

GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION AS A FACTOR FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In most developing countries of the world, the increase in the levels of education among girls has favourably impacted on national integration and development. It has also enabled them to provide positive contribution to the development of their nations. This paper attempts to show the extent to which education for girls and women plays a key role in national development, especially where the process of democratization is still fragile. The paper also underscores the fact that individuals cannot develop their potentials without education, pointing out the fact that even though the imbalances in gender ratios, at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, have reduced, there is still need to promote and enhance female participation in education. The paper recommends, among others, that local schools should be accessible to children without prejudice to sex.

Introduction

The access to education, especially for females has been and remains a major issue for policy consideration in most developing countries of the world. This is mainly because education is essential for economic and social development. Alao (1998) posits that, the total workforce for education should work for women's equality and employment and accord a high priority to their education as this plays an important role in the socio-economic development of a country. In spite of this fact, in Nigeria, the

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state of women education and the extent of the gender gap in education between men and women has become the major constraint to national development. Hill and King (1993) endorse that in order to raise productivity, increase income and improve the quality of life in our society, equal educational opportunities should be provided for both men and women. They expatiated further that, the benefits to economic growth and family welfare that derive from educating women are undeniable. The evidence makes it clear that any endorsements tailored at women's education contribute to development. In other words, the development of any nation in terms of social and national integration as well as political and economic advancement at all levels requires the contribution of both men and women. This may only be possible where functional education is provided to girls and women in the society.

The global outcry for a competitive provision of education for women and girls indicates a high level of importance attached to joint partnership effort in social and economic development of every region of the world. Education is generally for the development of the human resources in any given nation and the issue of inequality, segregation and gender stereotyping should be out of place. For instance, the 1990 Jomtein Declaration of Education for All, the 3rd World Children's Summit, which set the year 2000 as the target for ensuring that all children have access to basic education. This commitment can also be seen in the way International Agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and World Bank embarked on sponsoring girls and women education projects in Nigeria. Indeed, the critical role of girls and women education as a factor for fostering national integration and development of Nigeria led to the various policies of education provision among which is the Universal Basic Education in 1999. Therefore, the importance of women education in the socio-

cultural, economic and political development cannot be overstated.

Factors Affecting Girls and Women Education in Nigeria

The Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report (2003/2004), disclosed that the goal to eliminate gender disparities is not within reach in many parts of the world. The Report considers that at the current rates of progress, a large majority of countries will not achieve gender parity at primary and secondary levels. The imbalances in gender ratio at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education have reduced considerably over the years in favour of men instead of women folk.

The major challenges facing women and girl-child education in Nigeria is deeply rooted in culture and traditions of many ethnic groups in Nigeria, as many of these groups are inclined towards gender stereotyping in society. The odds against women and girls-child education are too real and practical to be ignored. They are a host of socio-economic, cultural and religious constraints, which can be examined under five broad headings, namely: cultural factors, child labour, religious factors, early marriage and poverty.

Cultural factors

Nigeria is a patriarchal state and so exalts the role of men in all works of life. The content of cultural education or socialisation has, for time immemorial, maintained a rigid division between masculine and feminine subjects. Traditionally, education of girls is designed to make them primarily effective mothers and house wives. Generally, the socio-cultural role that prevents women from having free access to education is to promote their perceived feminine role of domiciliary duties and indirect support of husbands in society. Traditionally, gender stereotyping is accepted, girls were given a code of conduct in preparation for

their future roles as brides; to make girls to become hardworking and devoted wives (Alao, 1998).

Therefore, social norms play a significant role in explaining why and how gender differentiation occurs and how it becomes legitimized through divisions between men and women. For instance, many parents noted that educated women often face problem of getting married on time or becoming gainfully employed. Besides, as they get older, they end up their lives in their parental homes. Williams (1990), endorsed that the reluctant attitude to educate women or provide them with necessary functional skills in the present century must be viewed as part of the conservative reaction to the forces of socio-cultural beliefs and practices.

Child Labour

As a result of family pressures, children are exploited. They often engage in street hawking and other menial jobs, which deprive them the opportunity to be educated. This trend is more pronounced among the low income families, where girls are used for mini-street hawking with a view to saving money in preparation for their marriage in later years. The EFA Global Monitoring Report (2003/2004) reveals that, the low participation rates of children in schooling tend to be higher among girls especially in rural areas.

