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THE GIRL CHILD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Hauwa'u Muhammad Mainoma, Ph.D

Department of Admin and Planning, Faculty of
Education, Nasarawa State University

Ibrahim Tanko, PhD

Department of Admin and Planning, Faculty of,
Education, Nasarawa State University, Keffi

Abstract

The importance of girl-child education cannot be over emphasized. Hence, this study therefore examined the problems and challenges of girl-child education as well as the benefits of educating the girl child with particular reference to Nigeria as the study area. The study revealed that, the problems facing girl-child education in Nigeria is not far from poverty, early marriage, cultural and religious misconceptions. The study recommends among other things that, government, non-governmental organizations, parents, traditional and religious leaders should join hands in the enlightenment campaign for the benefits and need to educate a girl-child.

Keywords: Girl Child, Education, Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations

Introduction

Education is an important foundation to improve the status of women and has also been recognised as a fundamental strategy for development. No sustainable development is possible if women remain uneducated, discriminated against and disenfranchised. Improving and widening access to education, especially basic education, is not only an objective in itself but also accelerates social and economic advancement Dauda (2007). The evidence is out: nations that invest in girl's education enhance economic productivity and growth. In fact, the World Bank has stated that there is no investment more effective for achieving development goals than educating girls. The second Millennium Development Goal challenges the international community's commitment to ensure universal primary school completion and to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education. This goal is grounded in the recognition that access to basic education is a human right, and a vital part of individual's capacity to lead lives that they value Lloyd (2010). In addition, education is a powerful instrument that enables women to access a variety of opportunities, while rendering them less vulnerable to

HIV/AIDS, abuse, and exploitation. Maternal mortality is one of the strongest predictors of the health of a nation and reflects the disparities between wealthy and poor nations more than any other measure of health McAlister and Baskett (2006). As an indicator of inequality, maternal mortality is considered by many to be a measure of a woman's places in society, representing the accessibility of social support, economic opportunities, and health care. In addition, the two measures of gender inequality relating to education, (female literacy rate and combined education enrolment ratio) are predictors of maternal mortality. Improving basic education, especially female education, has a powerful influence on both mortality and fertility McAlister and Baskett (2006). Indeed, the close relationship between education and demographic changes has clearly emerged in a number of recent empirical studies. A wide range of theoretical analyses from different disciplines confirms that education improves health and reduces fertility. For example, women with formal education are much more likely to use reliable family planning methods, delay marriage and childbearing, and have fewer (and healthier) babies than women

with no formal education. The effect is particularly pronounced for secondary school. Women with a secondary school education tend to have better knowledge about health care practices, are less likely to become pregnant at a very young age, tend to have fewer, better-spaced pregnancies, and are more likely to seek antenatal care, postnatal care, and skilled attendance at delivery. The effect is profound: for each additional year of schooling provided to young women, fertility declines by 10%. In fact, it has been estimated that one additional year of school for 1,000 women would avert two maternal deaths Lloyd (2010).. Improving the quality and coverage of education, especially for girls, is key to Nigeria's economic development. Since the 1985 Nairobi Declaration and the 1990 World Declaration on Education for all, numerous strategies, policies and programs to improve levels of female education were conceived and implemented by successive governments. Some earnest efforts have been made to improve the efficiency and quality of the educational system, and to increase the relevance of education for Nigerian students Dauda (2007). Unfortunately, gender gaps in education still exist. According to the National Population Commission (NPC 2004), the national literacy rate for females is only 48%, compared to 73% for males, with certain states having even lower rates of female literacy, enrolment, and achievement. Girls' access to basic education, especially in the northern states, has remained low. As few as 20% of women in the northwest and northeast of the country are literate and have attended school. The purpose of this study is to assess the current status of girl-child education in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Almost everyone in the community has identified and agreed with the importance of educating the girl child and its resultant economic benefit to the society, and thus necessitated the need to make plans and policy to ensure that the girl child is been educated to the required level. However, despite all policies and plans put in place by government and other private concerns citizens, there still exist a large gap between girl child education and the boy's child education. In some rural areas, the girl is been discriminated when it comes to education, in most cases the girl child is subjected to many different child slavery ranging from hawking,

house cleaning, and in some other cases, early marriages. This necessitate the need to increase more effort in enlightening parents and society of the need to educate the girl child and more strict laws to be put in place by policy makers to ensure compliance.

