

EMPOWERING THE ADOLESCENT GIRL FOR SELF AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the need to empower adolescent girls for development as young females. This is in line with the growing realization that the contribution of the female gender is imperative for the development of any nation. Factors militating against the adolescent girl include the complexity of the adolescent period which is heightened for the female due to being more vulnerable than the male in areas such as premarital sex. Another factor is harmful socio-cultural practices against women with the attendant negative consequences on the psychosocial development of adolescent girls. This paper recommends the theatre for development as an effective means of empowering adolescent girls so that they do not go adrift and for self and national development.

Introduction

It is increasingly being accepted worldwide that women are actually a needed social force in the pursuit of development. That there can be no genuine development without empowering and involving women. In line with this, it is necessary to give attention to the adolescent girl who has a lot militating against her so that her potentials can be realized and she can also contribute to national development both as a girl and in future as a woman.

Youths generally like other segments of the Nigerian society have roles to play in national development. Indeed, they are one of the greatest assets that any nation can have. Not only are they the future leaders, they are also the greatest investment for a country's development. It is in recognition of this that the national policy on youth was formulated in 1983. In line with the above Ajayi (1998,p: 4)) has this to say:

There is even more glowing realization of the place of youths not only in building an advanced and sustainable society, but also in forgoing international integration, peace, mutual understanding and the health of the international community.

Definition of Concepts

Adolescence: - This is the stage of life roughly between the ages of 11 and 18, when the child approaches the threshold of adulthood. It is a period of self-discovery and self-definition. It is also a process of achieving the attitudes and beliefs needed for effective participation and functioning in the society (Hodges (Ed), 2001 ,P: 17).

The adolescent girl is therefore a female whose stage of development growth whose is within the above period. Adolescents are part of the youth population of a country.

Empowerment: - This may be defined as the process of strengthening the existing capacities and capabilities of disadvantage^ groups in society, so as to enable them perform better towards improving themselves, their families and the society as a whole. It involves the provision of enabling environment for their productive and intellectual abilities to be realized (Sako, 1999 in Agaba, 2002:84).

Development: - This may be defined as a process of mobilizing all the available human and material resources of a society with the final goal of achieving a quality of living standard that is based on satisfaction, justice, equality, liberty, happiness, freedom and progress.

Theatre for Development: - This is the theatre for the people and by the people. It uses the expressive medium of the people. It also treats the actual problems of the people in a new light for the primary aim of reopening discussions on them as a way of seeking solutions to such problems.

The Adolescent

Empowering the adolescent girl necessitates the understanding of her peculiarities and needs. A predominant characteristic of the adolescent period is that it is that of transition from childhood to adulthood. According to Suarez Ojeda et al ((1998, p: 18) it is a period during which the maturity of the personality, the sense of identity, the capacity for abstraction; and as a result, adoption to the family and the community environment begins,

This adolescent period is marked by¹ complex changes in the physical, mental, social and emotional

realms. Physically, girls start experiencing growth of hair in the public and underarm regions of the body, enlargement of the breasts and onset of the menstrual cycle among other changes. Mentally, as individuals move from childhood to adolescence there are changes in their thinking concept formation. They are able to think more in abstract terms. These constant mental changes make it difficult to understand them sometimes.

Socially, adolescents love being with their friends a lot. They shift their allegiance from parents to peer group, crave for more independence and have a strong need to belong. They also get attracted to the opposite sex. Emotionally, they also go through changes, which cause them to feel more but to understand less. The emotions are about the only outlet for the adolescents to express the frustrations they are passing through. This is particularly intense in girls as a result of the hormonal secretion due to their monthly period.

All the above changes at times result in instability, unpredictability and bring about confusion, frustrations and misunderstanding in relating with them. The psychologist Sigmund Freud declared that adolescence is a temporary mental illness while Anna Freud said that to be normal during the period is itself abnormal (Mueller, 1994).

Early adolescence is a - time of particular vulnerability during which adolescents from all social groups commits anti-social acts such as dropping out of school, becoming pregnant, taking up smoking, abusing alcohol and other drugs, succumbing to mental disorders and attempting suicide.

On the positive side, youths have been recognised to be sensitive, active, and in the most productive phase of their lives. If adequately empowered they will bring to national development a great reservoir of energy, resource fullness, creativity and dynamism:

The adolescent girl is more fragile and vulnerable than her male counterparts in some aspects. Apart from the general complex changes and peculiarities of the adolescent period the following are also to her detriment.

