

Girl-child Education: A Genuine Tool for Poverty Reduction and Inclusive Development

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Girl-child education refers to the aspect of education that aims at developing the skill and knowledge of girls and women from all castes, races and backgrounds. In Nigeria, like many other developing countries, girl-child education has often been neglected due to deep-seated cultural beliefs and economic difficulties that cut across the land; from the North to the south and from the East to the West. This paper, therefore, examined girl-child education issues in relation to poverty reduction and development within the setting of Nigerian society. The rampancy, causes, implications and remedies were conspicuously highlighted with deliberate focus on girl-child education as a tool for its reduction as well as enhancing inclusive development amidst the persistent social problems facing the nation. The concept of girl-child education was explicitly discussed. Benefits and challenges facing girl-child education as well as implications for inclusive development were also discussed. The paper observed that Nigeria is still struggling to meet her set target of poverty-free nation despite several governments' efforts on girl-child education. The paper eventually offered appropriate solutions and recommended among others that government should aggressively invest in girl-child education by ensuring that girls and women have access to quality education for the much desired positive impacts on the larger economy and the overall inclusive development of the nation.

Keywords: Girl-child, Education, Poverty, Reduction, Development, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Education is defined as the process through which individuals are made more functional members of their society. Education is an inalienable right of all irrespective of the person's circumstance (Obinaju,2014).To educate a girl child means to train her mind, character and abilities. Education is a fundamental human right that should be availed to every girl child irrespective of the age and nationality. Education is a critical factor in reducing poverty and promoting long-term economic growth.Girls' education is a strategic development priority. Women that are better educated are likely to be healthier than the uneducated ones. They tend to be involved more in the formal labour market. They

also earn more income, give birth to lesser children, marry at a later age, and provide better health care and education to their children. These factors, put together, can help households out of poverty. (worldbank.org).

However, girl child education has suffered a great neglect in the past due to cultural beliefs and culture among other reason. As reported by UNICEF (2007), and cited by Grace (2010), the global figure for out-of-school children is estimated to be 121 million, out of which 65 million (approximately 53.8%) were girls and over 80 percent of these girls live in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2011, according to President Goodluck Jonathan, Nigeria has 9 million (37%) out-of-school children, which is more than One-third of its primary school age children and this is the highest in Africa (Tayoaka,et.al,2014). In a another development, the Nigerian President, Muhammed Buhari, as quoted on January 16, 2020, Nigeria has 13.2 million out-of-school children. The girl-child accounts for 60% of this figure Despite the efforts of Goodluck, Nigeria girl child that are not in school are still around 7 millions.. Girls are discriminated against in Nigeria in access to educational opportunity, food, and nutrition. The girls have been left behind in Nigeria's education system particularly by many families who have often prioritized the education of boys, denying their female counterparts the same opportunity to learn and develop the skills necessary to succeed in life. This has not only perpetuated gender inequality but also deprived the country of the full potentials of half of its population. Girl child education in this paper is therefore being discussed in subsections under the following headings; concept of girl child education, importance of girl child education, girl child education and inclusive development, efforts of government on girl child education, challenges facing girl child education etc.

2. Concept of Girl Child Education

A girl child is described as a female child between infancy and early adulthood (Okay, 2012). A girl-child is also referred to as a female between the ages of 6-18 years (Mukhtar et al., 2011). The national Child Welfare Policy (1989) as cited by Ada (2007) defines the girl-child as person below 14 years of age. It is a known fact that education is a platform through which skills, knowledge, abilities for reducing poverty and enhancing inclusive development. Girl child education therefore refers to the aspect of education that aims at developing the skill and knowledge of girls and women from all castes, races and backgrounds. Education is a good tool for girls and women to claim their rights of place in the society. It also helps them to realize their potentials in economy, politics and social aspects. Above all, it is the most powerful means to lift people out of poverty (<https://eujournal.org>). For the girl child, it is one of the first steps in participating in society and freeing herself from economic exploitation and patriarchal oppression (<https://www.researchgate.net>). Education is an instrument that is capable of correcting inequality in any society. The exclusion of girls from education denies them the opportunity to develop their potential and to play a crucial role in their families, country and the world at large. Providing more education for girls will increase their involvement in the political process and further

the spread of information on several health-related threats such as female circumcision, early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (<https://women2.com>). Educated girls may also result in a decrease of infant and maternal mortality, domestic and sexual violence and child marriages.

2.1 Importance of Girl Child Education in the Society

The benefits of girl-child education to man and society cannot be over-emphasized. Girl child education is of great benefit to the individual, her family, community and the country as a whole. Below are some of the benefits of girl child education in Nigeria:

(i) Impacting on the education of the future girl child: If a girl child is educated and grows up to become a successful mother in her chosen career or vocation, she is likely to ensure that her own children equally receive good education for them to enjoy the benefits she enjoyed. So if we educate a girl, we educate a family and a nation at large.

