



Girl-Child Education as a Tool for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Non-discriminatory education benefits both girls and boys, and thus ultimately contributes to more equal relationships between women and men in terms of developing the country. Equality of access and attainment of educational qualifications is necessary if more women are to become agents of change. Literacy of women is an important tool to improving health, nutrition and education in the family and empowers women in building, molding and sustaining future generations of skills and educated labour force in the society. Investing in formal and non-formal education and training for women, has an exceptional high social and economic return, and has proved to be one of the best means of achieving economic growth and sustainable development. Girl-child education is that type of education which equips the women with all the necessary tools needed for the effective discharge of their own peculiar roles in the service of the nation building and sustainable development. Therefore, this study examines the importance of girl-child education as a tool for sustainable development in Nigeria. The study found out that girl-child education is bedeviled with several problems ranging from cultural gender bias and preference, poverty, ignorance, religious misconceptions, teenage pregnancy and early marriage amongst others as factors militating against the girl-child education. Finally, the paper recommends that massive public enlightenment campaigns on the importance of girl-child education, including relaxation of cultural taboos and constraints, social and medical complications that may accompany early marriages, teenage pregnancy should be mounted.

Keywords: Education, Girl-Child, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Education has to be viewed not as a special privilege but as fundamental human right. As a right, it is to be exercised by everyone regardless of gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, political orientation, economic disparity, nationality or geographical differences, and health barriers. Education is known to be a channel to human development. It is a channel through which knowledge, skills, character, values and attitudes are acquired and transmitted to the next generation. Education exposes one to acquire knowledge about one's environment so as to know the causes of variations in a person or persons, groups and also for sustainable development in a country (Eze and Eze, 2018). According to Okafor (2016) education is a process of acculturation through which the individual is helped to attain the development of his potentials. In another dimension, Eze & Eze (2018) described education as a process of transmitting the culture, norms, values and ethics of a given society to the younger generations.

As a life-long process, it should be accessible anywhere, anytime and under any circumstance. Such right has been ratified by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights of 1948; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and by many others. But international instruments per se are not enough nor can the education of the girl child be accomplished by mere lip services (Assefaw, 2010).

Education enables girls to make their own decisions and to influence their families positively. Education saves and improves the lives of girls and women. It allows them greater control of their lives and provides them with skills to contribute to their societal sustainable development. Educated women have already played or are still playing pivotal roles as presidents, prime ministers, chancellors or as competitive political leaders, ministers, community elders, consultants, researchers, managers, etc. in various countries. The number of influential women in international positions is also not deniable. As leaders and managers, they have attested their trustworthiness and still are doing many valuable activities in stepping up productions and had contributed their part in the sustainable development of their countries (Assefaw, 2010).

Quality education for all regardless of all circumstances brings in innovations in improving the standard of learning and increase life-long learning. Education makes people employable, brings in equity and inclusion, opens up other levels of learning and establish technical know-how or more technological advancement in life, help to curb peer influence and unnecessary quest for wealth and money. In Nigeria, it was revealed that about 9 million (37% out of School children) roam about on the street daily. Nigeria continues with high rate of out of school children every year. Out of this figure, out of school girls are the highest with about 5.5million girl child out of school (Tyokaa, et al, 2014). The level of girl child education in Nigeria is poor and shocking. This needs to be addressed. Therefore, this study examines the importance of girl-child education as a tool for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Concept of Girl-Child Education

Within the context of the Nigerian environment, several definitions of the girl-child have been given by different scholars. The national Child Welfare Policy (1989) as cited by Ada (2007) defines the girl-child as person below 14 years of age. Chibiko (2009), and Juliem, (2018) viewed the girl-child as a biological female offspring from birth to eighteen (18) years of age. This is the age before one becomes young adult. This period covers the crèche, nursery or early childhood (0–5 years), primary (6–12 years) and secondary school (12–18 years). During this period, the young child is totally under the care of the adult who may be her parents or guardians and older siblings. It is made up of infancy, childhood, early and late adolescence stages of development. During this period, the girl-child is malleable, builds and develops her personality and character. She is very dependent on the significant others, those on whom she models her behaviour through observation, repetition and imitation. Her physical, mental, social, spiritual and emotional developments start and progress to get to the peak at the young adult stage (Tyoakaa, Ifeanyichukwu & Apine, 2014).

Education is the process of providing information to an inexperienced person to help him/her develop physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, spiritually, politically and economically (Juliem, 2018). In education parlance, it means that the individual has acquired adequate and appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes and values, known as cognitive, psychomotor and affective behaviours to be able to function optimally as a citizen. These behaviours are the focus of training individuals in institutions of learning. The planned and systematic training given in an institution of learning is formal education. The programme is organized, planned and systematically implemented. In an informal education, there is no plan and the training is haphazard and incidental (Chibiko, 2009).

According to Ocho (2005), education is the process through which individuals are made functional members of their society. It is a process through which the young ones acquire knowledge and realize their potentialities and use them for self-actualization, to be useful to themselves and others. It is a means

of preserving, transmitting and improving the culture of the society. In every society education connotes acquisition of something good, something worthwhile.

