

Education of the Nigerian Child: The Perspective of the Girl-Child**Muhammad Garba Mahuta, Ph.D**Department of Education,
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Every child irrespective of sex has the right to education. The right of all persons to education is categorically clear and set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thus education is a human right which is also an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality and development. The development of any nation is a collective responsibility of boys and girls. For this reasons, all nations of the world have realised that education is the instrument for promoting and improving the status of girls and women. To empower girls therefore, increased access to education is necessary. This paper discusses the issues of gender inequality and marginalisation in relation to the education of the Nigerian girl-child. The paper examines how girls are not accorded equal access to education on the grounds of their sex. It also identifies some of the barriers to girls' education and how these pose threats to the nation's drive for national development, integration and cohesion. Lastly, recommendations are proffered on how girls' education can help to promote and sustain national socio-economic and political development. One of such recommendations is that, there should be proper implementation of the Universal Basic Education Programme in Nigeria, since inter alia, it has provision for girl-child education or development generally.

Introduction

Education in general and formal education in particular is a powerful agent of socialisation. It is equally an agent of social change and development in society. The provision of education to all devoid of sex and gender discrimination has been one of the priorities of the United Nations. For instance, efforts made in the past include:

1. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 which considered education as a basic human right.
2. The world conference on 'Education for All' held in Jomtein, Thailand in 1990 which also drew attention to the gender bias in educational opportunities in favour of men and its consequences for human development.

Education has been increasingly recognised as a fundamental factor for socio-economic, political and social development. Thus, the educational level of a nation's population is an indicator or determinant for its socio-economic development. Areas such as health, agriculture and the economy are all

affected by the quality and effectiveness of a nation's education system. However, despite the enormous correlation between education and development there are so many children especially girls who still receive little or no education in Nigeria, this is more so in the case of Northern Nigeria. Though there are cries here and there, it appears that there is no solution in sight for now. The ever ringing question is, what can be done to eradicate this ugly trend before it is too late?

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to examine gender inequality in education in the context of the factors hindering or facilitating access to education of the Nigerian girl-child. The discrimination and marginalisation tendencies accorded girls, the barriers to girls' education as well as what can be done to attend to the problems of education of the Nigerian child in relation to the girl-child are some of the issues and questions this paper seeks to address.

Girl-Child Education: A Global Perspective

Female illiteracy and the under-representation of girls in formal schools are still posing a big problem and challenge to nations in the developing world. Of course, it cannot be disputed that, at all levels of educational pursuit, access to education of girls has appreciated to a greater extent. Nonetheless, much needs to be done to achieve the equal participation of girls in education with their counterparts. According to Hallack (1990) with industrialisation and more propitious socio-economic conditions, it took the USA and European countries, such as France, Germany and the United Kingdom from sixty to one hundred years to achieve Universal Primary Education. Today, the developed nations of the world have almost achieved full equality of access to education for boys and girls.

In the United States, many of the policies and programmes in education are such that advance the status of women, which are established by legislation with a view to eliminating discrimination against women. Rational policies, successful initiatives and effective programmes are administered by the United State Department of Education to improve conditions for women and girls through education, training and research. Local activities are promoted to encourage women and girls of every age and background to complete education and training, putting emphasis in the fields of science, technology and Mathematics. Americans have been able to identify and eliminate many barriers that impede girls and women from participating in the educational endeavour. Such barriers have been for example:

- Enforcing federal laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, colour, origin, gender, age and disability.
- Encouraging the inclusion of strategies that address the special needs of girls and women in federally supported educational programmes.
- Supporting applied research and disseminating information about practical solutions.

- Promoting instruction in gender equitable methods and techniques, eliminating bias in instructional materials to encourage girls and women to take advanced courses in mathematics and science.
- Realising a safer school climate for young girls who are at risk of leaving school.

However, with these national strategies and many more, there has been a significant change and improvement during the last decade in girls' access to education in the United States of America. This can be supported by a very recent report of United Nations International Children Education Fund UNICEF on gender parity and education (2005) which clearly showed that the net attendance ratio of girls in school in the United States is 94.4%.

In Britain, the current education system is largely the result of the 1944 Education Act, which made education compulsory and free for every one between the ages of 5 - 15. According to the Department For International Development DFID (2005) not until the 1960s, many girls were directed towards the commercial and technical streams in secondary schools. Again, until the mid 1980s, it was still relatively unusual for girls to do well in or continue studying subjects such as mathematics or science to university level. Girls' education in Britain saw a sharp rise due to many factors such as the following:

- Families' prioritisation of the daughters' education.
- A shift in perceptions of gender linked to women movement in the 1960s and 1970s.
- Government policies on comprehensive schools.
- Promoting further education and reform of the examination system and gender equality strategies in local education authorities and schools.
- Policies such as area in school just for girls, strong anti-bullying and anti-harassment policy.
- Growth in service facilitated demand for girls in the labour market.