(ii) Reduction in infant mortality rate: Educated mothers are acquainted with diseases and the various preventive measures to avert them unlike uneducated mothers whose children are more likely to die from preventable disease such cholera, tetanus, poliovirus, measles etc. For instance, in the rural area, cultural challenge may prevent immunization from getting to the children and/or mothers that need it thereby putting them at risk of future health challenges and financial stress on the children or family. If not well handled, it may result in fatality.

(iii) Contribution to national development: Through girl-child education, important basic knowledge and vocational information are acquired for wealth creation and job placement (if she attains a higher level education). Taxes are paid by these engaged women to government coffers which are now used for various developmental projects.

(iv) Reduction in child marriage: It is the practice in some communities in the Northern part of the country to give the hands of their young girls in marriage at early ages (around 9 years). This act abruptly put an end to their education. Denied access to education will obviously affect the girls seriously as she grows up to become an illiterate adult. There is high tendency that educated girl child when grown up will want to give education to their own female children because of its benefits and the edge they have over the illiterate women counterparts.

2.2. Challenges Facing Girl-child Education in Nigeria

There are many girl-child are not in school today for one reason and the other. They are denied access to education because of various issues like poverty, discrimination, Culture and emergencies. These girls

have the same aspiration just like their male counterparts with the intention to go to school-learn and get engaged with a good job for in order for them to be able to support their families and the community they live in. Instead of being supported and encouraged, they are often discriminated against. In many instance they are regarded as second fiddle. Below are some of the challenges facing girl child education:

1. Early marriage: There are child marriages in every part of the world, including Europe and North America. But the highest rates of girls under 18 getting married are in Niger (76%), Central African Republic and Chad (68% apiece). In the northern part of Nigeria, marriage is often seen as a higher priority than education. The moment girl child (mostly when they attain 18 years of age) is given out in marriage there will be an abruptly put an end to her education. Although, boys can also be affected but most victims of child marriage are girls. It is obvious that girl child that ends up this way may likely live in poverty since they possess inadequate educational skills.

2. Pregnancy: It is a common knowledge that when a girl child becomes pregnant, she is banned from coming to school by school management. It is one of the standing rules in many schools. So, many of the school s are still holding on tightly to that regulation. In many parts of the world, girls who are pregnant, irrespective of the circumstances, she will be excluded from going to school. Unfortunately, many do not return after giving birth due to many reasons such as stain, fees and unavailability of school programmes that are not adjustable..

3. Violence in the school: Girl child has a right to be live and be educated just like their male counterpart, but right is being violated in school which is one of the most common causes of girl child drop out of school. About 246 million children are harassed and abused on their way to and at school yearly – in particular the weak girls. About half of these children are said to be bullied at school in Africa. About 18 million girls with the age range of 15-19 are victims of sexual violence, this usually lead to school abandonment.

4. Lack of/inadequate funding: Financial provision for girl child education is usually too low compare with the male counterpart for families or community that does not cherish girl child education. Many girls are least considered when it comes to education financing because the available financial resource is used for boys' education. Funding is an important issue when it comes to challenges militating against girl child education in the society. Females are perceived to be less valuable because they believed the spending on them is a waste of resources since they will be married off sooner or later.

5. Child/domestic labour: The harsh economic situation in most countries, especially in Africa, has had a negative impact on several millions of families. The girl child works hard daily to help put food on

the table for their families. They stay at home on most occasions to look after their younger ones. They also shoulder the larger part of house chores and other responsibilities. The opinion of some unlettered parents has been that educating a male child is considered a worthwhile investment while is a waste of time and money for the girls. Some of these girls are engaged in all sort of work –selling at the markets or even on the street, farms, house helps at home at tender age. A girl child, who does domestic work for money are usually susceptible to all sort of vices such as sexual violence, maltreatment, trafficking, forced labour etc. Most of these children are supposed to be in the school instead they are busy working somewhere.

6. Walking alone unguided in unsafe routes: The routes to the various schools these girls attend are most times unsafe. So trekking these routes portend danger for the girls. At times they are waylaid and bullied or raped. The walk to school can be very dangerous or intimidating occasionally, most parents, therefore, are unwilling to allow their girls to walk long distances to school on unsafe routes.

7. Hygiene: In some part of Africa and other regions, girls- adolescents-who are on their monthly periods, can miss between 3-5 days in school monthly in order to take care of themselves because of inadequate water and hygiene facilities. Most schools do not separate toilets for girls and lack of sanitary supplies. In mixed schools where lavatories are shared sexual advances by the male counterparts have become a source worrisome.

