

Educating the Girl-Child for social development in Nigeria: Implications for gender equality

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ABSTRACT: Importance of Girl-Child education has become a frontline issue in many discourses held globally in recent times. The premium placed on the Girl-Child's education is a result of several awareness/enlightenment campaigns on the need for the Girl-Child to assume her rightful place in society. The illiteracy of the Girl-Child has chain effects on the family; which is the primary agent of socialization and the society in general. For social development to be rightly positioned in Nigeria and to result in the overall development of the nation, the Girl-Child must become an active player in the society. The paper concludes that the Girl-Child having been denied education due to a lot of reasons surrounding her sex must be given educational opportunities like her male counterparts to enable her fulfill her potentials as a member of the Nigerian society in line with the Child Right's Act of 2003 and recommends amongst others that early marriages and other cultural practices which denies the Girl-Child her right to education should be eradicated for optimum growth of the female child through education.

Keywords: Child's Right Act, education, Girl-Child, social development goals, millennium development goals, Nigeria, universal human rights declaration.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, education has been recognized as the best channel for the development of individuals and the society. This is because an educated populace is enlightened and has awareness of human rights and consequences of its abuse amongst others. The Federal Government of Nigeria having known this has declared in its National Policy on Education that education is regarded as an instrument per excellence for social and economic reconstruction of the nation (FRN, 2014). The Government goes further to explain education as key to the realization of Nigeria's collective aspiration of being among the top 20 developed nations of the world by year 2020. In as much as the year 2020 has passed and the world is in 2023, the questions to be asked are what makes some nations developed and other nations developing or underdeveloped and why is Nigeria not among the developed nations of the world? One obvious answer to the above questions is the huge investment made on human capital development especially through education

by developed countries and vice versa in developing and underdeveloped countries. Developed countries of the world commit heavily to elements that will improve standards of living, promote human life and dignity and secure livelihoods. For instance, the United Nations has said that at least 26% of a country's annual budget should be given to education but the facts show that between the years 2011-2021, allocation to the education sector in Nigeria has been between 5.6%- 9.06% (Premium times in Uyanga and Archibong, 2021). It is even more worrisome that the budget of 2022 saw the education sector received an allocation of 5.4%, a far cry from the 8.4% equivalent to 1.14 trillion naira which UNICEF says should have been given (Tyessi, 2022) with the compounding problems facing Nigeria where the naira exchange rate keeps on dropping against the dollar.

Developing nations are remarkably different from developed and industrialized nations in terms of presence of infrastructure, use of technology and even in the

utilization of the human components of the society. In many parts of the world, women leaders are seen to be emerging as Heads of States and Government, Prime Ministers and Members of Parliament. Women occupy very sensitive positions in Government, Industries, Financial houses and the likes. This can inevitably be linked to their educational qualifications and prowess which has set them up to play these role(s) effectively. Lawal and Wahab (2011) aver that education is the most important instrument to enhance human capabilities and to achieve desired objectives of socio and economic development. In Nigeria today, however, there are many impediments or obstacles in the way of the development of the girl-child. She is a victim of obnoxious cultural and religious practices, poverty and general abuse and these are major distractions and disturbances that do not allow her to achieve her fullest potential and become a force to reckon with in the Nigerian society. In developing nations, the active workforce is generally made up of more males than females in secondary and tertiary occupations such as banking and mining, to mention a few, while primary occupations such as farming; fishing and trading are dominated by women who are mostly illiterate and semi-literate rural dwellers. The relegation of women to the background in developing nations has witnessed a lot of attendant problems ranging from illiteracy and poverty to social exclusion, under development and utilization of their potentials to be leaders in their homes and in the society at large.

Developed nations on the other hand, knowing the essence of having a balanced workforce of both productive and functional males and females have keyed into education of both genders for the maximization of the benefits of an enlightened manpower to propel development in their societies. Therefore, in these societies, males and females are provided equal opportunities to aspire in different sectors of the society. There is therefore a need to fast track development in Nigeria by a renewed and conscious effort to promote human capital development through heavy investment in education for both boys and girls. The following subheadings will be discussed: the concepts of education, Girl-Child education and its importance, the concept of social development, and the implications of Girl-Child education for gender equality.

THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATION

Education is a process of equipping individuals with relevant knowledge, skills and requisite attitudes to function effectively in any given society. The concept of education has been defined by Ibia and Ette (2011) as any process by which an individual gains knowledge and insight or develops attitudes or skills. It is a process and system of providing information, knowledge, skills and training with an aim of changing a condition and situation (Gowon in Collins, 2014). Peters (1966) in Amaele (2000)

opines that for any process to be termed education; it must have the following criteria:

1. Education implies the transmission of what is worthwhile to those committed to it.
2. Education must involve knowledge and understanding as well as some kind of cognition which are not inert.
3. Education must at least rule out some procedures of transmission on the grounds that they lack willingness and voluntariness on the part of the learner.

From the above views, it is obvious that education aims at moulding an individual and equipping him with what it takes to become a productive and functional member of society. The willingness of those committed to it must be met with an equal amount of commitment on the part of the educator to foster, equip and imbibe what is considered worthwhile in the individual for the good of the society. Every child has a right education which will help them to develop themselves first and contribute meaningfully to the development of the society. Article 26 of the UNDR declaration of 1948 emphasizes that everyone has a right to education which shall be free at least in the elementary and fundamental stages (United Nations General Assembly). Nigeria is a signatory to many international charters and treaties of the United Nations such as Education For All, Millennium Development Goals and the Social Development Goals. Being a signatory to the above already places a commitment on the Government to ensure that it provides the necessary opportunities and puts in place all requirements to guarantee meeting its obligation. In 2003, Nigeria domesticated the UN convention on Rights of the Child and the African charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child when the National Assembly passed the Child's Right Act into law (Nwozor and Okhilo, 2022). The Child's Right Act guarantees the right of all children in Nigeria. Subsections 11 and 15 discuss the Right to the dignity of the child and the Right to free, compulsory and universal primary education. Every child irrespective of age, sex, religious or ethnic sentiments has dignity which must be protected by all relevant authorities and bodies. One of the best ways to achieve this protection of human dignity is through making education available for all and not denying anyone based on sentiments of any kind.

The education of the Girl-Child has continued to face deep rooted issues which pose as obstacles to her achieving her all round development and functionality.

THE CONCEPT OF THE GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION

The education of the girl-child has continued to face deep rooted issues which pose as obstacles to her achieving her all round development and functionality when compared with her male counterpart. Girl-Child education can be viewed as the education given to females by the family, school and other agents of socialization in the society to

enable them develop their potentials to become useful to themselves and the society as a whole. It can also be seen as educational provisions made available to females to make them become productive and fulfilled members in the society they live.

Across cultures, the Girl-Child has been made a victim of many inhumane circumstances as a result of her sex at birth. The Girl-Child is victimized, abused and relegated to the background as a result of her gender. In Africa, inclusive of Nigeria, many cultures believe that educating a woman is a waste of resources as she will eventually get married and leave her father's house. In the words of Collins (2014) with regards to the above, especially in Jos North, the author writes:

“since it is believed that the right place for women is in the kitchen, some parents have considered it not necessary to provide equal educational opportunities with their male counterparts.... any amount of money spent on their daughters education is regarded as a waste, since she will end up in the kitchen or in somebody's house” p.135.

Still in Nigeria, the girl-child faces many obstacles more often in the North than in the Southern part. This is as a result of their cultural and religious practices. Nwozor and Okhilo (2022) affirm that the patriarchal system in Northern Nigeria which is strengthened by the embedded influence of cultural and religious norms tends to favour practices that oppress, subjugate and exploit women. This therefore restricts educational opportunities of the girl-child through the practices of child betrothal and early marriage. It is not uncommon to find videos and read about how the Girl-Child was stopped from going to school and sent into an early marriage on social media platforms. UNICEF in 2014 quoted in Agusiobo (2018) posits that 10.5 million children in Nigeria are out of school and approximately 60% of this statistics are girls. This ought not to be so especially when the human rights edict and child's right laws are considered.