Merriam Webster defines girl child as a female under aged 18, a young 15-year-old female is an example of someone who would be considered a girl.

Wikipedia defines girl child as a female human from birth through childhood and adolescence to attainment of adulthood when she becomes a woman. The term *girl* may also be used to mean a *young woman*, and is often used as a synonym for *daughter*.

Challenges of Girl Child Education

So many factors have been reported to be responsible for low enrolment of girls in schools Nigeria. Mukhtar (2011) identified religious misinterpretation, cultural practice, poverty, early marriage, illiteracy, inadequate school infrastructure as some of the factors militating against girl-child education. To majority of the parents, girl-child education is less important because no matter what level of education the girl attains, their hope is to see the girl-child get married. To some parents, western type of education is termed to be a way of negative transformation and initiation of an individual into materialism, promiscuity and inculcation of western cultural ideologies.

Alabi (2012), maintain that the considerable spatial disparity, and in some cases incompleteness, of institutional provision (even at primary level) relates directly to difficulties of physical access which adversely affect girls more than boys; there is an overall and profound urban/rural dichotomy which favours towns and cities, especially in respect of secondary school (and especially single sex) provision for girls; patterns of transportation and migration affect educational provision and take up, again normally disadvantaging females and in some cases extreme physical difficulties, such as flooding and other hazards act in the same way. The influence of these factors can only be overcome by more sophisticated and multivariate spatial analysis of educational needs and the planning and implementation of integrated development projects as

a result. Educational planning on its own would be futile taking cognizance of these realities.

Socio-cultural

A major deterrent to female take up and follow through of educational opportunities (even when these are available) is a near universal fundamental cultural bias in favour of males. The widespread operation of patriarchal systems of social organisation; of customary early marriage; of the incidence of early pregnancy (in and out of marriage); of heavier domestic and subsistence duties of females (especially in rural areas); a generally lower regard for the value of female life, all combine though differentially in each case, to adversely affect the participation of girls and women in formal education. To this list may be added problems of seclusion and security in some areas. Such long standing constraints result in a dearth of female role models that could challenge the traditional one that is clearly acquired by both sexes at a very early age. The influence of these factors can only be overcome, *inter alia* by a profound change of attitude on the part of influential males, and in some countries of traditionally minded Powerful females in key family positions (Amin, 2005; Nnoro, 2006; Alabi et al., 2012).

Health

In general the effect of poverty and malnutrition on the health of school age children falls harder on girls than boys. Boys may get preferential feeding, while girls (who have a heavier domestic work load) are more likely to be undernourished. Even if they get to school, this adversely affects their performance and therefore retention rate. Health problems associated with pregnancy, especially for adolescent girls, obviously have a negative effect, as do rising trends of sexual activity in the younger generations where these occur. Problems associated with family size and family planning is widespread in relation to possible participation in education and imply the need for sex/health education at school level. It is clear that the health factor, though partly hidden and indirect in effect is a very significant one in respect of the quality of (young) female participation in education as well as the quantity of it (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Igube, 2010).