8. Inadequate female teachers: Inadequate female teachers in schools in some countries can make school an unpleasant and unattractive to girls. The availability of more women in the classroom as teachers would provide a gender friendly environment that would make the young girls comfortable. In the United States, about three-quarters of school teachers are female. But in African countries such as Liberia and the Central African Republic only about one in five primary teachers are women.

9. Life of girl child in war trouble areas: The consequences of living in war-troubled areas are unpleasant. UNICEF estimates that 48.5 million children worldwide do not go to school because of wars, unrest and conflicts. Girls living in countries disturbed by war and conflict are 90% more likely to be out of secondary school than those living in peace. Attacks on girls' schools also mean many parents are afraid to send their daughters to school.

10. Physical challenges of girl child: Girls with physical challenges usually encounter discrimination because of their gender and disability. Respondents to the World Health Survey 2002-2004 indicated that 41.7% of girls with a disability completed primary school compared to 52.9% for those without disability.

11. Girl child from poor countries: Some of the poorest countries in the world find it difficult to support education system financially for all her children. Deliberate investment in education reduces poverty to a greater extent not leaving behind benefits in health. It is believed that educated female population will also increase a country's productivity and drive economic growth.

12. Natural disasters: In the unexpected events like Flood, landslide, earthquakes, and disease outbreak can negatively affect education for many numbers of girls. In crisis emergencies, as well as natural disasters, increased attendant poverty and lack of employment opportunities for families may translate those girls maybe at higher risk of early marriage. Families whose livelihoods have been destroyed may no longer be able to afford to send their daughters to school even if any school exists.

2.3. Efforts of Government on Girl-child Education

In 2013, World Bank country director, Marie-Francoise Marie-Nelly, said that 100 Million Nigerians live in extreme poverty, girls inclusive. According to the World Bank itself, to live in extreme poverty is to live on less than \$1.25 per day. The World Poverty Clock has also reported that there are 71 million extremely poor Nigerians, according to 2023 data (The World Poverty Clock is a tool used to track poverty progress worldwide). In another report The Rivers State's All Progressives Congress governorship candidate, Tonye Cole, said “Nigeria has the awful distinction of being the world capital of poverty, with 71 million people living in extreme poverty today (WPC,2023) and a total of 133 million people classed as multi-dimensionally poor according to National Bureau of Statistics data.

Global and local statistics has shown that the poverty situation and trend in Nigeria is a clear indication that Nigeria need to make a deliberate effort to reduce it through diverse strategies one of which is through massive investment in girl child education that has proven to be a genuine tool for reducing unemployment. Below are the highlights of government efforts aimed at improving girl child education:

i. Establishment of the National Commission for Mass Literacy and Non-formal Education in 1991. This commission was saddled to work in co-operation with all concerned stakeholders to eradicate illiteracy in Nigeria (<https://placng.org>).

ii. Universal Basic Education (UBE) program: The UBE program was launched in 1999 to provide, compulsory and qualitative basic education for all children in Nigeria, including the girls. The program aims to provide education for every Nigerian child, regardless of gender or social status (<https://ubec.gov.ng>).

iii. Girls' Education Project (GEP): The GEP is a project funded by the Nigerian government and implemented by UNICEF in collaboration with state governments. The project aims to increase the

enrolment and retention of girls in primary and secondary schools in Northern Nigeria. The GEP provides financial supports to families to help cover cost of schooling and provides training for teachers' to improve the quality of teaching.

iv. Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Program: The CCT program is a government initiative that provides cash transfer to poor households in Nigeria, with the condition that they send their children to school. The program aims to increase enrolment and retention in schools, particularly for girls from poor households.

v. Safe School Initiative (SSI): The SSI is a government-led initiative aimed at improving the safety and security of schools, particularly in conflict-affected areas. The initiative aims to ensure that girls can attend school without fear of violence or intimidation.

vi. National Gender Policy (NGP). The NGP was developed in 2006 to promote gender equality and eliminate discrimination against women and girls in Nigeria. The policy aims to address the root causes of gender inequality and promote the right of women and girls, including their right to education.

vii. National Plan of Action for the Education of Girls (NPAEG): The NPAEG was developed in 2004 to promote education of girls in Nigeria. The plan aims to increase the enrolment of girls in school, retention and completion rates of girls in schools, particularly in the northern part of the country where girl child education is most challenging.

2.4. Strategies to Improve Girl-child Education in Nigeria

According to UNICEF chief field officer in Kano, Mr Rahaman Muhammed Farah, who recently disclosed that 10 million girls are out of school in Nigeria and that the majority of them are from the Northern part of the country. This shows that the country must do something urgently to reverse the number. Below are the ways to improve the girl child education in Nigeria:

- (i). The Nigerian government and the media should increase public awareness and implement laws that forbid discrimination against girl child education in order to raise the standard female education
- (ii). Government should make frantic efforts to remove the barriers that can prevent girl child from accessing education. e.g provision of sanitary pads and water for schools to encourage adolescent girls from coming to school during their monthly flows.
- (iii). Parents and guardians should endeavor to reduce the house chores of the girl child. Assigning girls with plenty domestic works is common to families in developing countries such as Nigeria

etc. It is advised that house chores should be shared among members of the family so that girls can have time for education.