Other actions which pose as challenges to the Girl-Child education include poverty, trafficking of women and girls and most recently, kidnapping. Poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities and a violation of human dignity. It means a lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society (Ucha, 2010). Trafficking of women in all its ramifications is tantamount to the debasement of womanhood (Akor, 2011) and Kidnapping of females from school especially in the North has seen parents preferring to have their children uneducated and safe than kidnapped or dead (Obahopo and Arenyeka in Onyido, 2019). With the above happenings, the Girl Child's education is at risk as many parents will accept to give out their female children in marriage as opposed to carrying the burden that comes with their education. It is therefore common to see premium being placed on male children and investments such as education made available to them.

When the Girl-Child is not educated, she becomes socially excluded, marginalized, abused and ineffective in coping with the expectations of living in a contemporary global world. Todaro and Smith (2009) have stated three core values of development to include:

1. Sustenance: the ability to meet basic needs;
2. Self-Esteem: to be a person; and
3. Freedom from servitude: to be able to choose.

Denying the Girl-Child education is in complete negation of the above because she will lack the ability to meet her basic needs (sustenance), have a low self-esteem (by viewing herself as an inferior person to others) and also lack the capacity to choose among given alternatives, thereby making her a prisoner to ignorance and savage ways of life (freedom from servitude). The Girl-Child does not have to beg for a living when her education can turn things around for her. Ballara (2002) and Ottaway (2000) in Kobani (2015) write that education of the Girl-Child is vital to any sustainable development since her education affords her the opportunity to take advantage of family planning resulting in fewer births and less social and economic burdens. It enables her gain employment which gives her capacity to earn and contribute to the financial needs of her family and increases her productivity in any of the sectors she finds herself; whether formal or informal. The education of the Girl-Child also positively impacts on the political space as seen today with women occupying various offices and serving competently in government and other administrative capacities. The likes of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Present Director General of the World Trade Organization comes to the fore as her non-denial of education opportunities and other human rights set her up for the assignments which she is effectively carrying out today. Therefore, denying the Girl-Child education is a great abuse of her right to education, which is a human right and ultimately a great affront to justice which in the words of Plato in Uyanga (2014), is “the greatest good”. When the Girl-Child is denied her right to education, it abuses the principle of social justice which places emphasis on the just and fair distribution of social goods and services, of which education is part, to ensure the survival of individuals in an environment that promotes good standards and qualitative living of individuals (Uyanga, 2014).

Importance of Girl-Child education

The young Girl-Child today becomes the adult female tomorrow. She will grow up to become a professional, a wife and a mother, a model and hence a major stakeholder in the life and future of her off springs, both biological and adopted. When a Girl-Child is educated, the society stands to gain positively as she, knowing the essence and value of education is placed in a better position to provide necessary assistance to her husband in the education of

their children. An educated mother is intellectually sound, socially active and is able to understand and avoid the complexities that are associated with illiteracy by advising others especially her own on the need to acquire an education. Some complexities associated with illiteracy include poverty, social exclusion, being passive in matters that define one's personality, infant and maternal mortality, and complications such as VVF that can result from sexual relations with under aged girls usually seen occurring more frequently in the North, where early marriages are a common practice. Illiteracy excludes women from political engagement, affects women's ability to earn a livelihood thereby exposing them to increased risk of exploitation and insecure employment and can also lead to increase in gender based violence (International Women's Development Age, 2018). Education enlightens the Girl-Child and prepares her to be more politically active, more conscious of her rights and become more active in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy where she is able to gain employment. Todaro and Smith (2009) list out four desirable reasons for education of women (Girl-Child); these reasons are:

1. The rate of return on women's education is higher than that of men in most developing countries.
2. Increasing women's education not only increases their productivity on the farm and in the factory but also results in greater labour force participation, later marriage, lower fertility and greatly improved child health and nutrition.
3. Improved child health and nutrition and more educated mothers lead to multiplier effects on the quality of a nation's human resources for many generations to come.
4. Because women carry a disproportionate burden of poverty and landlessness that permeates developing societies, any significant improvements in their role and status through education can have an impact in breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and inadequate schooling.

