Girl-child Education: Challenges for Sustainable Development in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract. Education at all levels is the process through which individuals are made functional members of their society. It is also a process, through which the individual acquires knowledge, realizes his/her potentialities, and uses them for self actualization and to be useful to others. In every civilized community, children are regarded as the greatest asset society can possess. They are therefore, cherished and protected from all forms of abuse and neglect. For the girl-child however, she may not be so lucky to be that protected due to certain traditional beliefs and practices which put her at high risk of abuse and neglect. Illiteracy and poverty are other factors which further put the girl-child at high risk of exploitation and violation of her right. Yet, she is expected to grow into the good mother of tomorrow even in the face of these disadvantages. Indeed, under such conditions of abuse and neglect, the girl-child education has come to symbolize the reality of all forms of discrimination in Northern Nigeria. One cannot but agree that sustainable development will not be possible if the girl-child/women who formed the bulk of the population continue to wallow in perpetual ignorance. As indicated, girl-child education in the northern region constitutes a developmental challenge. Reports have shown that over thirty million school aged West African female children are not in school, while more than ten million are from northern Nigeria. This paper therefore, examines the factors militating against girl-child education in the area in question through the instrumentalities of primary and secondary sourced data.

Keywords: Girl-child Education, Northern Nigeria, Factors, Discrimination.

1. Introduction

Education developed from the human struggle for survival and enlightenment. It may be formal or informal. Informal education refers to the general social process by which human beings acquire the knowledge and skills needed to function in their culture. Formal education refers to the process by which teachers instruct students in courses of study within institutions. “Education …. Is the seed and flower of development” Harbison and Myers all agree that “the single most important key to development and poverty alleviation is education”. Education could thus be the difference between a life of grinding poverty and the potential for a full and secure one; between a child dying from preventable disease, and families raised in healthy environments; between orphans growing up in isolation, and the community having the means to protect them; between countries ripped apart by poverty and conflict, and access to secure and sustainable development” (World Bank, Undated). 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. (World Bank, undated). Education is indeed a human right and most single vital tool with immense power to transform. That is why, since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and much later United Nations Declaration of Human Rights of 1989, the right to education has always been regarded as the most central of all rights. However, girl-child education in the Nigerian context particularly in northern Nigeria, is even a more daunting one, despite global efforts to re-design education at both national and international levels.

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

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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.

2. Girl-Child Education

It is pertinent at this junction to state clearly who the girl-child is and what girl-child education is all about. It is a known fact that any person who is below eighteen years is legally considered to be a child. As such, girl-child is a biological female offspring from birth to eighteen (18) years of age. This is the age before one becomes adult during which, the child is totally under the care of an adult who may be her parents, guardians and older siblings. At this stage, the girl-child is malleable, builds and develops her personality and character. She is very dependent on those whom she models her behavior, through observation, repetition and imitation. Her physical, social, mental, spiritual and emotional developments start and progress to get to the peak at the young adult stage. Therefore, 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 and indeed, to foster their personal development as well. It is also an avenue that prepares an individual to acquire knowledge and skills that are lifelong assets to them during the course of their stay in this world and the hereafter.

So, there has been an increased outcry for the education of girls at various Forums, Seminars, Workshops and Conferences which were organized to address the problems faced by the girl-child. This may be because of the fact that the girl-child participation in education had been identified as one of the most significant challenges facing Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. The education of the girl-child became a strong issue of concern since the Jomtien Declaration of the Right of Child (male or female) in 1989 and 1990 world summit for children. It is in the realization of this that governments came up with various programmes aimed at uplifting the socio-economic and educational status of the girl-child. However, despite these various programmes organized for the girl-child training, history has shown that the girl-child is still at a disadvantage position.

2.1. Impediments to Girl-child Education in Northern Nigeria

There is no doubt that societal recognition to the value of education in the north has been displaced paving way to the ignorance of the people deplorable condition of education particularly that of the girl-child. This situation arose because of many reasons among which are; socio-cultural and ignorance, economic stagnation characterized by pervasive poverty which has virtually weakened all sectors of development, especially the education sector, and above all inefficient and ineffective implementation of the national and state government policies on education. These impediments contributed to poor school enrolment particularly that of the girl-child who is considered not necessarily relevant to pursue formal education in traditional social set up.