- (iv). Government should ensure adequate security in school so that it will be safe haven for girls. This will also encourage more girls' enrolment in school and improve on their attendance as well.
- (v). There should be massive education of teachers on gender issue: Teachers are known to be custodians of knowledge and as such must teach with open mind without biases concerning gender. Teachers should endeavor to neutralize any conceptions about girl child education.
- (vi). Church, Mosque and other religious leaders should also join the crusade for girl child education by properly educating their followers, that may involve parents, guardians etc about the importance of girl child education as well as neutralizing any wrong view they may be holding on firmly to.
- (vii). The members of the public should be carried along on issue of girl child education. This can come in the form of awareness creation for the noise about girl child education to be loud enough for all the stakeholders to begin the prioritization of girl child education.
- (viii). Government should create a proper working system to meet the special needs or demand of the female students. School calendars and time tables should be flexible enough to allow for seasonal jobs that can fetch them money to support their education.
- (ix). The primary education management board and other related body should improve on their functions and activities. This body and other related ones are assigned with the roles of bringing government policies to bear in the local government areas. In other words, they decentralize government policies and programmes for effectiveness and easy participation of the people.
- (x). Government should ensure that all laws and regulations that will favour girl child education are followed and duplicated across the strata of government (<http://www.africanleadershipmagazine.co.uk>)

3. Summary

Education is a fundamental human right that should be availed to every girl child regardless of the age, sex, colour and nationality. There is no question that educating girls is a prerequisite for eradicating poverty. Education is a critical factor in reducing poverty and promoting long-term economic growth. Girls' education is a strategic development priority that holds a lot of positives for any society. They tend to be involved more in the formal labour market which allows them to earn more income, give birth to lesser children, marry at a later age, and provide better health care and education to their children. These factors, put together, can pull many households out of poverty (worldbank.org). Education empowers and transforms women. It allows them to break the cycle of exclusion that keeps them at home and disengaged from decision making. Education, especially higher education, can prepare women to take on roles of responsibility in government, business and civil society. Women make ideal

leaders, according to many studies, as they tend to allocate resources more wisely than men. For example, women spend a larger percentage of their income on food and education for their children. Therefore, enhancing the economic and political role of women directly benefits the next generation (<https://www.un.org>). To provide an excellent university education for women is to make long-term investment in their children's futures. So, deliberate investment in girl child education will not only reduce poverty but also enhance inclusive development for a better society.

4. Conclusion

Girl child education has become an issue of global and national concern considering the increasing number of out-of-school children yearly as evidenced by various statistics globally and Nigeria in particular (<http://www.unesco.org>). The benefits of educating the girls to the society cannot be over-emphasized. However, for Nigeria to enjoy the sweet in girl child education, it must put in deliberate efforts to confront the various challenges militating against girl child education so that the attendant benefit of gainful employment which reduces poverty can be harvested. Also, the big statistical figures on out-of-school children can only be reversed only if all hands must be on deck to achieve the various aims and objectives of government policies and program on girl child education.

5. Recommendations

Girl-child education can be a good tool to reverse the trend of unemployment in the Nigeria and also achieving massive development without leaving anybody behind if the following recommendations can be considered

- i. The government should concentration more qualified teachers in the rural areas where the majority of vulnerable girls reside and ensure balanced distribution of educational amenities and facilities in both the urban and rural areas. This will encourage the teachers in the rural areas to stay for a longer period of time before seeking transfer elsewhere.
- ii. There should be a strict follow-up and implementation on the Universal Basic Education programme in the country.
- iii. Government should create more awareness on the promotion of girls' rights so that it can be protected by all and sundry.
- iv. Females should be allowed to lead or drive the implementation of most government policies and projects targeted at improving girls' education in order to have great impacts on the girls.
- v. The government should encourage girl-child education using scholarships as bait of enticement in order to enable poor parents and those that have to consider sending only boys to school over scarce resources to be able to send their girls to school.
- vi. There should be thought through strategies to strengthen the enforcement of policies to enable pregnant girls and young mothers stay in school and discourage child marriages.

- vii. Government agencies should revive, review and monitor the curriculum and teachings in classes that are gender biased.
- viii. Government should ensure safe and supportive learning environment for girls. Just as the new IG, Egbetokun, has set up a special force to secure schools across the country.
- ix. Government should ensure that displaced girls in every part of the country have access to basic education.
- x. The post-insurgency reconstruction programme for the Northeastern part of the country should involve strategies that will encourage and promote girl-child education at all levels in the sub-region.

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