

IMPERATIVES OF ENHANCING ACCESS OF THE GIRL-CHILD TO QUALITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

UGBE THERESA BEYIN (PhD)

Department of Continuing Education and Development Education

E-Mail: thessyugbe@gmail.com

AKPAMA VICTORIA SIMON (PhD)

Department of Social Studies and Civic Education

University of Calabar, Calabar

E-Mail: vickysweetakpama@gmail.com

USHIE, GODWIN BESHIBESHEBE (PhD)

Department of Continuing Education and Development Education

E-Mail: godwinushie101@gmail.com

Abstract

Education is the bedrock of every society; as it serves as a path through which human and non-human transformation is envisaged, guaranteed and achieved. Through education, lives are secured including those of children. Children come as a gift with great inner potentials. Education (especially formal education) therefore serves as the mechanism needed to nurture and prepare them, to optimally precipitate these potentials in order to impact on themselves and humanity positively. Without formal education, children are not only denied the opportunity to develop their full potentials but also denied the opportunity to live productive lives, impact on themselves, their families, societies and the world at large. Despite numerous gains recorded with, regards to education in terms of enrolment, there is still gender disparity in education. Therefore, this study centered on imperatives of enhancing access of the girl-child to quality education in Nigeria with specific focus on concepts of girl-child, girl-child education, theoretical perspective, negative economic, socio-cultural and health practices against girl-child education, ways of enhancing the girl-child education, benefits of girl-child, education and recommendations.

Keywords: Girl-child, Girl-child education, access and quality education.

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Introduction

Children are gift from God and the hope for continuity without them, posterity will suffer in despair and despondence as regard human race. When they are birth, their journey into becoming responsible adults and able to fulfill their destinies, is anchors on training and education. This is so required to achieve these functions optimally mendless of their sex or gender.

Education according to Balogun (2010) is the light without which the world will be in darkness. Education helps to build children into individuals with high self – esteem, confidence and sense of purpose which are essential for them to be purpose driven and to impact their society positively. Yet, the girl – child in most part of the world, Nigeria inclusive, is being deprived of this essential means to a more meaningful life.

Aina (2013) asserted that there exist a sizeable gender gaps for poor women and women in poor places, and that education gap have narrowed in most countries, in their enrolment of girls in primary and Secondary schools in sub-Sahara Africa countries and some parts of

South Asia which have not improved much as well. Recent report by Betiang, Ojong & Ugbe (2022) has it that, 7.6 million girls are out of school in Nigeria: 3.9 million at the primary and 3.7 million at the junior secondary level. More than 50% girls are not attending school at the basic level. 48% of the out – of – school girls are in the Northwest and Northeast. 9% of the poorest girls attend secondary school compared to 81% from the richest quintile. (UNICEF 2022) the above gap can only mean one thing, “presence of poor access to quality education for the girl – child and gender inequality in education”. For any society to be developed and lopsided, the girl – child should be given quality education. Considering the essential and vital role women played in our nation’s development, it becomes necessary to examine the crucial and imperatives that enhances access of the girl child to quality education in Nigeria.

Concepts Clarification

CHILD: A child is someone below the age of 18 years. A young human below the age of puberty. Also a girl – child is a biological female offspring from birth to eighteen (18) years of age. (Mamma1995) According to Beshel (2008) different societies have different perceptions of who the girl-child is. For instance, the girl child in the third world or developing countries is perceived and accepted differently from the girl-child in the developed countries in term of a quality with the male-child in holding positions in the society, inheritance, education, economic buoyancy etc. Even though the girl-child in developing countries may share natural attributes with her counterparts in the developed countries, they are never the same because of cultural/traditional or religion beliefs. And so, the girl-child in African and Nigerian in particular could be defined thus;

- a. One who is born to take care of the home, assist in house chores, and take care of other younger ones in the absence of the mother?
- b. One who is supposed to be seen and not heard
- c. One who has no right of inheritance of family property except for the few ethnic groups in Cross River, Rivers and Bayelsa States in Nigeria.
- d. One who will soon leave the family to become a member of another family by marriage, thereby dropping her original family name.
- e. One who must take orders and command from parents, husbands, family
- f. One, who is position and place, is in the kitchen and so has no need of formal education etc.

Girl – Child – Education in Nigeria: the concept has been viewed by different people in different ways. Girl – child education is the aspect of education that is geared towards developing the skills, knowledge and attitude of girls and women from all castes, race and backgrounds. This includes education at schools, colleges, health education, professional, technical and vocational education. It also refers to all the girls and/or more activities designed, and carried out with the sole aim of improving on the capabilities of girls and women that places them on an advantageous position of gaining financial value or becoming employable.