For instance, socio-cultural factors are significant in parental and family decision on whether to invest in girl-child education. Pervasive gender ideologies at the household and community levels always favour boys over girls and promote differential educational opportunities and outcomes. Socio-cultural believes and custom influence decision to enroll girls in schools, decision to withdraw them from schools and decision to drop out of school and indeed, their academic performance as well as grade level attainment. Also, the socio-cultural expectation of girls and the priority accorded to their future roles as mothers and wives have a strong negative bearing on their formal education. The girl-child is discriminated by virtue of her sex, the structure of the society, its values, traditions and institutions all have an in-built discrimination against women. The assigning of different expectations to male or female has made the traditional society in the past years to believe that it is not natural for a female child to be educated. As such, the illiterate parents prefer to have their female children doing some domestic works at home. Traditional beliefs to some extent hamper the girl-child education. It ranges from the fact that girls do not carry on the family name like boys. If at all they send their children, it is limited to the male children who according to such parents would occupy their place in the case of death. As such, every available means is used to train the boys at the detriment of girls because of their important role in protecting the “family name”. In addition, some girl-children are withdrawn from
school or denied access to higher education because of the belief that the higher the girls educational qualification the lower her chances of getting a suitable husband.

In the same regard, owing to the economic stagnation of the northern region, it is common to find school age girls engaged in street hawking rather than attending school. Poverty and the impoverished condition of the citizenry serve as a barrier to girl-child education. Most mothers preferred street hawking and early marriage than sending their wards to school. In the same vein, family background of the girl determines her chance of attending school. The more educated a parent, the more favourable his/her attitudes to education. Further to this, in most polygamous homes, boys are usually given considerations whenever there are scarce resources for the training of the children. Sometimes, an intelligent girl is deprived of opportunity to go to school while allowing a less intelligent or less ambitious boy to go to school. Also, the input of the girl-child in the family income is so high that it becomes economically unwise to allow such a child to pursue western type of education. Such income could therefore, be generated through hawking food items. The situation led girls between the ages of thirteen to fifteen are falling headlong into marriage and thereafter begin to face the challenges of child birth. One, they are denied the opportunity of formal education as they could not have any solid economic base or resources. With little or no education, capital, access to credit facilities, they are subordinated perpetually to their husband for almost everything, even the way they think and behave. This does not only affect the young women or rather the girl-children but also their offspring who due to the collapse of social and religious welfare services, are dumped with their unsecured mothers. These children are often faced with the problem of proper parental guidance. As a result, they could join some urban gangs or go into crime due to the nature of their upbringing.

There are also the political and institutional related factors which serve as the major impediment towards the development of the girl-child education, thereby increasing the gender gap. Government policies are beautifully designed on paper without proper implementation. As a result, it is imperative consider the political and economic changes in the country since the production of the first National Policy on Education in 1977, and the much later current one (National Policy of Education) of 2004, there is a dire need for further reviewing and restructuring in order to meet the needs and aspiration of Nigerians. The government could not also provide education of whatever sort to all its citizens at all levels. So, there is the need for a clearer articulation of the philosophy of education in the National Policy of Education so that the expected direction of education and indeed girl-child education in Nigeria became easily known and understood by all. Besides, four (4) out of ten (10) girl-children did not complete primary school in 2002/2003. So, five years after the World Education Forum and the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, progress at the primary level is far from decisive. Hope that the quality of education among other things like gender equity and women empowerment would improve by 2015 is now greatly threatened by implementation problems.

It should also be noted that some parents hide under the clock of “religion” to unjustly deny the girl-child her right to education because to such parents, western education is synonymous with Christianity. However, it is worth noting that, Islam as a complete way of life for Muslims has spelt out everything as it relates to the well-being of every Muslim, both male and female. Moreso, as rightly observed by Badejo, the position of women under Islam has been the subject of repeated controversy among Muslims ever since they came under the influence of Western civilization and education. However, she further noted that it has been the basic stand of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs ever since it came into existence and formulated its approach to existing social and economic problems that Islam is not a rigid framework of laws and institutions, but a set of principles capable of fresh application in changing social conditions.

3. Conclusion

Finally, 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 world, since so many of these children will continue to progress to adulthood poorly educated, frustrated and bound to face uncertainties in the future (UNICEF, 2002). Indeed, Nigeria has a long way to go before the dream of 2005 achieving parity as set by SAGEN and the 2015 EFA can be attained and realized. Invariably, 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 which is sustainable development will thereby become slower since at least half the children are denied their rights to education and the girl-child will grow-up suffering in silence throughout her life.

4. Reference