Vulnerability to Sexual Advances

The physical changes that the adolescent girl goes through which are meant to prepare her body for womanhood leads to the attraction of male attention. She is therefore frequently under pressure to succumb to sexual advances. One of the negative images society has of women is that they are dispensable sex objects. This compounds the problems of the adolescent girl. They are normally targeted because men are proud to deflower girls.

Threats of victimization also make adolescent girls to give into sexual advances. Such groups of men include teachers, principals and employers who sometimes punish or deny girls of their rights due to non-response to their advances. Such men also include older and influential men in the society who may not be in a position of victimizing but whom girls find difficult to resist as in the case of sugar - daddies.

The society also makes girls to learn early that it is possible to exchange sex to meet needs. According to Omudu (2003, p: 50):

Girls use money that they earn from sex to pay school fees, buy textbooks, make-up, hairdressing and clothes. The exchange of sex for money, gifts and marks place girls in a dependent situation in relation to negotiating safe sex.

Some of these girls later take to prostitution while others live their lives as mistresses to wealthy men.

Girls generally begin to have sex earlier than boys due to the fact that they develop faster than boys. Another reason is that girls are subjected to sexual pressures earlier by older and more experienced men. Gyepi - Carbon (1985) quoted b Alachi (2003, p: 35) states:

Recent studies ...have demonstrated that adolescent girls of the present generation are more sexually active than their counterpart's decades ago because they mature early and are exposed to urban influences and foreign cultures that introduce them to what may be regarded as decadent by our traditional culture.

A report (Hodges 2001, p: 211) have it in the last decade in Nigeria, there has been large-scale trafficking of adolescent girls and young women, to Europe, particularly Italy; for work in the sex industry: These women are lured abroad by traffickers promising them legitimate and lucratic work, but on arrival they are handed over to prostitution rackets. Some of the girls arc involved voluntarily.

Sexual Health

The sexual behaviour of adolescent girls has a, lot of repercussions on their lives particularly their health. One of these is pregnancy outside wedlock. According to Lavake; (2003, p: 3) more than 13 million adolescent

girls give birth each year in the developing world exposing them to serious health risks.

Unplanned births are usually emotionally distressing and likely to place heavy financial burden on such: women and their family: It is particularly difficult for unmarried adolescents who face disapproval in many communities along with economic hardship.

The sexual behaviour of adolescent girls also makes them vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. In many areas up to half of new infections of HIV occur among those under age 25, with girls at particular risk of infection. Maggawa and Ngugi (1992) in Utulu, (2001, p: 25) state that while STD can affect people of all ages, young women are especially susceptible to STD transmission.

According to them young women have fewer protective antibodies than older women and the immaturity of their cervixes increase the likelihood that exposure to the infectious agent will result in the disease being transmitted. The situation concerning HIV/AIDS is further complicated for young people due to lack of access to HIV information and preventive strategies.

According to Lavake (2003, p: 3) youths under age 24 comprise about half of all new HIV infections, and a growing number of young people are sexually active for more years prior to marriage than ever before, resulting in unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infection...

HIV/AIDS is really shattering many young people's opportunities for healthy adult life. It is particularly worrisome, as young people have been identified to be the greatest investment for a country's development. HIV/AIDS is currently accounting for about 905 of non-traumatic deaths of the people especially young people outside the hospital (Diani, 2002 in Boh, 2003, p:77).

Harmful Cultural Practices

Harmful cultural practices constitute a major hindrance to adolescent girl's personal development and greatly limit their contribution to national development. In Nigeria there are still many such socio-cultural practices, which are based on the traditions of the people. Tradition still has a very strong hold on the people of contemporary Nigeria. It affects every facet of life. Gender roles are still culturally determined. Therefore, the emancipation of women in Nigeria can only be realized if such negative customs are overcome.

These socio-cultural practices have negative effect on the psychosocial development of girls. They affect their self-concept and self-esteem and make them 'view themselves as inferior and sub-servant to man. Some of these practices include preference for the male child, Utulu.. (2001, p: 55) observes that, the Nigerian girl-child from birth is already exposed to a society that discriminates against her person. In some homes, cultures and religions in Nigeria, the girl-child is seen as just an appendix. The names given to girls are derogatory showing them as inferior. The physical and emotional stress which young children and adolescent girls go through in addition to denial of opportunities to play, explore the environment, interact fully with peers, and the burden of premature responsibility is likely to have permanent adverse psychosocial impact.

Early/forced marriage is another socio-cultural practice that hinders the development of the adolescent girl. Early marriages in many cases are carried out without the consent of girls involved. The men involved are usually much older than the girls and sometimes old enough to be their fathers or even grandfathers. These are men that the girls will most likely resent when they come to know what marriage is all about.