Also, the Nigerian constitution (1991), emphasizes the right for education of all its citizens, regardless of tribe, sex, physical disability or whatever. All these show that the people of Nigeria considers education as instrument per excellence for realizing rapid natural development, for reaching social change, for forgoing to gather a nation split by civil way. (Betiang Ojong & Ugbe 2022). Girl – child education also refers to training, knowledge and information given to the female children between birth and eighteen years. The form of

knowledge that is geared towards improving their skills and experiences. (Betiang, Ojong and Ugbe 2024).

Similarly, the United Nations General Assembly (2001) adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which stipulates that, everyone has the right to education which shall be free at least in elementary and primary stages. In addition, Puri (2016) advocates for the removal of disparities of the poor, street kids, girl-child labour, rural and remote populations, indigenous people, ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities, should not suffer any discrimination in cases of accessing education. Girl- child education is not easy to come by, as it is usually proclaimed as many impediments standing in the way of the girl-child (Kasomo, 2009). The rights of the girl-children are always being denied because of corruption both in government and the family and this denial, leads to lack of access to education thus resulting in girl-child labour, which deprives the girl-child of her childhood potentials, dignity and joy.

This agrees with Bolaji (2007) who noted that there is still gender inequality in terms of accessibility to education in many parts of Nigeria, particularly the Northern states like Katsina, Kano, Bauch, and Jigawa, as well as in Akwa Ibom, a South-South state etc. subsequent to Bolaji (2007), Osimulu (1994) lamented that the girl-child is discriminated against in terms of education and given out to marriage early, thereby denying the her the required competences for community development. The resultant effect of such discrimination is poverty and the only key to ending poverty, among the women-folk, as a whole is education of the girl-child (Kasomo, 2009). According to Ahmad and Najeemah (2013) one of the most important tools available to empower women within the family and within society is education, as it contains cascade of benefits, to the girl-child and her family as well.

Sadly, in the Northern states, the number of out – of – school children is particularly on the high side, and the proportion of the girls to boys in school, ranges from 1 girl to 2 boys and 1 – 3 in some states. 7.6 million girls are out of school (OOS) in Nigeria: 3.9 million at the primary and 3.7 million at the junior secondary level 1 as reported by UNICEF (2022). More than 50% of girls are not attending school at the basic education level. In each cohort, 1 million girls drop out between the first and last year of primary school, and 0.6 million between Primary 6 and Junior Secondary School SS1. 48% of OOS girls are in the Northwest and Northeast. Gender parity in net attendance ratio is below 1.0 in 10 states (primarily in the North) but is decreasing in 15 states. 9% of the poorest girls attend secondary school compared to 81% from the richest quintile. Adolescent fertility rates remain high (104 births per 1,000 women ages 15-19) and are increasing among 10- to 14-year-olds. In Nigeria, girls access to basic education, especially in the Northern part, has indeed remain low. UNICEF (2022)

Theoretical Perspective

Feminist Theory

Tong, (2007) noted that feminist theory encompasses a range of ideas, reflecting the diversity of women worldwide. Feminism counters traditional philosophy with new ways of addressing issues affecting humanity, calling for the replacement of the presiding patriarchal order with a system that emphasizes equal rights, justice, and fairness and that women should be free to exercise total sexual and reproductive freedom. Radical cultural feminists urge women to extricate themselves from the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. Marxist–socialist feminists claim it is impossible for anyone, especially women, to achieve true freedom in a

class-based society. Multicultural feminists explain how the idea of ‘sameness’ or intersecting identities could be used as an instrument of oppression rather than liberation. Global feminists stress the universal interests of women worldwide. Ecofeminists focus on the connection among humans to the non-human world. Feminist theory has impacted virtually all structures, systems, and disciplines, challenging traditional ontological and epistemological assumptions about human nature as well as ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness.’ Modern feminism, which began 200 years ago, has evolved in three waves. The first wave dealt with suffrage; the second centered on equal access; and the current wave is focusing on global equality. (Tong 2007)

Implication

When women face limited opportunities for education, their capacity to achieve equal rights, including financial independence, are limited. Feminist theories seek to promote women's right to equal education (and its resultant benefits) across the world.

Why Educate The Girl – Child

Education of girls, do not only offers them the necessary skills and information needed to excel in a chosen career in future, but prepares them for a complete and total personal development and transformation. This in turn impacts the society positively as they become builders of our society through their knowledge and contribute to society's economic, cultural and political development. According to Betiang, Ojong and Ugbe (2022), the benefits of education of the girl child, extend beyond the girl child affecting her family, but the society as a whole. It benefits the society as it enhanced economic development of education for the next generation, healthier young ones families and fewer maternal deaths.

