford to give the girl-child education. On the other hand, the rich can afford to educate their female children alongside the male children (Ijaduola 1996) as Ijaduola observed; other factors that influence the attitude of society towards female education are the level of awareness of the society itself. This can be seen in the number of people of the society, who really show interest in education. Those who are not educated will not see the importance of education and consequently may not even see any sense in wasting money, energy and materials in educating female children whom they believe are supposed to be at home to care for their families.

Girl-Child Education Today

The education of girls was meant to expose the girls in Nigeria equally to all fields of human endeavour as men. Over the years, the importance of girl-child education had been stressed worldwide. The issue of women's participation in education in particular has generated so much interest, leading to numerous research studies, conferences, seminars, training workshops and intervention programmes involving not only the academic but also governmental and non-governmental agencies in many parts of the world.

In Nigeria today, the inferior status of girl-child is gradually diminishing. On the global scene a lot of changes have also taken place. Nigerians are encouraging girl-child education by setting up some strategies for co-ordinating among many sectors of society and at community and national levels. They have started empowering women and girls, which occurs at the national, community and individual levels. Its goals are to:

- a. Eliminate laws that discriminate against women and girls in their educational pursuits.
- b. Strengthen women in leadership and decision –making e.g. Prof. Dora Akinyuli, Former minister of information and communication.
- c. Increase access to education for women and girls.
- d. Increase women's access to the control over economic resources e.g. Dr. Ngozi Iweala, minister of finance and co-ordinating minister of economy.
- e. Increase women's access to health information and women's control over their own bodies.
- f. Improve women's self-esteem and sense of personal power (GPI, 2002) Prof. Ruquayatu Rufai, minister of Education.
- g. Her Honour Noble lady, Valerie Egbe, Deputy Governor AKS.
- h. Sarah Ogikpo-Minister of water resources.
- i. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf –President of Liberia and many others.

According to Population Report (1994), worldwide, networks of women's group are working to achieve these goals through grassroots activism and lobbying at the political level to change discriminatory policies and practices. In addition, thousands of non-governmental organizations are working to instil a great sense of enlightenment among women and girls via human rights education, legal literacy programmes, gender training and other smaller group efforts.

In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and Girls. The convention specified steps to prevent discrimination against women and girls in education, employment, public life, health and other areas. It also suggested actions to change laws and attitudes. Most countries had ratified or acceded to the convention which gives women and girls full legal capacity.

The girl-child education is receiving positive attention today in the whole world. The Population Report (1994) stated that around the world women have formed groups to see that women and girls receive fair treatment under the law. For example in Brazil, women's rights advocates began a campaign in 1985 to influence legislators writing the new constitution. They organized vigils, sent letters to newspapers, and aired television sport announcements. As a result, the new constitution gives women and girls equal rights in education and public service.

Conclusion

It is common knowledge that girl-child education was not given the necessary attention in the past. Many factors have been identified to be responsible for this behaviour such as parents' level of education, customs and tradition of the society and the socio-economic status of each family.

Due to this condition the gender differences in education had a big gap whereby the boys performed more than girls. Today, the government, communities, NGOs and individuals are encouraging girl-child education in our nation by giving women and girls equal opportunities (rights) in education and public services.

The society has also improved the cultural, social, legal and economic positions of women which will lead to the well-being of female children.

Therefore, women and girls are to utilize the advantage offered by these numerous opportunities for their upliftment.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

1. parents should have the number of children they can cater for and be responsible for the proper upbringing of their children until marriage.
2. parents should stop pressurizing their daughters to go out to earn income for them.
3. communities should stop honouring traffickers and affluent returnees' with titles and recognition in public occasions.
4. government should give special concessions for female applicants into education in terms of admission requirements.
5. government should remove societal barriers to girl-child participation in schools.
6. government should implement free education for all primary and secondary school levels.

References

- Anumu, R. S. (2006). *Women education for active participation in the next millennium*. A seminar paper presented at the 3rd National Association of Colleges of Education at Lugard Hall, Kaduna.
- Apeji, E. O. (2003). *Women education in Nigeria challenges facing it*. A seminar paper presented at Federation of Muslim Women Association Forum, Kano.
- Christian Women Mirror (CWM) (2003). *Celebrating the girl-child*. A Seminar paper presented at Deeper Life Association of Christian Women, Lagos.
- Euler-Ajayi, O. (2001). Training women: A reflection of the Nigerian Experience. *Education Today*. 2 (1), 5-11.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (1991). *National Policy on Education* (Revised) Nig. Press – Lagos.
- Girl's Power Initiative (GPI) (2002). *Empower more girls*. A paper presented at Calabar Women progress Association, Calabar.

Girl –Child Education: Changing Trends in Societal Attitudes

- Hall, A. G. (2008). *Foundation parents and Community involvement in Early Childhood Education*. New York Harper and Row Press.
- Hake, M. (2000). Parents Attitudes towards Primary Education in Hausa Community of Northern Nigerian Kano. *Monograph faculty of education*. Kano.
- Ibrahim, M. B. (1999). *Social / cultural factors affecting female participation in teaching services at post primary institutions in Zamfara State*. Unpublished Master's thesis Faculty of Education, ABU Zaria.
- Ijaduola U. (1996). *The sisterhood, the impact of women changing roles in social and economic life around the world*. New York: W. W. Marton and Company.
- Newland, S. (2000). *Gender Equity*. London, Roberts Publishers.
- Parson, T. (1958). Low Participation of girls in Education: Strategies redress. *Promoting science and technology among girls and women in Nigeria*. A publication of the women branch of the F. M. L.
- Population Report (1994). Opportunities for women. *A Journal of Health and Gender Equity*: U. S. A. 9-10.
- Population Report (1999). Ending violence against women. *A Journal of Health and Gender Equity*: U. S. A. 9-13.
- Science Teachers Association of Nigeria (STAN) (1992). Women in Science, Technology and Mathematics: The Nigerian experience. *Position paper* No. 2 Ibadan, STAN Secretariat.