Religious Factor

Religion is one of the factors that has been responsible for the slow and poor growth of the girl-child education in Nigeria. In Northern Nigeria, for example, some Muslims shy away from sending their daughters to school because they fear that western education may introduce their children to attitudes and values that are prejudiced to the growth of the girls' religion. Also, the practice of purdah, according to Callaway (1984), cited by King

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and Hill (1993), has affected negatively the education of girls particularly in Northern Nigeria and other areas in the Sub-Saharan Africa that practice the Purdah system. In this cultural perspective, women are confined to their matrimonial homes; and so are not allowed to continue education.

Early Marriage

Marriage in every society is regarded as a milestone in adult life. Sadly enough, the practice is capable of militating against successful adult life, especially where the interests of the spouses are denied in favour of or respect for tradition. UNICEF (2001), in a recent study in West African countries, with Nigeria inclusive, shows that 44 percent of women between age 20 – 24 years old were married under the age of 15. Among some of the reasons for early marriage as found by this study are the needs to follow tradition, reinforcing ties among families and communities, and to protect girls from out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

The reasons and practices are against some of the universal laws governing human existence. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) in UNICEF (2001), articles *I* and *II*, on consent of marriage and minimum age for marriage, endorsed that:

- i. No marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties, such consent to be expressed by them in persons as prescribed by law.
- ii. States parties to present convention shall specify a minimum age for marriage (“not less than 15 years” according to the non-binding recommendation accompanying this convention). No marriage shall be legally entered into by any person under this age.....

Furthermore, in article XXI of (1990), on African charter on the right and welfare of the child, states that, child marriage and

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betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and legislation shall take action as to age of marriage not less than 18 years. UNICEF (1998) reports in the International Regional Information Network that, in Kano, just about 26 percent of girls in Northern Nigeria make it beyond primary school and most of the children, who leave, do so because their families marry them off.

Where female autonomy is considered unstable or risky, early marriage is used as a means of securing the future of young girls (EFA Global Report 2003/2004). This is a practice where young girls from the age of nine and below are betrothed to their suitors. For example, a girl who is brilliant in school may be withdrawn by the parents and given out in marriage at a tender age, ranging between eleven to thirteen years. Sometimes a girl is made to marry a man who is not of her own choice; or she could be given out for marriage to an older man. This is more common in the rural areas than in urban areas. King and Hill (1993) posit that in Northern Nigeria, a social consensus seems to have emerged that education in western schools is bad for girls and for the society as a whole. This attitude, as considered by King and Hill, is a barrier to female education even when the government or donor agencies finance their schooling. However, this negative attitude to western education for girls and women has changed positively in recent years. Parents have started to realise the need and relevance of girls and women education for national integration and development in Nigeria.

Poverty

Poverty is one of the under pinning factors for early marriage, selection of school and schooling period of a child in a family. It limits the access and chances of the child in education. To Prasad and Kaushik (2007) in a family or community where poverty is acute, young girls may be regarded as a burden to the family.

Educating them is considered as a waste of resources; therefore preference is given to boys, who are considered to be perpetrators of the family names. This is more common amongst parents of low socio-economic status. Thus, in taking decisions concerning the educational life chances of the children at home, boys get preference over girls, especially in the Northern Nigeria. The main argument is that girls will eventually get married and the boys will be the bread winners of the family. It may not be out of place to mention that this argument holds no water and may not be unconnected to the ignorance of the need and relevance of education for the personal development of an individual.

Girls-Child Education for National Integration and Development in Nigeria

In relation to the democratization of education, Thompson (1981) reflects that one particular thrust of education reform, which has been seen as offering more effective means of harnessing the total human resources of this nation, removing some of the major internal sources of dissension and of improving the capacity of the people as a whole to participate in the management of their own affairs, is that of widening the access to education and making it available to all citizens, both old and young. In developing countries of Africa, the problem of democratization of education and making it accessible to all citizens continue to elicit different debates, analyses and recommendations from politicians, educationists and others interested in educational reforms. The question of making education accessible to all citizens in the country bears on the issue of gender discrimination in education; this problem also directly relates to marginalization of females in all day-to-day educational affairs. In fact, there has always been the crisis of global marginalization of females in regard to exercising their

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enrolment rights in education from primary school and up to the tertiary level.