In the same word, Puri (2016) noted that girls' education is like sowing the seed which gives rise to a revitalized, cheerful and full grown family plant. Educated women have the capacity to bring socio-economic changes. Lack of education denies the girl-child, the knowledge and skills needed to advance their status in the society. Educating the girl-child will enable her to realise her full potential, to think, question and judge independently. It would make her a wise decision-maker, develop civic sense in her and make her learn to respect and love her fellow human beings. Offering basic education to girls is a definite way of giving them much greater power that will enable them to make genuine choices over the kinds of lives they wish to lead. This is certainly not a luxury. Education is one of the most critical areas of empowerment for women, as was affirmed in both the Cairo and Beijing Women's Conferences. Status of women in today's world depicts some of the clearest examples of the discrimination women suffer, in all spheres of life.

More so, both individuals and nations benefit from girls education, as better educated women tend to be more knowledgeable about nutrition and health care, marry at later age, raise fewer and more healthier children, should they choose to become mothers. This literally reduced mortality rate. Educating the girl child, and by extension, women include enhancement of the quality of living food, housing, health, clothing, transportation, communication, entertainment and gainful use of leisure. Women who are educated can enhance their personal development remarkably and their children and husbands also stand to gain tremendously. (Alele 1986)

Educated women are likely to participate in formal labour market and earn higher income which makes them more financially independent. Also they can participate in community development, politics and social development that shape the nation. A woman who is educated earns more respect from her spouse and this reduces domestic violence as well (Ugbe 2023) Education empowers women and equips them for the future as well. A woman's literacy also increases her productivity and self – employment in the informal sector. (Kobami & Nkpolu 2014) Educational level of rural women is associated with increased productivity in agricultural sector in many developing nations. In the same vein, literacy assist people mostly women to acquire skills and knowledge that help to facilitate better use of natural resources and other agricultural inputs, thereby increasing productivity. (Kobami & Nkpolu 2014). Thus, the girl-child being active participant in all stages of the production chain, such as hoeing, weeding, fertilizing, harvesting and threshing of grains, storage and distribution of goods, needs to be educated to effectively and efficiently mount such production chain for increase productivity and income level. (Betiang, Ojong and Ugbe 2022)

Also, girl – child education prepares her to face reality in the society, helps her realize her full potentials and enables her take decision that affects her life. In the words of Agusiobo (2018), Educating girls and women is an important step in overcoming poverty. Poverty education enables the fulfillment of her right to education and other rights of the girl-child, and young women which serves as a powerful tool in making a change in her life, enhance gender equality, self – esteem empowerment, social wellbeing, leadership and critical spirit. UNESCO (2004) noted that, the school has significant and instrumental roles to play in helping individuals, especially girls, to achieve their economic, social and cultural objectives and helping society to be better protected, better served by it leaders in more equitable ways. Beshel (2008) summarized benefits of educating the girl-child as follows:

- a. Women's self-improvement which ensures a brighter future for future generations
- b. Improved quality of life for the whole family.
- c. Improved health care practice at home and better hygiene or clean environment.
- d. Increased in the family income leading to the improved standard of living.
- e. Increased or better child upbringing leading to better society
- f. Reduction of child labour, child trafficking and other social vices associated with ignorance, poverty and illiteracy on the part of parents.
- g. Reduction in crime rate as a result of mothers' literacy level and awareness.
- h. Closer family ties leading to peace and stability in the society and
- i. An educated girl-child will be attracted to well-to-do suitors who can through her, bring development to her immediate communities.

Challenges of Girl – Child Education in Nigeria

The girl – child education as a global concern have had bottlenecks to its successful implementation. With particular reference to Nigeria, various studies has reported that there are dwindling school enrolment of females in some parts especially the Northern geo – political zones (Ishaku 2020)

This assertion is tie to numerous factors, but this research work is limiting discussion to the following:

