

GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: TOWARDS THE IMPROVEMENT OF ENROLMENT AND PARTICIPATION OF GIRLS IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROVISIONS

MAHUTA, M. G.

ABSTRACT

Various governments in Nigeria have made concerted efforts to pursue concrete and powerful steps aimed at enhancing girl-child access to education. In a series of international conferences on education, the education of girls and women was identified as a factor for socio-economic and political empowerment. Education is generally regarded as a fundamental agent or factor for socio-economic, political and cultural development. The level of education of a nation is a predictor or criteria for determining its socio-economic development. In matters such as health, economy, the training of a skilled, efficient and effective workforce is usually affected by the quality of the nation's educational development. This therefore, means that there is a mutual relationship between education and development. Despite this relationship, a large proportion of girls receive little or no education in many parts of Nigeria. The aims of this paper is to identify and examine some of the issues pertaining to girls' education, problems facing the education of the girl-child as well as the strategies that should be employed so as to improve the enrolment and participation of girls in education. The paper made a number of recommendations. For example, parents, and traditional rulers should be made to take part in the sensitization and mobilization process on the significance and relevance of girls and women education in the personal, family and national development.

INTRODUCTION

The institution of education is a powerful tool or instrument for national and personal development of individuals. The provision of universal access to education is a fundamental factor for achieving socio-economic transformation and technological growth and advancement. The Universal declaration of Human Rights, which asserts the right of everyone to education, also states that the right of human beings shall not be subjected to distinctions "such as race, colour or sex". In a member nation such as Nigeria where the principles of the declaration are accepted even if not always put into practice, one would expect male and female to have equal access and participation to educational provisions at all levels. In practice, girls are generally educationally under privileged in Nigeria. The aim of this paper is to examine the situation of girl-child education in Nigeria. This will be done in the context of the problems facing girl-child

Dr. M. G. Mahuta is a Senior lecturer in the Department of Education, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

education as well as the strategies for the improvement of enrolment and participation of girls in educational provisions.

The Situation of the Girl-Child Education

The National Policy on Education (2004) of Nigeria after realizing that education is the cornerstone of socio-political development adopted education as an instrument of excellence for effective national development. In Nigeria the philosophy of education is based on the integration of the individual into sound and effective citizenry with equal educational opportunities at all levels of education through formal and non-formal schooling system. Hence, various efforts were made to follow a purposeful direction aimed at enhancing the accessibility of education for girls and women. It is important to note that disparity in access to education still exists in favour of the male children in most regions of Nigeria.

However, the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (2003) shows that the literacy situation in Nigeria is as follows:

- The overall literacy rate declined from 57% in 1990 to 49% in 2001.
- Literacy among women declined from 44% to 41% during the same period.
- There are striking geographical discrepancies – urban areas 67%, rural areas 42%.
- There are also striking regional (or geo-political) differences both in overall literacy rates and in women's literacy rates as shown below:

Table I: Nigeria – Regional and Gender Differences in Adult Literacy Rates in 2003

ZONE	WOMEN	MEN	F + M
South East	60%	74%	67%
South West	55%	74%	64%
North West	22%	40%	31%
North East	21%	42%	32%

Source: UNICEF, 2003.

In addition, in 2001 a situation assessment and analysis of children and women in Nigeria conducted by UNICEF and the National Planning Commission maintained that:

There are a number of cultural, societal and economic barriers to girls' education in Nigeria. These barriers loom large especially in many states and communities. Cultural inhibitions are closely tied with religious affiliations and traditional practices. For instance, in many of the predominantly Muslim states where the gender gap is markedly high (e.g. in Sokoto, Zamfara) girls are traditionally prevented from having access to formal school environments as a consequence of erroneous interpretation of religious injunctions.

The right to equal educational opportunities by all irrespective of gender, sex, socio-economic, socio-cultural, religious and or political inclinations is one of the basic

human rights guaranteed by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Since then (more than fifty years ago) various efforts are being made by various governments toward the universalisation of education with no distinction between boys and girls. This is because the development of any nation is a collective responsibility of both men and women. All nations of the world today have realized that education is the vehicle for promoting and improving the status of girls and women. It has equally been understood that sustainable development of any nation may not be possible when more than half of its population remain ignorant, marginalized, secluded, isolated and insulated. According to Human Development Report of 1997, an important strategy for empowering girls and women is to promote access to formal and functional education.

