

STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In all countries of the world, education is now recognized as the main vehicle for promoting and improving the status of girl-child. The new interests in the education of a girl-child are part of general awakening that has taken place during the last two decades. The realization now is that sustainable human development cannot be effective if half of the human race (the girl-child) remains ignorant marginalized and discriminated against. This paper therefore focuses in the barriers to girl-child education in Nigeria and the possible strategies to eradicate the prevailing problems.

Introduction

The convention of the rights of child defines 'child' as any one below the age of 18. Girl child education is part of the gender issues in education. Girls in developing countries particularly Nigeria live in environments, societies and cultures that are diverse. Yet, their disadvantaged situation is basically similar wherever they might live. They are more likely to be born into discrimination, be undervalued in comparison to their brothers, be exploited and considered transitory members of their families and serve as helpers to their over-burdened mothers from a very early stage (African Centre for Women, 1998).

The concern about the situation of children throughout the world culminated in the convention of the rights of child in 1989. The double vulnerability and negative impact felt throughout one's life of being female and a child led United Nation International Children and Education Fund (UNICEF) to bring more attention to the special needs and constraints on the girl-child as a separate area of concern. The African Platform for Action for Advancement of Women (1994:4) listed four main objectives of giving special attention to the girl-child and they are:-

- i. To eliminate discrimination against girls in areas of education and training, health and nutrition among others.
- ii. To advocate for elimination of negative cultural attitudes and practices against women and girls.
- iii. To enhance the capacities and esteem of girls especially those with the needs.
- iv. To sensitize the girl-child about social, economic and political issues and problems.

Therefore, to universalize this, the United Nation organized series of conferences on woman/girl child in 1975 at Mexico City, 1980 at Copenhagen, 1985 at Nairobi, 1990 at Jomtien, 1993 at Ouagadougou, Burkinafaso and 1994 in Kampal. The central theme of all these conferences has been the need to raise the status of girl-child/women and bring them into the development process as equal partners with boys/men. African Common position for Advancement of Women (1984) stated that the girl child of today is the women of tomorrow. Then, the women are facing the same vulnerable conditions too in the societies. Consequently, the above aforementioned basis could be traced through the factors that hinder the girl-child having access to education in Nigeria. The barriers will be discussed below.

Barriers to Girl Education in Nigeria

The hindrance of girls' education in Nigeria anchors on various factors-cultural, societal and economic. These can be viewed from early marriage and child bearing, house hold duties, parents' perceptions that schooling is more beneficial for their sons than for their daughters, worries about girls' safety outside the village environment and limited job opportunities for women in sectors that require higher education. These barriers loom large in many states and communities.

Cultural factor also acts as barrier is the education of the girl-child. Many of the cultural and traditional practices advocated for the girl-child by their societies and families stem from the belief that females are inferior and must be controlled as well as prepared for their main role- to be wives and mothers. Cultural inhibitions are closely tied with religious affiliations and traditional practices. For instance, in many of the predominantly Moslem states where gender gap is marketing high in Sokoto and Zamfara, girls are traditionally prevented from accessing formal school environments as a consequence of erroneous interpretation of religious injunctions. The betrothal of the girls for marriage at early age also hinders school attendance and retention. This is closely tied with teenage pregnancy. To support this assertion, Ezio (2003) stated that about 30% of the teenagers drop out of school has already begun bearing child before the age of 18. However, this practice is becoming unfashionable in homes with educated parents.

Societal influence also impedes girls' education. In rural areas, many Nigerian parents prefer to enroll the boy-child in school instead of the girl-child especially in large families where fund are limited. This is because they (parents) believe that education is more important for the boy-child and less for the girl-child. Gender roles in homes and society at large are stereotyped with the girl-child made to do greater proportion of household chores. This lack the reserve energy and spare time makes real participation in development of her community and self development through education and training impossible even if the opportunity is available. Some parents argue that investing in the girl-child is equivalent to investing for the benefit of the family she will marry into while investment on the boy-child will be to the benefit of his family.