Thus, the Dakar Framework and Millennium Development Goals (2000) endorsed its goal as follows: “to promote gender equality and empower women”. It specified in its target 4 to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels of education not later than 2015. This directive was meant to be focused towards ensuring that girls enjoy full and equal access to achievement in basic and quality education as stressed by Goal No. 5 of EFA. Thus, according to the EFA Global Monitoring Report of (2003/2004), gender equality means that boys and girls would experience the same advantages (or disadvantages) in educational access, treatment and outcomes. Furthermore, according to the EFA Global Monitoring Report (2003/2004), the achievement of gender equality positively bears on the following:

- * equality of opportunities, in the same way that girls and boys are given the same chances of access to school;
- * equality in the learning process as girls and boys receive the same treatment and attention, follow the same curricula, and enjoy teaching methods and teaching tools free of stereotypes and gender bias, profit from the same quantity and quality of appropriate educational infrastructure;
- * equality of outcomes, that is, leaning achievement, length of school, careers, academic qualifications and diplomas would not differ by gender and;
- * equality of external results, that is, job opportunities.

This issue of gender equality, which was given major prominence in the Dakar Framework and Millennium Development Goals (2000), is not recent or new because, the need for gender and educational equality for all has been stressed through legal obligations as follows:

1. In November 1948: the nations of the world made a declaration about the nature and extent of human rights; amongst many others, the right to education was acknowledged for all people. In this declaration, education was not defined to mean for a particular sex, region or nation. Therefore, it is a universal human right.
2. In 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) stressed a most comprehensive set of legally enforceable commitments concerning both rights to gender and educational equality. It included wide-ranging provision for ending gender discrimination by stating that there shall be no distinction in the external provision for women and men. In respect to the provision of social welfare, which education is one, cognizance shall be for both sexes and the less privilege.
3. In 1990, the World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien (Thailand), set out an expanded vision of education and restated the Universal Basic Education (UBE) goal for achievement by the year 2000.

In 1999, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) for Nigeria organized a mini summit in Abuja to assess the extent to which this programme is intended to remove all the obstacles to life long education for millions of citizens who are denied the right to basic education. Gender disparity, especially as it affects girls and women, was among the issues discussed. Many other conferences held throughout the world stressed the need for girls and women education. In line with the deliberations of the world conferences, the Abuja (1999) mini summit endorsed that the need for girls and women education largely derives from the following:

- * the Girl- child and overall women education is a key factor necessary for their overall human resource and development

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needs. This is with emphasis to basic or foundation education, which is a requisite for social cohesion, national integration and general development.

- * education is the basic tool that should be given to the girl-child and women in order to fulfil their roles as full members of the society. These roles of women are basic needs for the society, for the promotion of traditional values, uplift standard for socialisation and the maintenance of the society. Women with valued information provide first hand knowledge and skills for child consumption and learning.
- * education is the starting point for women advancement in different fields of human endeavour. As this provides foresight, improve skills and prepare them for the complex roles of house wives, child bearers and peacemakers in the society.
- * education and training programmes would help the female folk in the acquisition of aesthetic skills in the production of resources, which emanate from arts and crafts. Therefore, education focuses on women as a means of empowering them, thereby improving their living standards.
- * education would be a preamble to the full utilization of women in the development of their resources.
- * educating the girl-child benefits not only her parents, but also herself and her future family as well as society at large. Investing in women/girls education could raise women's wages, which in turn increases returns to their educational pursuit and family. Therefore increase in parents' investment on their daughter's education becomes necessary investment for the future.
- * education of women has a greater effect on family welfare than that of the men. Studies in Economics, Medicine and Anthropology revealed a strong link between a mother's

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schooling and a decrease in the incidence of mortality among her children. More schooling for the mother appears to lead to better hygiene and improved health. One reason for this is that more schooling seems to accord her greater control over the frequency and spacing of childbearing and to influence her use of health services.

education enhances women's ability and curiosity to exercise their civic rights and social responsibilities, such as, the right to vote and partake in public deliberations and social responsibilities, such as, making a good home and serving as a mother to her children.