However, widening educational opportunities and opening more chances for girls has been a major policy goal of governments for quite a long time now. It is evidently clear that education improves health and productivity and is a strong agent or factor of social change and mobility. When opportunities for education are provided for girls and women the benefits are realized in the various sectors of the economy. In other words the impact of educating girls will be felt by the different institutions in the society.

In recognition of the fact that the status of girl-child education is significantly low when compared to that of boys, the World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in 1995, noted the persistent discrimination against the violation of the rights of the child. This was one of the twelve critical areas requiring urgent attention by governments and international community. This concern is to create awareness of all citizens to the fact that equal educational opportunities should therefore be made available or accessible to all.

However, a recent report on the extent and depth of child poverty in the developing world by UNICEF (2003), found that there were 135 million children between 7 and 18 years old without any form of education and 60% of them are girls. On the whole, 83% of all girls that are out of school in the world live in Sub-Saharan Africa, South and East Asia and the Pacific. For example, in South Asia there are around 23.5 million of girls that are out of school. But the most worrying statistics come from Sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of girls that are out of school rose from 20 million in 1990 to 24 million in 2002. Figures from the Department for International Development (2005) show that there are 7.3 million children of school age who are not in school in Nigeria, of whom 62% are girls.

It is evidently clear that there is need for concerted efforts by government of all levels in Nigeria to redress the problems of ignorance and the marginalization of the girl-child. Rapid development in Nigeria can be attained when girls and women are provided equal educational opportunities. The responsibility for the development of any nation is a collective responsibility of male and female. In addition, the level of education of a nation determines to a greater extent the level of development of that nation.

However, the situation of girl-child education in Nigeria can also be better understood by the following points:

1. Available data indicates that only 28 percent of females are literate out of a 66.4 percent national literacy level of 1985/86. In the rural areas, 25 percent of females are literate out of 62 percent adults. Nationwide, an illiteracy level of 34 percent was recorded with females accounting for over 63 percent of the figure. Put

- differently, for every 100 persons in the urban areas who were illiterates, over 63 were females, while the remaining 37 were males (UNDP, 1995).
2. Current national statistics show a gender ratio 57:43 in favour of boy's enrolment in education. While some southern states have attained parity such as Lagos 50 percent, Akwa-Ibom, Rivers 50 percent, Enugu 52 percent, Abia 50 percent and Oyo 50 percent, the gap in the north ranges between 34 percent in Kebbi and 44 percent in Borno (UNDP, 1995).
 3. The rural-urban difference in education is a factor affecting the girl-child education. The urban-rural dimension of access to schooling is an important independent cause of gender bias in education. Urban primary enrollment levels are generally higher than those in the surrounding rural areas. Many children migrate to urban areas for their primary schooling (Blakemore and Cooksey, 1981:57). However, it may not be out of place to provide some data to show the extent of rural/urban inequality in the enrolment of boys and girls in primary school. In this case, Kebbi State is used here as a typical example.

Table II: Rural/Urban Inequality in Enrolment of Boys and Girls in Primary School

RURAL			URBAN		
LGEA	Boys	Girls	LGEA	Boys	Girls
Augie	11,083	5,169	Argungu	31,952	20,177
Fakai	11,524	5,672	B/Kebbi	15,525	9,758
Shanga	5,088	1,639	Yauri	8,168	5,238
Suru	8,049	4,376	Zuru	14,019	10,946

Source: Bagudo, (2004)

4. Many parents today see the school as a major source of vice and serious moral contamination through the undesirable behaviour exhibited by some peers in school; in this case the school has been seen as a threat to the home. Thus, Conflict emanating from socialization process and interaction of children with other children as well. This can be seen as a conflict between the home and school, thus resulting to problem in educational opportunity for the girl-child.
5. Socio-economic crises in the family are yet another fundamental dilemma facing the rural girl-child thereby causing a serious gender imbalance in educational opportunities. For example, Dubey et al. (1979), noted that where parental resources are limited, the female tends to get a lower order of priority in consideration for entry in further education. This clearly means that where parent's resources are limited they may prefer to send boys to school instead of girls even if the later are more intelligent. In this case, therefore, it can be stated without fear of contradiction that gender inequality of access as a result of poor economic situation has manifested to a large extent.