The above stated reasons point to the fact that educating the Girl-Child comprehensively is not a "wasted venture" as viewed by most cultures but is even an added value since its effects are manifold and obvious. Among the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) adopted in September 2000, by the 189 member countries of the United Nations; eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education and promoting gender equality and empowering women are goals 1, 2 and 3 (Todaro and Smith, 2009, Lomazzi *et al*, 2014). In the words of Idoko in Collins (2014), investment in girls' education most likely will yield some of the highest returns on all development investment by generating both private and social benefits that accrue to individuals, families and society at large.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

The success of every nation lies in the well-being of every individual of that nation. This is the reason the government of Nigeria aims at improving the social development of its citizens in order to help them to be self-actualized and in turn develop the nation. Social development is the evolution and improvement in the living conditions of individuals in society and it consists of development of a country's human and social capital (The Black Sheep Community, 2023). It means investing in people and requires the removal of barriers so that all citizens can journey towards their dreams with confidence and dignity (Economic and Social Inclusion, 2008-2009). It cuts across empowerment schemes through education, various training programmes and providing incentives to help individuals aspire to become better and improve their quality of life both qualitatively and quantitatively. Social development in Nigeria in recent years of her nascent democracy has been vigorously pursued by succeeding Federal Governments. They include the following:

- Initiation of YOUWIN programme in 2011 under former President Goodluck Jonathan. The Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YOUWIN) programme was established to generate over 100,000 jobs for innovative unemployed youths across the country in the course of three years and today many women who benefitted from the programme have become great entrepreneurs locally and internationally (Oladayo, 2015).
- In 2012, still under the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan, the Public Works and Women and Youth Empowerment Programme was launched with the goal of employing 370,000 youths in year 2012 with 30% of the jobs reserved for women. The Programme also supported the education of female children across the country (Oladayo, 2015).
- In 2014, with the G-WIN scheme of Goodluck Jonathan, 1000 women were trained in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills. The aim according to the Federal Government through his Minister of Communication Technology, Dr..Omobola Johnson was to empower Nigerian girls and women through its ICT gender empowerment initiatives (Okwuke, 2014). This was for wealth creation and to be able to live in a world that is technologically driven thereby resulting in the improvement of their socio-economic wellbeing.
- In 2015, the Federal Government computerized education in the country with the introduction of the Computer-based test (CBT) which was made mandatory for all UTME candidates (Tijani, 2015). This was and is still targeted at the social development of individuals in line with global best practices.
- In 2018, the Federal Government launched the school

feeding programme for Children, both male and female in public primary schools to help encourage basic education and improve it nationwide (Seun, 2021). This act witnessed a boost in the education of children in public schools.

- In 2019, Government through its four cluster programmes of N-Power, Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), the National Home Grown School feeding Programme (NHGSFP) and the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme (CCT) directly and indirectly impact the lives of poor Nigerians. Through the N-Power scheme, thousands of graduates have benefitted a sum of N30,000 being paid as monthly stipend for a period of two years after being deployed to acquire a skill(s) in Health, Education, Agric and ICT institution (Onyishi, 2019; Lamidi *et al.*, 2021).
- Approval for the establishment of six new Colleges of Education (one for each geopolitical zone), six new Federal Polytechnics and six new federal Science and Technical Colleges (FSTC) in 2020 to help breed female technicians, engineers and scientists who will contribute to the development of the nation (Idris, 2021)

The above and many more have continued to lead many Nigerians to become better equipped, self-reliant and also contribute to the growth and development of the Nigerian society. Social development in Nigeria under former President Goodluck Jonathan witnessed the investment and involvement of the females in government in large numbers. In his administration, he introduced 35% female appointments in government positions. Among the female members who were in his administration were Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Miriam Aloma Mukhtar; Nigeria's first female Chief Justice of the Federal Republic, Diezani Alison-Madueke, Stella Oduah, Joy Ogwu; Nigeria's representative at the United Nations and Viola Onwuliri among others.

