

## GIRL-CHILD EDUCATIONAL REFORMS: TOOL FOR ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS FOR GENDER EQUALITY

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### **Abstract**

Education sector has a major role to play in the transformation agenda to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the nation. Education ought to be provided for all, regardless of gender or other differences. This implies equalization of educational opportunities for all children. Unfortunately, gender inequality exists in all spheres of life due to some socio-cultural, socio-economic, social values, and socio-political reasons. Most parents, especially the illiterate ones do not consider the education of their girl-child necessary; hence they are not empowered to be self-reliant with the result that they are exposed to some social vices like unwanted pregnancies, prostitution, child abuse among others. This paper is based on the premise that education is the ladder that will bring about gender equality and empowerment. Good education affects every aspect of life, health, economy, cultural perception and general life style. The paper finally made conclusions and recommendations on the way forward.

Gender equality according to UNESCO (2005) does not mean that the male and female folks should be exactly the same; rather it means that men and women should be equally valued by the society regardless of their gender differences. They should be seen as equal partners anywhere they find themselves. This however is one of the goals of Education for All Programme launched by the Federal Government in

2004, vis-à-vis the Universal Basic Education (UBE). It is therefore not surprising that gender equality and women empowerment is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2000.

In 1995, during the Beijing platform for Action on the Education of the Girl-child, it was stated that the girl-

child of today is the woman of tomorrow. Therefore, if there must be people-centered sustainable development, so that men and women can work together for themselves, their children and the society at large, in order to meet the challenges of this century and those ahead, the girl-child education cannot be compromised. Regrettably, despite the concerted efforts at national and international levels to bring about gender equality between the male and female, inequality still persists worldwide. No wonder, in 2004, Carolyn Hannah a Director in the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, posited that gender equality and women empowerment is one of the major challenges facing the United Nations and the world today.

Education sector has a major role to play in the transformation agenda to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the nation. Education ought to be provided for all regardless of gender or other differences. Unfortunately, gender inequality exists in all spheres of life, as most parents, especially the illiterate ones, in the developing and under-developed countries do not consider the education of their girl-child necessary for some socio-cultural, economic and political reasons. This however, has placed the girl-child in a disadvantageous position with its attendant social vices like, unwanted pregnancies, prostitution, child-abuse to mention but a few. This however is a dangerous signal to the

national development; hence the girl-child should be empowered educationally to be able to compete adequately with her boy-child counterpart. This is so because education has been considered as an indispensable catalyst for personal confidence, equal rights, equal justice, equal access to resources, equal opportunities, self-respect among others. It is therefore the concern of this paper that education should be used as the tool to bring about gender equality and empowerment of the girl-child.

### **Who is a Girl-Child**

A girl-child is a female that falls below the age of maturity. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, "a girl is a young female person". Dashen (2004) posited that the girl-child is understood to fall under 18 years of age. According to him, it is the formative year which coincides with the primary and secondary school education stages. Similarly, Gabriel (1995) in the Beijing Platform for Action on the education of the girl-child, regards a child as any person who has not attained the age of 14 years. Generally, a girl-child refers to a female child who is below the age of 18 years.

It is the girl-child who later grows to become a woman and we all know the importance of a woman in every household. She is a wife, mother, manager of the domestic household, an earner, trader, stallholder, nurturer, raiser of children (UNICEF 2002). Since

a woman produces manpower for the society, she needs to be educated right from the childhood before she becomes a woman who will conceive, bear and nurture children for the society. As a wife and manager of her household, she needs education to do that. She needs education to even prepare balanced diets for her household. Writing in support of this, the World Bank posited that a country with more educated girls and women is not only healthier, but wealthier. It is therefore very imperative that we look at the objectives for developing girl-child education and relevance.

#### **Objectives for the Development of Girl-Child Education**

Education for the girl-child was intended to reinforce her roles as a prospective wife and mother. There is a general belief that education of a woman ends in the kitchen. Contrary, education of a woman has gone beyond domestic purposes, as they perform several roles within and outside their homes.

It is noteworthy that through education many women have made records in the world of politics. These include, Margaret Thatcher of Britain, who was a Prime Minister for 10 years from 1980-1990. She led Britain so well that she was given the name 'iron lady of Britain'. We have also Indira Ghandi of India, Benazir Blutto of Pakistan (1979 – 1993). Carazon Aquino of Philippines, Ruth Perry headed Liberia.

Helen Johnson Sirleaf has been the President of Liberia since 2006.

Here in Nigeria, we have women who have made landmark in politics and their career. These include: Dame Virgy Etiaba, one time Governor of Anambra State and the first woman Governor in Nigeria, Mrs. Ngozi Okonji Iweala, the current Minister for Finance and Assistant Director of World Bank, Justice Mariam Aloma Mukhtar who is the current Chief Justice of the Federation and a host of others.