Economic

Together with the fundamental socio-cultural bias in favour of males, the economic factor, especially in terms of grinding poverty and hunger, is probably the most influential in adversely affecting female participation in education, especially in rural areas. In such harsh economic circumstances, both direct and hidden costs to a family of sending daughters to school are perceived by parents to be prohibitive in terms of the provision of books, paper and uniforms/clothing (important for social reasons) as well as the loss of vital help at home and on the land. In most cases the contribution of females is unpaid and they may have little or no experience of the handling of money which further reduces their status and power, but increases their vulnerability. Because of the patriarchal predominance, investment in a girl's schooling is wasteful since it benefits the family into which a girl marries rather than her own Dills, (2006). In a classed society, investment in the education of females may be an advantage in 'their placement in social strata. This further increases the urban/rural gap. Vocational education which might relate to employment prospects, is everywhere weak and under-valued, but especially so in respect of the interests of girls. The apparent inability of some countries to resource their schools and even to pay their teachers regularly lead to low morale, teacher absenteeism and parental disenchantment Miller, and Birch, (2007).

Educational

This factor itself can be a deterrent to female participation in schooling. Difficulties of accessibility, lack of resources and low teacher quality and morale are widespread. In particular the lack of female primary teachers in rural areas is a real problem. Parents are, in some countries, very reluctant indeed to send daughters to school if there is no female teacher, and the facilities for the accommodation and security of such teachers are usually absent or inadequate. The organisation of schooling in terms of the daily and seasonal imperatives of local economies usually renders it dysfunctional, and the curriculum is often unattractive in instrumental terms. At secondary level, in addition to the lack of (accessible) places, problems of cost, direct and hidden are acute, and there is a considerable need for more single-sex (girls) schools, some with secure boarding facilities and scholarship schemes to enable participation. Vocational education

is weak and schemes open to girls in this field are particularly useful. There is still a widespread problem of gender bias in books and materials Dills (2006).

Religious

Although in general acting indirectly, the religious factor is on balance a positive one, though it is often overcome by the fundamental socio-cultural bias in favour of males. The fact that most religious practitioners and leaders are male makes for a powerful image in favour of that sex, and it would be a very helpful move if religious leaders of all faiths and denominations were to speak out strongly in support of the female cause Crosnoe, Monica, and Glen, (2004).

Political/Administrative

Amin (2005) opines that although policies exist in most cases for such developments as universal primary education, equal educational opportunities in terms of gender and the eradication of gender bias from texts and other materials, the political will to carry these through seems to be weak in the face of severe economic constraint.

Problems with the Girl-Child Education

Over the years, the role of females in Nigerian society has been erroneously conceptualized to child bearing and house-keeping. This is why, in most developing countries males are groomed for career in technical and scientific fields while females are guided to concentrate their efforts on home economics. In Nigeria, the social relations and activities of Nigerian women and men are governed by patriarchal system of socialization and cultural practices, which favour the interest of men above those of women. The women are in subordinate position particularly at the community and household levels and the male children are preferred to the females in the same vein, Agwagah and Agule (2009); Offorma, 2009); Alabi (2012) identified preference of some parents toward certain disciplines, girls' negative attitude towards mathematics; teachers' negative attitudes to students, poor methods of teaching and inadequate importance attached to girl-child education by the government/society, as possible factors that could influence the participation of the girl-child in STM. The

consideration of the girl-child education as secondary to that of boys in some societies and in some religious set up, could also be responsible for the wastage rate among females at all levels of education. Furthermore, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF,2007) identified poverty, early marriage and teenage pregnancy; inadequate school infrastructure; cultural and religious biases; gender bias in content and teaching and learning processes; poorly qualified teachers among others as some of the barriers to girl-child education.

Benefits of Educating the Girl Child

The importance of education in the life of an individual can never be overemphasized. In both spiritual and temporal or mundane aspects of human existence, education is paramount. It is the light that shows the way by removing the darkness of ignorance; the salt that gives the taste of life; the medicine that cures; and the key which open doors.

The greatest favour one can do to himself or herself is "to get education" and to others "to give them education". According to a Chinese proverb, education is the best legacy to give to a child because "giving your child a skill is better than giving him one thousand pieces of gold."

Females like their male counterparts have the right to education and skill acquisition, the right to choice and self-actualization. But what we see in most societies today is the other way round.