Problems Facing the Girl-Child Education

In African countries and Nigeria is no exception, according to the Department for International Development Report (2005) the major barriers to girl-child education are

poverty, child labour, child trafficking, remote geographical location, poor infrastructure, ethnicity, women low social status and mother's lack of education, civil conflict, and violence against women. It is relevant to mention that the Department for International Development Report (2005) indicates that more than 100,000 girls directly participated in conflict in the 1990s in developing nations. In addition, the HIV/AIDS pandemic presents enormous challenges in education of girls and women as they are seriously infected and affected. According to the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and World Health Organization (2003) for every boy newly infected with HIV in Africa, there are between three to six girls newly infected. Girls who are not infected are affected by being care givers to infected parents, family members or orphans, which compromise their education in many developing nations. This is a serious set back for girls and women education in Nigeria, especially with the government's drive for universalisation of education.

Furthermore, other factors affecting girls and women education in developing countries include the following:

- i. The education of the girl-child is usually termed as an optional endeavour that should be considered when issues that are regarded more serious are treated. This means that girls' education is not seen as a serious matter.
- ii. The burden of debts and other economic reforms have made education to remain behind other development agenda or priorities. This means that poverty is a serious problem that is holding education back.
- iii. The fear that people may lose their cultural identity and the introduction of alien culture.

In addition, Mahuta (2006) opined that other factors that tend to inhibit or affect girl-child education are:

- i. The misconception about the position of Islam on formal schooling: There is a very serious misunderstanding about the position of Islam as regards the education of girls and women. Islam has a positive position on educating the women folk. The popular prophetic tradition clearly shows that, the search for knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim man and woman. It is therefore, evident that those who show negative attitude to girls' education on the grounds of Islamic religion show such an attitude out of ignorance but not an Islamic viewpoint.
- ii. The negative attitude of parents towards education of girls which leads to early marriage, and consequently leading to withdrawal of girls from school for marriage by some parents in Nigeria, and more especially in the extreme Northern Nigeria. This is one of the problems hindering the education of girls and women, as it causes inequality in educational opportunities among girls and women. This is because equality of educational life chances, requires enrolment, retention and completion. However, when anyone of these is absent, it means there are no equal educational opportunities.
- iii. The conservative attitude of some parents which are opposed to any form of social change and modernization, and therefore consider formal schooling as against their cultural norms and values. This is combined with the fear that formal schooling is likely to interfere with their cultural norms thereby undermining the sanctity of the home.

More rural based research should be carried out to identify the causes of girl-child drop out from school. There should be broad and well-articulated policy to take care of continuing education for those who dropped out. In other words, facilities should be expanded for "second chance" functional literacy education to adult women. For example, women centre for continuing education in Sokoto and similar other ones across the country.

Government through community structure should ensure that girls complete their schooling. In addition, the public enlightenment campaign should be intensified to increase the awareness on the need for and value of education by parents and the society at large. Awareness campaigns and community involvement programmes can help to change negative attitudes towards female education by sensitising parents, guardians, policymakers, traditional rulers, teachers and girls themselves about the detrimental socio-economic prejudices which discriminate against female enrolment in schools as well as campaign against early marriages.

Considering that girls' involvement with household chores prevent them from attending school and reduces the time spent at home, the following measures should be taken:

- Provision of childcare centres for mothers so that their daughters do not have to play at home to care for siblings.
- Provision of good drinking water and alternative sources of fire so that girls spend less time in search of water and firewood for cooking.
- Energy-saving devices and cheap processing techniques which minimize labour and reduce reasons for withdrawing children from schools to meet household labour demands, should be made available to households.
- Government should make extra-moral or evening classes available so that girl and women can avail themselves of the opportunities for part-time or full-time education or for remedial courses. Such programmes should be encouraged in rural areas where the majority of illiterate women live. Therefore, husbands should be sensitised on the benefits of women education to the family so that they could encourage their wives to participate in adult literacy programmes.
- More importantly, it is essential to accelerate the pace of socio-economic development of Nigeria and eradicate poverty as many of the required changes usually accompany development and improvement in the economic well-being of citizens.

Conclusion

The paper has shown that there is need for the development of girls and women education, because educated citizens and mothers do play important role in raising the socio-economic and political well-being of the country. The cultural and social discriminations, which stand to be barriers to their rise to greatness, are equally capable of exposing Nigeria to threat to development. This therefore means that we should all remember that an educated girl is an asset to herself, her family and the nation at large. The paper has further made it clear that gender disparity is brought about by interplay of factors ranging from attitude to girls' education, rural-urban dichotomy and socio-economic factors etc. The problems being faced by the girl-child could greatly affect the

enrolment opportunities of girls in schools, their performance and achievement, retention as well as completion of schooling. Lastly, but by no means least, the paper is of the opinion that the education of the girl-child is as important as the education of her male counterpart because national development is the responsibility of all without prejudice to sex-type.

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