It is also worth mentioning that there is apparently gender bias in favor of boys in the number of schools or educational establishment set up by government or community for example in Agulu where the researcher comes from the boys school came into existence before the girls thereby giving ahead start to boy child in terms of access.

In the case of classroom observation in Nigeria, Ohiri-Aniche (1988) indicated that both male and female teachers do not give girls enough opportunity for classroom participation. For example, in Science classroom interactions in Nigeria primary and secondary schools, girls are given less time on task than boys (Ezio, 2003).

Harsh and intimidation classroom interactions engender fears in pupils and hatred for school. These factors hinder the performance of the girl-child. Moreover, the gender stereotypes in educational system only indicate that there are masculine subjects such as Mathematics, Science and Technology while feminine subjects are Home Economics, Secretarial Studies and Literature.

Economic factor is another area of impediment to the education of girls. The economic barriers are largely associated with parental poverty. With about 70% of the populace being poor most especially in the rural communities and urban ghetto settlement, the inclination is to deploy the girl-child to income generating activities rather than to school. Thus, during school hours, it is common to see more girls than boys hawking in the streets or in markets selling wares. In the process of hawking, they are exposed to all sorts of abuse including sexual abuse and the dangers of contracting HIV/AIDs and other sexual transmitted disease. However, the processes in which the government, non-governmental organization and educational philanthropist sought to tackle the problems are discussed next.

Programmes Adopted to improve Girls Education in Nigeria

Enrolment rates for girls at the primary and secondary school level have increased in some states in Nigeria due to several education programmes adopted- Universal Primary Education (UPE), National Mass Literacy Campaign (NMLC) and Universal Basic Education (UBE). These programmes were launched and implemented on the basis to educate every Nigerian and eradicate illiteracy.

In September 1976, Nigeria launched the UBE scheme for all children (boys/girls) between the ages of 6 and 11 years. The education of primary school age girls was further emphasized in the National policy on education (revised 1981) which said that special efforts would be made to encourage parents to send their daughters to school. This emphasis indicates the seriousness of the federal government as per girl-child education. The federal government (1988) re-echoed the theme on the blue print on women education. Other stated objectives in the blue print include the advancement of girls' education especially in the areas of science, technology and mathematics and the industrialization of measures to discourage the withdrawal of girls from various level of educational system for whatsoever reason.

On 8th September 1982, national Mass Literacy was launched. The main thrust of the programme was to eliminate illiteracy through vigorous sustained two pronged campaigns to universalize primary education for children (boys/girls) and adults (men/women) on a massive scale.

Education of girls received a further boost when Nigerian government endorsed the goals of the Jomtien conference of 1990 on Education For All (EFA) by the year 2000. Subsequently, in 1993 Nigeria re-established the National Primary Education commission (NPEC) which had dissolved in 1991 and gave it the responsibility for pursuing EFA goals at the primary level (Ohiri-Aniche, 1998).

Moreover, the Family Support Programme (FSP) which initiated in 1994 launched a programme intervention in Basic Education. The Federal Ministry of Education (FME) (1994) in blue print on family support basic education programme which was launched in 1988 stated that one of its key area in primary education and among its special target groups is also the girl-child.

UBE was launched on 30th September 1999. The aim of the scheme is to offer free, compulsory and qualitative education to Nigerian children in and out of school with the intention of arresting poverty and eradicating illiteracy in the country (FME, 2000). Thereafter, the FG in conjunction with the donor agencies such as the British Council, UNESCO, UNDP, Fond Foundation and UNICEF have also played active roles in the promotion of female education at various categories and thus contributed to the rise of the girl-child enrolment. Upon all these measures, the problem still exist and why it still continues will be dealt with below.

Justification of the Problem's Persistence

Conversely, all the effort of the FG in launching and adopting various programmes and the contribution of international donor agencies over the girl-child/ women folks) education, their missions and various are yet not attained. This is caused by various factors as illiteracy among women folks, traditional attitudes towards female group and prevalent problems facing developing countries-instability of government and insufficient political will.