Societal attitude to girl – child
Early marriage

Poverty level of families

Cultural practices

Hawking/child labour

Sexual violence

Low self – concept

- a. Societal attitude to girl – child: The societal notion of a girl child/woman as a weaker vessel, her place is in the kitchen, her education will rather benefit her husband etc has posed a great challenge to the girl child education, as many parent will not bother to send her to school. This societal attitude has placed education of their male counterpart above theirs. (Ishaku 2020)
- b. Early marriage: Early marriage birth loss of self – identity. The girl child is confused, feels trapped, disorganized and deprived of her teenage life as a stage. She suffers from inferiority complex and low self – esteem. In Northern part of Nigeria, girl – children are given off in marriage between the age of ten and fourteen, limiting their chances and opportunities of formal education and in most cases with no provision for non – formal education later in life.
- c. Poverty level of families: Most families are very poor and so they have to make a choice between the girl – child education and their male ones due to male preference as a fractional norm. Some families may resort to using their female children as money making machine. Driscoll and Nagel (2010) noted that, parents struggling to raise a child often see education as adding excessive stress to the family hence, many girls who should be in class have been withdrawn to work for money to assist the family to their own detriment.
- d. Cultural practices: Cultural practices such as male preference, household chores and caring duties (children raring and attending to the sick) and initiation ceremonies act up to mitigate against the girl – child education. As such obligation initiation limits the time available for education and other activities causes resulted in frequent absenteeism and reduce performance which lead them to drop out of school. UNESCO, (2010) report shows that traditionally initiated girls may also find it difficult to continue schooling after passage to adulthood as the next step is expected to be marriage.
- e. Hawking/child labour: Girl – children are mostly found in these practices. As the male child education is much more valued than that of the girl – child, so she is subjected by the parent to help generate income to supplement the efforts of the parent. This robs her of access to education. To worsen matters in the process of hawking, unwanted pregnancy may set in if care is not taken, this leaves her suffering for lifetime as well reduces her self-esteem and self-worth.
- f. Sexual violence: Sexual violence is one factor that has continued to make school unsafe society living for the female children. It is increasingly becoming a pressing social problem in our that needs to be urgently addressed in school system. Sexual violence is becoming the most pressing education issue internationally because it is making many schools unsafe place and is denying many girl – children opportunity to persist and complete educational chain, thereby creating gender inequality in education. (Bajpa 2019)
- g. Low – self concept: Another hindering factor is the girl – child’s low – self concept. She sees herself as not been able to cope with the challenges of modern learning, so she begins to find excuses, that; after schooling there are no job opportunities’, so it will be better for her not to attend school.

Programmes adopted to improved Girls education in Nigeria/Ways of enhancing girl – child access to quality education

Nigeria recognizes education as a fundamental human right and it is a signatory to the major conventions for the protection of the rights of children (girls and boys) and women. In 2004, the country enacted the Universal Basic Education (UBE) law to fast-track attainment of Education for All (EFA) Goals. The enabling legislation was to ensure provision for compulsory free Universal Basic Education, that is, a nine-year continuous education (6 years of Primary and 3 years of Junior Secondary Education) known as basic education (UNICEF, 2010). For any nation to develop, it needs to provide education to its citizens. Enrolment rates for girls at the primary and secondary school level have increased a little 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.

Also, the Federal Government (1988) re-echoed the theme on the —blue print on women education. Other stated objectives in the blueprint include the advancement of girls ‘education especially in the areas of science, technology and mathematics and the 27 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 was 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 was initiated in 1994 launched a programme intervention in Basic Education. The Federal Ministry of Education (FME) (1994) in blueprint on Family Support Basic Education Programme which was launched in 1988 stated that one of its key areas in primary education and among its special target groups is also the girl-child.

There are other programmes established for this singular purpose, but this research work is limiting its discussion to the few mentioned. Now the question of “whether these programmes are actually effective” is a disturbing fact that must be provided with sincere answers. More so, the Federal government in conjunction with the donor agencies such as the British council, United Nation Educational, scientific and cultural organization, (UNESCO), united nation development programm (UNDP), etc should enforce to ensure the workability of the above programmes, by putting all it takes on ground to increase children enrolment in schools which automatically will translate to increase girl – child enrolment and access to quality education in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Providing women and girls with equal access to education is a fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for a prosperous and sustainable world. Nigeria, a developing country is being confronted with economic, social, political, and educational challenges. These challenges led to the introduction of different reforms at different levels of the national operation. The reforms were designed to bring about developments in areas of needs through infusion of modern methods and values. Specifically, education constitutes a major focus because it is believed that education is an instrument of national development and thus, it could be employed to achieve political, economic, and social developments. The development of any nation requires the collective efforts of its citizens and all residents. More importantly, to achieve national development, both male and female members of the society need to be carried along.

Recommendations

To enhance access of the girl-child to quality education in Nigeria, the following are recommended:

1. Government at all levels should make concerted effort to alleviate poverty at the grass root, as this will undoubtedly overcome the challenge of not sending the girl children to school by parent for reason of poverty.
2. Young women who are empowered through skills acquisition before marriage have financial autonomy and are better able to contribute to the development of their family, society and the world at large. This should constantly be emphasized by both government and related agencies.
3. The issue of the girl – child education must be taken serious by the government and all institutions to ensure enforcement that will ban street hawking among school girls
4. The legislation on the equality in education must be enforced and adhered to intensely to ensure equal enrolment into the educational system by both boys and girls.
5. There should be regulation by the government to arise the age of marriage for girls to at least 21 years and above.
6. Government, Non – governmental Organisations, Religious leaders and traditional rulers have a major role to play in leading these awareness and enlightenment campaigns on not only the importance of education for the girl child but, also on the need to eradicate the various cultural and religious misconceptions that have militated against girl – child education in Nigeria -over the years.
7. Education should be made more accessible by ensuring that education is free at lease at the basic education level, as stipulated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Right (1948)
8. Adoption of the Child Rights Acts by all states and ensure its workability. and
9. Address gender – based violence and development of school safety implementation plans.

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