Thus, the EFA Global Monitoring Report (2003/2004) also makes a strong case for achieving gender equality. It clearly states that it is in the private and social interest of any nation to eliminate gender inequalities in education. The personal and social benefits accruing from education, make individuals healthier and better nourished. Besides, education adds value to citizens and makes them to cherish civic responsibility in the nation. It is an affordable investment with high pay-offs. Based on these benefits, King and Hill (1993) observe that education is important in the lives of women as well as promoting the economic wellbeing of individuals.

In addition, the UNDP Human Report, (2002) estimated that over 60 million persons in Nigeria are women and girls; it is, therefore, obvious that this group could no longer be excluded from being exposed to education. This is to say that, meaningful educational advancement, promotion of national integration and development cannot take place in its complete form, if women are not educated and are grossly underrepresented in some important sectors of the economy such as education, health, social work and politics. These aforementioned areas in the economy

may likely suffer the consequences of women under-representation.

The Way Forward

It is generally known that gender disparity in education constitutes one of the major challenges facing government's drive for the development of girls and women education and the desire for the attainment of the "Education for All" by the year 2015. What is more interesting is that challenges posed by gender inequality are common. If equality in education and women empowerment are to be achieved, these challenges must be tackled by all stakeholders in the education industry.

However, the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (2003), considers that gender equality can be achieved through the following ways:

- * increasing women participation in education by embarking on enlightenment campaigns for expanded education in respect to nomadic women, women in purdah, women in riverine areas, women in rural areas, the gifted and the educationally challenged. The curriculum should also be adopted in such a way as to satisfy the needs and aspirations of these groups of people.
- * reducing dropout rate amongst women in primary schools and catering for the dropouts of widows and the single parents from schools.
- * increasing the overall literacy rate among girls and women.
- * satisfying the 30 percent political posts and positions that are supposed to be set apart for women in order to bridge the wide political gap in respect of the differentials existing between the political awareness of men and women.
- * tackling and removing all forms of discrimination against women in all spheres of our national life.

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International Resolutions and World Plan of Action (2000) at the highest level of governance, which include:

- * ensuring increase in girls and women's literacy level.
- * providing facilities for adult and women education.
- * liaising with appropriate bodies in producing policies and legislations that will eliminate all forms of gender discrimination, in training and employment.
- * promoting skills acquisition in schools for the improvement of arts, food processing and other vocational training within the context of the needs and potentials of women.
- * promoting and protecting the rights of the girl-child with particular reference to education.

Recommendations

Schooling chances and environment should practice the provision of equal treatment of boys and girls in classrooms or during teaching exercise. This will develop in the society a positive attitude of respect to both sexes. Institutional responses to the elimination of social barriers will go along way to equate social status, feeling and promote self-esteem. Therefore, the right of men should be equal to that of women in education.

As the nation is long tired of traditionalism and conservative practices, it is important to re-examine traditional gender roles. This is only possible if the institution of education will work with other social institutions, leaders, parents and policy makers to have a change in attitude. Change in gender roles, definition of gender and protection of gender is necessary and should be done by providing equal rights to social services in the society.

The education of girls and women should be designed to be flexible and competitive to the extent that it could challenge social discrimination and eradicate the idea of dependency in them. Again, the education of girls and women should take cognizance

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of their natural endowments; the curriculum and period of teaching and learning should therefore be designed to respect their nature. However, the full support from individuals, communities and governments should be sought to ensure success. This is to provide or accord social equality to the age long marginalised segment of our society.

Conclusion

This exposition entertains the view that from a broad perspective, increasing female education has a favourable impact on national integration, socio-economic and political development. A very important consequence of a society investing in the education of girls and women is the changes it could engender in household behaviour and practice. Most certainly, Nigeria like other developing countries, has agreed to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and at all levels of education by 2015. Efforts and progress have been recorded even though the goals for gender parity or equality are yet attained. In line with the Dakar and Millennium Development and International Treaties and UBE for Nigeria, nongovernmental organizations, traditional and religious leaders, United Nations and donors agencies as well as parents must all work together to facilitate successful implementation of girl-child education for the attainment of maximum national integration and development in Nigeria.

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