In the field of education, Grace Alele Williams made her mark by being the first woman Vice Chancellor in the country. Ojo Akande was a Vice Chancellor in the University of Lagos 1990, to mention but a few. All these achievements are made possible through education. No wonder then that the Beijing Platform for Action on the education of the girl-child outlined nine strategies as it relates to the girl-child. These include the following:-

1. Elimination of all forms of discrimination against the girl-child.
2. Elimination of negative cultural attitudes and practices against the girl-child.
3. Promotion and protection of the rights of the girl-child.
4. Increasing awareness of her needs and potentials.
5. Elimination of discrimination against the girl-child in education, skill development and training.

6. Elimination of discrimination against the girl-child in health and nutrition.
7. Elimination of economic exploitation of child labour and protection of young girls at work.
8. Eradication of violence against the girl-child.
9. Promotion of the girl-child awareness and participation in social, economic and political life and
10. Strengthening the role of the family in improving the status of the girl-child.

In spite of the above laudable educational objectives for the development of the girl-child, observations revealed that in some parts of the country, education of the girl-child still suffer serious set back, as well as violation of their fundamental human rights. These include:

**Child Abuse:** The girl-child is a victim of child labour e.g. hawking, engagement as sales girls, house-maids, manual labourers among others, with the result that they do not attend school. Regrettably, these activities take place at a period of the day when classes would be on (Onwuka & Ile, 2006). According to them, such children always find it difficult to do their homework or rest for the next day's school, if at all they are allowed to attend school. The result is

that the abused girl-child ends up being a school drop-out, while those who were lucky enough to combine the domestic activities with school works, show impaired learning capacity resulting from the lost hours.

**Low Educational Attainment:** It is on record that drop-out rate in primary and secondary levels in some parts of the country constitutes the girl-child. This is confirmed by the recent echoes of concern by Bayelsa and Bauchi states on the low enrolment of the girl-child in their states. States like Ebonyi in the South-Eastern part of the country is not left out.

**Prostitution:** Many parents have left their responsibility in child upbringing thereby leaving the girl-child with no alternative than to engage herself in the nefarious and illicit activities (sex trades) in order to earn a living.

**Early/Forced Marriage:** Some cultural/religious beliefs made it possible that the girl-child is given into marriage at a tender age without option. This is mostly seen in the Northern part of the country, hence the girl-child becomes enslaved to the wish of her parents.

**The Girl-Child Educational Reform**  
The concept reform, according to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English means cause to improve, make or become right; social action which does or should improve conditions,

remove unfairness in a society. Talking about the educational reform of the girl-child, and to provide a better way of life through education, presupposes that some studies of educational and national situation analyses have been thoroughly carried out. It also implies that the studies revealed gross defects, in the existing system and that there is very significant clamour for a new approach to the provision of education in the country, especially as it affects the girl-child.

However, the girl-child educational reform cannot make the intended impact, unless there is a conscious effort directed towards realizing the set objective. The reform ideas must be carefully and consciously articulated which implies that there must be a political will to conscientiously adhere to the stipulations of the reform document. The question one should ask is what type of reform does Nigeria need for the girl-child?

The girl-child educational reform should be anchored on gender equality and empowerment. A reform that will begin with the people themselves, their mindset, bearing in mind that the female empowerment is the means and end to any meaningful transformation. This reform should be about transforming lives especially, the girl-child. In other words the reform should be girl-centered approach, which should focus on the ability and achievement. It should be for the general good and maximum

development of the girl-child. The reform should be all inclusive and implemented within the complex realities of the national educational development.

Good education as opined by Akumadu (1998) is an inestimable asset, it liberates the mind, it emancipates a person from the slavery of ignorance. It opens more and better employment opportunities, it promotes natural understanding, it illuminates self confidence and self esteem. In other words, a good educational reform should be such that provides the girl-child with the types of skills and educational qualifications that will enable her enter areas of employment that is traditionally dominated by the boy-child. It is believed that the reform will help the girl-child develop new attitude to work. Furthermore, the educational reform will help change people's notion that the girl-child education is a waste of resources, rather than investment that will yield dividend, hence the statement, train a woman and you have trained a nation.

### **Conclusions**

Having x-rayed the unequal treatment and deprivation of the rights of the girl-child, this paper concludes that the girl-child educational reform is imperative for gender equality and empowerment. This no doubt will help achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the nation. When the girl-child is empowered educationally it

will enable her live a fulfilled life and also make meaningful contributions to the developmental race of the nation.

### Recommendations

1. Government should create special funds to sustain and promote the education of the girl-child.
2. The girl-child should be given equal educational opportunities as her boy-child counterpart.
3. Enlightenment programmes should be mounted in the mass media to educate the masses on the benefits of the girl-child education.
4. The educational reform of the girl-child should also emphasize on entrepreneurship education, vocational training like poultry keeping, hair dressing, tailoring, bakery among others to enable the girl-child to be useful to herself and the society at large.

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