Education is generally viewed as a positive force with a wide ranging impact on society and human development. This force is more unique for the girl-child who is seen as a child today but who later becomes a woman and also a mother. Educating the girl means educating the whole family. And what is true of families is also true of communities and ultimately the whole nation (UNICEF, 2004). According to Bellamy (2003) and Hadiza (2017), there can be no positive significant or sustainable transformation in societies and in fact in poverty reductions until girls receive the quality basic education they need to take their rightful place as equal partners in sustainable development.

It is worth while noting however that the purpose for women education is to enable them contribute to life, adapt to society, develop and broaden their minds and horizons, have all-round development, fill the gaps for those who did not go to school or dropped out of school, prepare young adolescents and adults to be able to cope with domestic work and family life socially, economically, and politically (Uduigwomen, 2004).

According to UNICEF (2003), education is every body's human right. It means that no girl, however poor her family or her country is, should be excluded from schooling. Educating girls is the best investment for societal development. The short and long term benefits of education to girls and the society at large include:

1. Educated girls develop essential life skills, such as: self-confidence, the ability to participate effectively in society and protect themselves from HIV/AIDS infection, sexual exploitation and pressure for early marriage and child birth.
2. Educated girls gain the skills and competencies for gainful employment, enabling them to be economically productive members of the society.
3. Educated mothers are more likely to send their children to school, thus promoting continued and lifelong learning.
4. Educated women marry later and have fewer children which they could manage and afford quality education and health.
5. Educated mothers nourish their children better, their children are therefore healthier and child mortality is reduced.
6. Educated women are less likely to die in child birth.

Review of Studies on Girl-Child Education

Ifedili, et al (2012) study the management of girl-child education in Nigerian tertiary institutions. They found out that the girl-children have faced several challenges in Nigerian universities such as rape, sexual harassment, insensitivity of some lecturers in attending to students, extortion of money, terrorism by some male students etc. Thus, these problems have seriously affected many female students from unlocking their great potentials.

Kamaldeen, et al (2012) examine the perception, attitude and practices of parents in Okene, Nigeria towards girl-child education using data gathered from a survey of 370 parents with children of school age. They found out that the perception and attitude of respondents towards girl-child education was good. Over 90% of respondents were aware that education is a child right. Over 90% of them also think that enrolling girl-child in primary school is important. Most of the respondents believed in enrolling their girl-child in primary school between the ages of two and five and about 90% of them thought that female child should be educated up to the tertiary level. There was still a lag in primary school completion among girls with a higher value when compared with the boys. The percentage of female drop out from primary school was 8.2% compared with 2.7% for males. Poverty was the major cause of female children's school dropout among respondents.

Femi (2011) investigates the challenges of girl-child education and alternative jobs in Nigeria. Data were obtained from 1,200 female children between 6–14 years of age. Findings show that 45% of girls had

dropped out of school and engaged in hawking to enhance their lives and that of their family household. They were hawking in crowded markets, hotels and at busy road junctions. There were also reported cases of child-sexual abuse in which 4% of girls performing paid housework were impregnated, resulted in clandestine abortions.

Ifijeh (2011) examines the concept of and crucial issues in girl-child education in Nigeria. The study reveals that the socio-cultural patterns, religious misconceptions, poverty, teenage pregnancy and early marriage amongst others as factors militating against the girl-child education.

Mohammed (2008) studies the problems of girl-child education in Kumbotso local government of Kano State, Nigeria. The study showed that girl-child education was bedeviled with numerous problems such as cultural gender bias and preference, poverty, ignorance, location of schools at very far distance, discrimination of girl-child in curricular offering, early and force marriages, rape and teenage pregnancy etc.

Crucial Issues in Girl-Child Education

Some of the crucial issues in girl-child education include the followings:

Access to Education

Access simply means the right to education. It is also the opportunity provided for the girl-child to be educated. Access deals with the availability, convenience and ability to be educated. It is true that many governments make provision for the education of their citizens, but the provisions most of the time do not take cognizance of the peculiarities of the girl-child. In that case the girl-child may not have access to education, which is a fundamental human right (Chibiko, 2009). Research has shown that millions of girls do not have access to school despite the concerted efforts to push the cause forward. Okeke, Nzewi and Njoku (2008) identified child labour, poverty and lack of sponsorship, quest for wealth, bereavement, truancy, broken home, engagement of children as house helps, as factors bedeviling girl-children's access to education in the UNICEF A-Field made up of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Anambra, Bayelsa, Benue, Cross River, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and River states of Nigeria.

The 2005 National School Census (NSC) revealed a net primary enrolment ratio (NER) of 83.71% (male = 87.01%; female = 81.39%) suggesting that a substantial proportion (16%) of the primary school age population (6-11 years) was not enrolled in primary schools. This may look encouraging but there are large geographical and gender disparities between the south and north regions of Nigeria, partly due to underlying socio-cultural factors. Girls' NER in some states in the South are as high as 70% while some in the north are as low as 24%. The picture is worse in secondary schools with the national female enrolment ratio at 44%. The regional breakdown shows an alarming disparity with girls NER of 60% in the south-west while the North West shows a dismal 10% (Akunga, 2010).