Further, the UNICEF Report Card on gender parity and primary education (2005) showed that the net attendance ratio for girls in Britain is 99.9%. In Canada, public education is run by the provinces and territories and is paid for through taxes. Most children start going to school at 4 or 5 years. By the law, children must attend school until the age of 15 or 16 depending on where they live. Girls have equal access to education as boys. The statistical figures quoted from the elementary and secondary school education (2005) show that Aboriginal girls in Canada are 16% less likely to complete high school and 20% less likely to complete University than non-Aboriginal girls. The UNICEF report card on gender parity and primary education (2005) indicated that the net attendance ratio for girls is 99.7%. It could also be added that in countries like Italy and France, there is also a significant increase in average educational levels of girls.

In various communities of the world, girls have to overcome many obstacles before they can participate in education. In developing countries, appreciable progress has been made in girls' enrolment in primary schools,

but many regions and countries are still lagging behind. It is relevant to note that conditions vary from region to region. According to UNICEF State of World's children (2004), enrolment rates in Latin America and the Caribbean are close to those in developed nations, 94% and 97% respectively, but South Asia lags much behind (at 74%) while Sub-Saharan Africa is moved at a mere 59%.

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 education and 60% of them were girls. On the whole, 83% of all girls 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 out of school, but the most disturbing statistics comes from Sub-Saharan Africa where the number of girls out of school rose from 20 million in 1990 to 24 million in 2002. Figures from the Department for International Development (2005) showed that there were 7.3 million children of school age who are out of school in Nigeria of whom 62% were girls.

There are combinations of reasons that keep many girls out of school in developing countries. For example, traditional culture, economic pressures, rural families tend to be more traditional and less supportive of girls' education. In large families where it is expensive to educate all the children, the education of girls is often sacrificed in favour of that of boys.

Obaid (2001) identified some of the constraints of girl-child education in developing countries as follows:

- The education of girls is considered to be an optional duty that may be pursued when more urgent needs are met.
- The burden of debt and structural adjustment has pushed education down the development agenda, therefore poverty in holding back education.
- The fear people had to loose their cultural identity.

Problems Facing Girl-Child Education in Nigeria

Gender inequality in educational access in Nigeria is seriously against female in the various communities in Nigeria and more especially in the Northern Nigeria. This trend could be attributed to many reasons or factors, some of which are enumerated below:

- i. Misunderstanding of the position of Islam on education
- ii. Socio-economic status of parents
- iii. Socio-cultural factors (taboos and superstitions)
- iv. Low and stereotyped status of girls in society and school.
- v. Patriarchal attitude and domestic division of labour.

Effort is made to discuss each of these factors briefly.

i. Misunderstanding of the Position of Islam on Education

In Islam the search for knowledge is a compulsory duty. Thus, it has mandated Muslims to acquire knowledge. The first revelation to

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was on the subject of learning. The holy Qur'an said:

Proclaim! (or Read) in the name of your Lord and Cherisher, who created, created man, out of a leech-like clot. Proclaim! And your Lord is Most Bountiful, He Who taught (the use of) the pen, Taught man that which he knew not (Qur'an ch 96: v1-5).

The Prophet of Islam (P.B.U.H) said that the search for knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim man and woman

There are very many Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions on the subject of learning, education, research and science. Despite the abundant justifications of the position of Islam on education, ignorance of Islamic injunctions and teachings on girls' education among some Muslims has posed and is still posing a big threat in the plight of girls' education particularly in the Northern Nigeria. The misunderstanding of the position of Islam on education makes them to have negative attitude toward girls and women education and consequently not sending their daughters to school. In the light of this therefore, it should be understood that the religion of Islam is not against the education of girls and women.

ii. **Socio-Economic Status of Parents**

The socio-economic status is a significant variable or factor in education and thus, it determines the educational life chances of girls or who gets what, where the family is poor, when it comes to the question of who goes to school among the children. The parents would prefer the boys to go to school because boys will raise the name of the family while the girl will be married to another family. Mahuta (2003) maintained that, socio-economic crisis in the family is a fundamental dilemma facing the rural girl-child thereby causing a serious gender imbalance in educational opportunities. According to the UNDP (2001) the cost of sending a child to school is divided into two, namely:

- The direct cost, which means tuition fees (where they are charged), levies, cost of uniforms, food, examination fees, textbooks and learning materials.
- The indirect or opportunity cost – this is the value of pupils' time measured in terms of alternative uses or alternative opportunities forgone.