Generally, the Copenhagen Social Summit of the United Nations in 1995 defined social development in terms of three basic criteria. These are:

1. Poverty eradication
2. Employment generation and
3. Social harmony

The above are indices of social development which have been broken down into different brackets by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) covers the Human Development Index (HDI) which focuses on life longevity, knowledge and decent standard of living; Human Poverty Index (HPI) which is based on assessing basic survival statistics, educational levels-showing the percentage of illiterates and sustainability. The last of the indices-Gender-related Development Index (GDI) measures all the above in terms of inequality between men

and women.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) of 2000 has been followed up by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) of 2016 with the aim to build on the success of the MDG's and ensure sustainable social and economic progress worldwide. The Sustainable Development Goals which have been proposed to be achieved by 2030 by the United Nations Development Programme has seventeen (17) goals. Goals number 1, 4 and 5 are particularly relevant in this article as they address No Poverty, Quality Education and Gender Equality respectively.

From the above, there is an indication that the Federal Government of Nigeria is making efforts to promote social development of its citizens and meet the goals of the MDGs And SDGs as stated above but a lot more investments need to be made in a country of over 200million people for a better future especially for the Girl-Child.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY FOR ATTAINING GENDER EQUALITY

1. Educating the Girl-Child in Nigeria will provide an equal opportunity for females to develop themselves intellectually, financially, socially and otherwise thereby making them grow in positive terms by reducing the gender gap in literacy level. This in turn will mean reduced rates of infant and child mortality, better care of the family through safer health practices and good parenting and contributions to the growth of the family which is the contribution to the growth of the society in the long run. This will promote national development. It has been noted that the infant mortality rate of babies whose mothers have received primary education is half that of children whose mothers are illiterates (Ojo, 2019).
2. Educating the Girl-Child will make her equally competent as her male counterparts and will enable her perform effectively in the discharge of her duties. This will result in more balance between the male and female gender as the gap of inequality in terms of poverty and social exclusion will be reduced drastically. This is affirmed in the position that through proper education of women like their male partners, hidden intrinsic potentials and qualities in them would be discovered and the individual is empowered (Wosu and Ejire, 2013).
3. Girl-Child education is linked with better reproductive health, reduction of HIV/AIDS and other diseases globally. This means that a healthy Girl-Child is the bedrock of a healthy nation. Implying that even the survival of the male gender in the society is dependent on women's reproductive health and sanitation practices. The above is in line with the submission by Ojo (2019) that education increases a woman's (and

her partner and the family's) level of health and health awareness.

4. Educating the Girl-Child will equip her with the needed competence to vie for elected positions in governance in the country, thereby making her an effective representative of her people. According to Barber's democratic theory quoted in Oputa *et al.* (2019), participatory democracy is an expression of a strong democracy; a form of government in which all people (including women) participate in decision making and implementation. Girl-Child education is seen as the best investment any nation can make in order to enhance productivity and good governance of her nation (Sule and Kongwai, 2019)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Education holds the key between self-awareness and ignorance among individuals. The Girl-Child deserves the opportunity to be heard as well as be seen in the society in which she lives. She should not be a victim of her gender and therefore be given the necessary support and approval to become an acceptable and productive member of society. The Girl-Child should be a decision maker in the affairs of society and not just be burdened with the adverse effects of those decisions made by "significant others- her male counterparts". Educating the Girl-Child is the gateway to solving myriad problems witnessed in Nigeria today. Therefore, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. The legislative arm of government has a responsibility of making policies to ensure the legal backing of the right to education of the Girl-Child in Nigeria and other developing countries of the world.
2. The executive arm of government has to follow up with the implementation of the above policies by ensuring that the Girl-Child is as educated as her male counterpart by actually providing scholarships to encourage parents to send their female children to school.
3. Early marriages and other cultural and religious practices that deny the Girl-Child her right to education should be eradicated for optimum growth of the female child through enlightenment and self-awareness which education provides.
4. The 2016 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations should be vigorously pursued with workable strategies put in place to practically outline how these goals can be achieved. Achievement of these goals will go a long way to place the Girl-Child in the front row of the affairs of society and will make her an active and not a passive participant in a democratic society like Nigeria.
5. National Orientation Agencies (NOA) through the media (print and electronic) must embark on sensitization campaigns on the need to eradicate all

forms of victimization, abuse of human rights, servitude and social exclusion of the Girl-Child in the family and the society at large. This will enable the Girl-Child to assume her rightful place in the political, social and economic affairs of the society.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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