Many girls today do not have adequate education past a certain age. When a girl is 12-14 years old, the elders in the community feel she is "ripe for marriage" and their words are LAW. So what are her words worth when the elders in the community have spoken? A girl who is given out in marriage at a very tender age is placed at a very high risk. She is not matured enough to be a mother, without any skill, information and confidence that might lead to her being a better mother and wife if she were educated.

The native traditional philosophy is that a woman's place is in her husband's kitchen and her primary role centers on her home. This belief has kept many girls away from education. The Child's Rights Act of 2003 prohibits child marriages and betrothals. In section 21

of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, any marriage contracted by anyone less than 18 years old is invalid. This is why there has been a lot of emphasis, particularly in recent times, for all citizens to have access to basic education.

When a girl is given out in marriage at a very tender age, to a man who is old enough to be her grandfather, her right as a human has been abused as most Nigerians would say “she don marry her grandpa”. She has also been deprived of her right to education and will be doomed to be an illiterate forever if her husband does not give her opportunity to school after her wedding.

At the beginning of colonialism, rigid ideas on gender were imposed on the African mind, thereafter, the woman’s role has come to be merely for sexual and commercial labours – satisfying the sexual needs of men, working in the fields, carrying loads, tending to babies and preparing food. How can a girl who is not up to 18 years old be able to execute all these duties and look after her so called “family”? She is not matured enough to give birth and in the process of giving birth could become exposed to certain viral infections and even lose her life.

It has been established by researchers that enabling female education is crucial for national development, and the role of women cannot be underestimated. The general belief is that “when you educate a man, you educate one but when you educate a woman, you educate a nation.” This is so because the education of every child starts from the family and the mother is the first teacher. Educating the girl child produces mothers who are educated and who will in turn educate their children, care for their families and provide their children.

Therefore, educating the girl child translates to better health for the future generation, reduction in child morbidity and mortality thus triggering a snowball effect of achieving all other Sustainable Development Goals in a viable manner.

The girl child needs to be educated to acquire knowledge and skills needed to advance her status for social interactions and self-improvement. The girl child education also prepares her to face the reality in society and teaches her to be a good wife and mother.

When she is educated, she realizes the full potentials endowed in her; she discovers to be whoever and whatever she wants to be. With education, she would break the shell of ignorance and open that of self-discovery.

Conclusion

Education is a human right and an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace. Non-discriminatory education benefits both boys and girls and thus ultimately contributes to more equal relationship between men and women, and promoting gender equity in education systems creates a healthy, educated and productive human resource base. It is time therefore to begin to do the right thing – to train and educate our girls. It is time to stop the insult of poverty and dependence, and minimize the culture of begging by maximizing the great resource GOD gave us in women. It is time to train and retrain the girl child.

Suggestions

In view of the various problems affecting girl-child education as unravelled, the following suggestions among other things were put forward to help tackle and address those problems.

- i. Government at all levels should make concerted effort to alleviate poverty at the grass root, as this will undoubtedly overcome the challenge of not sending the girl-children to school by parents for reason of poverty.
- ii. Another responsibility that government should take up so as to tackle this menace is to provide free, compulsory primary and secondary education. Schools should be built, well-staffed and equipped to provide quality education so that the children can learn comfortably.
- iii. Parents should be enlightened to encourage the girl-child to acquire basic education, at least, that will make her self-reliant and to secure a better future for herself. Governments, Non-Governmental Organizations, Religious leaders and traditional rulers have a major role to play in leading these awareness and enlightenment campaigns on not only the importance of western education for the girl-child but also on the need to discard the various cultural and

religious misconceptions that have militated against girl-child education over the years.

iv. The Child's Rights Act should be strengthened and implemented in all states. This would go a long way in checkmating indiscriminate child abuse. This is because, as girls are not educated, they remain

dependent on their parents before marriage, on their husbands after marriage, and on their children if eventually their husbands die. Would you as a concerned, caring and loving father or mother love to see your daughter in this condition? This calls for encouraging the girl child education.

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