Poverty is a major contributing factor which inhibit access to education more especially girls' education. This factor of poverty is more popularised or pronounced with the current trends in the rising cost of education and educational facilities coupled with the present economic predicaments and hardships.

iii. **Socio-cultural factors**

A common misconception about formal education is that girls would become Europeanised therefore alienated, disobedient and morally corrupt. In other words, girls would deviate from their culture and tradition. Unfortunately, there is a serious crisis of character resulting in a gradual erosion of ethical values and widespread moral laxity among students at all levels of our educational endeavour. This gradual disruption of societal values leads to parents to opt for marriage for their daughters instead of school. This therefore means that, unless school play a more vigorous part in moral education in this country, the gap between personal behaviour and the values upon which every society depends such as honesty, discipline, hard work, trust, cooperation, tolerance, etc. will continue to widen. Sociologist remark 'schools reflect the wider society.

iv. **Low and Stereotyped Status of Girls in Society and School**

The prejudices of people towards girls and women education in many societies are largely determined by their cultural dispositions towards women. In certain cultures the birth of a baby boy is characterised by happiness and joy, while that of a baby girl inspires little or no celebration. Certain societies hold stereotyped image about women who are generally regarded as reproductive agents. A common but not undisputed opinion is that females are naturally inferior to male in many capacities. For example, on women education in America, Swift (1976) maintained that girls were essentially considered to be passive, home-centred, quiet, ladylike, non-scientific, non-technical, and incompetent in leadership and abstract thinking.

v. **Patriarchal Attitude and Domestic Division of Labour**

As a system of stratification and the classification of roles on the basis of sex and age, patriarchy also conditions the social spheres of men and women. The male space consists of the public domain while the female space is the household. Women are expected to get married and care for their families. Hence, parents do not regard formal education as a pre-requisite for being a wife and mother. Patriarchal attitudes lead to preference by parents for boys' education. Patriarchal traditions prescribe domestic roles for girls. The domestic division of labour is an obstacle to the enrolment of girls in school. All these have consequent effect on the educational life chances of the girl-child.

Implications for Girl-child Education

The value and relevance of educating girls and women has long been universally acknowledged. The education of girls is the cornerstone of any equitable development of the community. They are homemakers and centres of the family. The education of girls is likely to raise the economic productivity, low infant and maternal mortality, improve nutrition and promote health, prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, reduce poverty and increase the chances of education for the next generations.

The education level of mothers plays a major role in determining whether or not a child goes to school. The more and better educated the mother, the greater her commitment to education of her children. The mothers' potential benefits and relevance of education for her children will make her encourage school attendance. The UNICEF report card on gender parity and primary education (2005) in developing countries shows that 75% of children who are out of school have mothers with no education. The promotion of girls and women education is a significant investment for the future generations. This is because educated mothers are more likely to be able to ensure the education of their daughters. It is obvious to mention that since the educated mothers have tasted the goodness in education they would want their daughters to taste the same. Thus, educated mothers serve as role model for their daughters and sons.

Another implication of girl's education is the ability to achieve social status in society, for example, holding a paid job role or political representation. Educated girls and women are more receptive to new ideas and or social change in society. By giving girls and women the opportunity to demonstrate their potentialities, it determines the extent of the quality of human development in society.

The participation of girls and women in education is a significant catalyst for the empowerment of women and the total development of the society in general. Educating the girl-child is a great investment for the present and the future. Education is relevant for her personal development (that is, fulfillment of her aspirations) and the socio-political and economic development of the nation.

Discrimination and exploitation are some of the problems being faced by girls and women who are not educated. With education, it will help in no small measure to make girls and women less vulnerable or exposed to exploitation, discrimination, isolation, insulation, exclusion and injustice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In order to provide equal educational life chances for boys and girls for a sustainable development and also to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination in educational opportunities there is the need for concerted efforts by government, non-governmental organisation, individuals and private organisations towards providing equal educational opportunities for girls. According to the millennium development goals (2003), the priority areas for development assistance in eliminating gender disparity in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in order to promote the gender equality and empower women include:

1. Provision of compulsory and free primary and secondary education for all children and as right for all citizens.
2. Supporting women in politics so as to fill the 30% quota of women in political posts.
3. Ensure the effective mobilisation of parents, communities and relevant agencies for enrolment drive.

4. Expansion and enhancement of science and technology education at all levels of the educational system stressing mathematical skills and the application of science and technology at the primary and secondary school levels.
 5. Restructuring of the curriculum to include basic science and technology in women education programmes.
- In addition to the above recommendations, other recommendations are worth trying such as the following:
1. Parents should change their negative attitude towards girls and women education. This is possible by way of grassroots mobilisation and sensitisation of parents on the value and relevance of girl-child education.
 2. There should be concerted efforts towards social mobilisation activities, with a view to making parents conceptualise the value and relevance of formal education for girls and women.
 3. Government at various levels, through the intervention of parents and traditional rulers should educate the society on implications and dangers of girl-child withdrawal from school. This should be done through persuasion and appeal devoid of threat and harassment.
 4. Schools and communities should be made aware of those factors inhibiting the plight of girls and women in education as well as benefits of educating girls for their socio-economic development of the nation and the fulfillment of individual aspirations for life.
 5. The education committees at various levels should incorporate parents and traditional rulers in matters relating to girls-child education, since they are closer to people and have direct contact with the rural people where low enrolment of girls is more popularised.

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