Illiteracy has been the greatest cankerworm which has eaten deeply in us and devastated the implementation of various wonderful policies of developing countries. Illiteracy has a positive relationship with poverty. For example since illiteracy is highly rated among the women therefore illiterate mothers will raise illiterate daughters who will marry early and have no access to education if their husbands do not comply. Poverty prevents many families from enrolling all or some of their children in school or forces them to withdrawn their children especially their daughters prematurely from school because of the cost of education or the need to put them to work either within or outside the home

However, the frequent military coups and changes of government since independence have left their toll on the education sector making it difficult to pursue and implement educational policies in consistent manner. Lack of continuity has been one of the main stumbling blocks towards realizing the attainment of the goals. Also, insufficient political will to translate into reality the formal commitments to ensuring unversed access to quality basic education. To a large extent, up-service has been paid to establishes goals and policy prescriptions by successive government. To remove all these flaws require re-orientation of Nigerian attitudes toward government affairs. This will tend to strategies for enhancing girl-child education.

Strategies for enhancing Girl-Child Education

Uneducated and under- educated girls are robbed of the opportunity to improve their own lives. Denying them their right to quality education effectively denies them all other human rights and shrinks the chances of succeeding generations particularly the chances of their daughters to develop to their fullest potential. To avert this and increase the chances of all girls having access to quality education in Nigeria, the following steps need to be taken. The strategies can be achieved from the three ties of government, community based

organization and non-governmental organization and various companies/employers should provide girl-child more access to scholarships to enable them attend schooling particularly those from poor families in rural or marginalize areas. Giving scholarship to well performing workers for sending their daughters to school will increase girl-child enrolment in schools.

Government, community based organization and non-governmental organization should provide non-formal education in terms of literacy/vocational lessons in their various local government constituency for girls and their mothers. Okpoka (2000) indicated that when women are taught practical numeracy and literacy or basic skills needed of their daughters being educated. Government and private sectors should build schools or conduction lessons close to girls homes. This will support access to (enrolment, retention and completion) and quality education for the girls in their communities. This should go with building and maintaining of schools, toilets for girls etc for example satellite schools should be established in strategic centers such as markets, village halls etc to provide illiterate women with a second chance of basic education at times that do not clash with their jobs or apprenticeships. This can help to sought out the problem of mainstreaming illiteracy from mothers to daughters.

Increase in the job opportunities for young female starters/ vocational training in the private sectors combined with life skill education can sensitive parents and communities about the importance of girls' education. Also, an improvement in income earning potentials of the women and young girls will enhance the sensitive and motivate the parents enrolling their girl to schools.

Private sector should provide medical insurance to their female employers, pay them child-allowances and grant them maternity leave as it is done in government sectors. One may ask how this can be a strategy. It can be in the sense that the women esteem will be raised and felt in the community.

Primary education can be offered free in all ramifications without extorting dues like Parents Teachers Association (PTA) levy, compulsory deposit levy and couple with transport fee. All these fees scare the parents away from sending their daughters to school especially when the resources are scarce and in the face of competing needs, the boys are chosen.

Government policies which force girls out of school on the ground of pregnancy should be eliminated. The private sectors can build homes where these girls should be housed for the period before they deliver their children. After delivery, the girl goes back to school without being exposed to any psychological trauma still uphold her self-respect and self-esteem. Example of such home is at Eke-Alumona, girl-child home established by catholic dioceses in Enugu state.

Plan instruction during hours when household chores and agricultural demands are not competing for their time and energy and provide support for the care so that the younger siblings of girls can be looked after.

Conclusion

On the whole, girls' education has been riddled with a lot of barriers ranging from parental to societal attitude. These have impeded girls' education to a very large extent. A number of strategies have been proffered to take care of these impediments. These range from using companies and community based organizations to bring about awareness as well as financial assistance to females in education. In addition, the various tiers of government viz local,

state and federal governments could also jointly bring about a new focus in the education of the girl-child.

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