NBS (2010) conducted a study on National Literacy Survey which reveals that girl-children access to education was still lagging behind their boy-children counterparts with females' access of 81.2% lower than that of males' access 88.1%.

Retention and Dropout

UNICEF (2004) report indicates that girls' education leads to more equitable development, stronger families, better services, better child health and effective participation in governance. Despite the obvious benefits of Education to national development, research findings indicate that girls' dropout rate from school is higher than that of boys. Osakwe, Osagie, Madunagu and Usman (1995) observed that Nigerian girls, for various reasons bordering on religious, cultural, socio-economic and school related factors, are not given a fair chance in the educational sector. In Nigeria, about 7.3 million children do not go to school, of which 62% are girls (UNICEF 2004). The same UNICEF report indicates that girls' primary school completion rate is far behind that of boys, at 76% compared with 85% for boys. This gender gap means that millions of more girls than boys are dropping out of school each year. This goes to show that the majority of children not in school are girls. UNICEF (2003) showed a worrisome report from sub-Saharan Africa where the number of girls out of school rose from 20 million in 1990 to 24 million in

2002. The report also indicated that 83% of all girls out of school in the world live in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific.

Mohammed (2004) equally reported that a girl may be withdrawn from school if a good marriage prospect arises. Early marriage is a socio-cultural factor that hinders the girl child's access to school. Some parents, in an attempt to protect their teenage daughters, give them out to wealthy old friends. Some of these girls who attempt to escape from such forced marriages end up in disaster. Efforts should be made to ensure that girls go to school and complete their schooling.

According to Egbochuku (2002), efforts made to ensure that adolescent girls who re-enrolled in school are retained with a view to acquiring education will permanently close the door to poverty and ignorance and at the same time open that of prosperity in terms of economic buoyancy, social advancement and civilization.

Alika and Egbochuku (2009) found that the socio-economic status of the girls imposes considerable constraints upon their continuing stay in school. In fact, they asserted that a girl's particular socio-economic inheritance may have a direct and important effect on educational attainment.

Girl-Child Education and Sustainable Development

The Sustainable Human Development approach emphasizes the participation of all segments of the population claiming that the eradication of the imbalance between sexes with respect to education, economy, cultures to mention but a few are pre-condition for achieving long lasting and sustainable development (Grace, 2012).

It is equally believed that all nations have to educate their citizens, male or female to achieve a meaningful sustainable development. Therefore, there is no gainsaying the fact that education opens doors to economic and social prosperity to a given nation, spurred by a dynamic workforce and well-informed citizenry able to compete and co-operate in the global arena (Ibrahim, 2012).

Nigeria as a nation in dire need of sustainable development equally believes that worthwhile development and progress can only take place in the country when its citizens are well educated and fully equipped to use their education as a means of solving the diverse and complex problem facing the country. For instance, many of the developed nations which have a long tradition of formal and non-formal education have succeeded, in large measures, in overcoming many of their national problems such as ignorance, poverty, disease (like HIV/AIDS) infant/maternal mortality as well as social and political issues. These were done through a deliberate educational policy and a programme of national development (Ibrahim, 2012).

The platform for action adopted in Beijing in the year 1995 underlines education as a human right and as an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace. Non-discriminatory education benefits both girls and boys, and thus ultimately contributes to more equal relationships between women and men. Equality of access and attainment of educational qualifications is necessary if more women are to become agents of change. Literacy of women is an important key to improving health, nutrition and education in the family and empowers women in decision making in society. Investing in formal and non-formal education and training for women, has an exceptional high social and economic return, and has proved to be one of the best means of achieving sustainable development and economic growth (Assefaw, 2010).

In addition, educating women is like educating the next generations because they are the ones who are shouldered with the responsibility of training, educating and bringing up the next generations and thus, has proved to be one of the best means of achieving economic growth and sustainable development in the society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion this study examines the importance of girl-child education as a tool for sustainable development in Nigeria. The study found out that girl-child education is bedeviled with several problems

ranging from cultural gender bias and preference, poverty, ignorance, religious misconceptions, teenage pregnancy and early marriage amongst others as factors militating against the girl-child education in the study area. However, when the girl-children are denied their full rights to education, it affects the society in its entirety, as no society is sure of its future when the girl-children are denied their rights to education. Also, Nigeria cannot expect to prosper and hold its place in the 21st century among nations of the world, since so many of these children will continue to progress to adulthood poorly educated, frustrated and bound to face uncertainties in the future. Indeed, Nigeria's underdevelopment is no doubt both a product of inappropriate education and lack of adequate opportunities afforded to the girl-child to acquire functional education. The negative result of this situation is sustainable development will become slow since some of these girl-children are denied their rights to education and they will grow-up not contributing their quarters towards the nation building and sustainable development of their country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study hence, recommends the following;

1. Public enlightenment campaigns on the importance of girl-child education, including relaxation of cultural taboos and constraints, social and medical complications that may accompany early marriages, teenage pregnancy should be mounted.
2. Poverty in the country should be reduced to a minimum barest level so that parents could afford to send their girl-children to school.
3. More female teachers should be recruited to serve as a role model for the girl-children.

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