Early marriage is regarded as an exploitative sexual practice that violates the rights of children and adolescents. It is a serious human right abuse which led to the August 1996 meeting in Stockholm Sweden as the first world congress against the commercial exploitation of children.

The consequences of early marriage include the limitations of girl's opportunities in life. It reduces their education and the likelihood of self-reliance. It also makes them more vulnerable to discrimination and abuse.

Implications for Self-Development and Contribution to National Development

It has been seen that adolescent girls need to be guided so that they can realize their potentials and also contribute to national development. However, the above militating factors if not addressed would greatly hinder this.

Wrong sexual behaviour of adolescent girls can greatly mar their future and ruin their lives as well as contributing to social vices like truancy in schools, dropping out of school, sex trafficking and encouragement of criminal activities. Issues surrounding their sexual health can lead to premature deaths as well as poor health, which greatly limit their contribution to society.

Harmful social cultural practices, which negatively affect women's self-esteem and self-concept, hinder them from achieving their potentials. When a woman's self-esteem is affected, she is depressed, lacks-self confidence and initiative and is generally unable to cope with other aspects of her life. She is

therefore unable to use her talents to contribute to the development of the nation.

Empowerment of Adolescent Girls through the Theatre for Development

Bearing in mind the immense potentials of youths and women, adolescent girls can be mobilized and empowered to take charge of their destiny and participate actively in national development. Adolescent girls are at an impressionable age. The society at large should be willing to participate in enlightening, conscientizing, reorienting and training them to realize their potentials. Adolescence is a special period in child development. It is perhaps the most remarkable period in a person's life during which a number of complex and important changes take place. It therefore requires adequate care by parents and society to ensure adequate psychosocial and educational development. Otherwise crisis might occur in the lives of adolescents. One effective way of mobilizing adolescents and the society generally for their empowerment is the theatre for development.

Theatre for Development

Theatre for development is a pragmatically oriented theatre that came into being in the -developing world since the early 1980's as a means of mobilizing and conscientizing the people : to enhance social action and development. It is built upon the dramatic participating theories of Brecht a German born dramatist and theatre theoretician. Paulo Freire a Brazilian contributed ; with his theory of conscientizing the people to become aware of their rights, which begin with ; radical literary programmes. While Augusto Poal another Latin American advocated that the people should not just be the guidance but actors and creators of the drama.

Poal believes that theatre is a medium that can be used by anybody talented or not with acting skills. That when people create and act out their problems they become aware of their needs. This theatre has been used to stimulate discussions that have led to positive changes in many parts of the world. It is collective, participatory, educative and entertaining.

According to Alachi (2003, p: 80) in Nigeria, theatre and drama have taken bold steps in sociological research and change. Participatory research strategies are theatre based, laying emphasis on participatory action for development. He cites examples of his Benue valley projects and Abah's Adenlari and other NPTA related projects.

This theatre can effectively be used to empower adolescent girls for both self and national development as they participate in the formulation of such theatre as well as the discussions that follow. Many messages can be passed across to adolescent girls through this theatre. These include developing positive self-esteem instead of regarding themselves as inferior to boys, sensitizing them to their vulnerability and the need to exercise caution so as not to ruin their lives at their adolescent period. Others include the need for them to develop healthy sexual habits particularly abstinence; value for education and hard work and the shunning of anti social behaviours like sex trafficking, cultism, and drug abuse. These messages can be passed across to the adolescent girls through songs, dance, music, improvised drama which they can participate in. The discussions that follow can enable the girl's see themselves and their situation in a fresh way and want to talk about these problems with others. This can lead to practical action of changing from negative norms when necessary.

Apart from adolescent girls other members of the society who have parts to play in the lives of adolescent girls can also be mobilized through the theatre for development to contribute; towards their empowerment. These include parents, teachers, community leaders, governments and NGO groups.

Avenues of mobilization include school programmes, neighbourhoods, churches, market places, rural areas and other places where the youths can be found. Local languages and Pidgin English can be used for such groups as illiterates and school dropouts in the rural and urban areas

Conclusion

As the society increasingly accepts the important role women, play in national development, there is need to also focus attention on adolescent girls. It has been seen that unless adolescent development is well guided and modulated, it can and often does go adrift leading to emotional crisis, delinquency or other social ills. There is therefore need for stakeholders in the lives, of adolescent girl's like parents, teachers and government to make efforts towards empowering them. This can effectively be done through the theatre for development.

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