

Girl-Child and Women: Education and Empowerment for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Improper education of the girl-child and women characterized with low self-esteem, lack of confidence, insecurity and national development. The reasons for girl-child and women education as well as empowerment for sustainable health and development was aimed to be investigated. Critical issues in girl-child education such as access to education, drop out from school by a female child and quality of education experience which endangered the girl-child or women have been discussed in this report. Educating and empowering of female children and women coupled with proffered solutions such as building of good mentoring as well as networking groups, sponsorships and proper training would not only apparently contribute towards embracing gender equality, increasing the workforces, particularly, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) workforce but improved emotional, economic, mental, physical, political, religion and social experiences. Thus, yield a healthy nation, high quality leadership, reduced rate of dependence and increased nation's workforce for sustainable development.

Keywords: Education, Girl-child, Women Empowerment, Sustainable development.

1. Introduction

For many years, women were believed to be second class citizens of most African societies, especially, Nigeria (Enejere 1991). A woman is always seen as a man's property and the bearer of children. This culture has led to partial treatment of women with regards to education. The less privileged and average rural Nigerian parents would choose to educate their sons rather than their daughters (Ada 1992). The traditional and religious customs have in one way or the other embraced gender inequality, which apparently affects the individuals and the society. For instance, most female children in the Northern region of Nigeria are not only deprived of the benefit of education but also do not contribute to economic development due to religious, sexual involvement, health consequences and culture reasons (Undiyaundeye 2013). Thus, seen as non-functional members of the society (Ocho 2005). In the South – Eastern part of Nigeria, the culture and tradition considered women as slaves in the society with no value in the family such as the case of no inheritance from her father's property after death. Education is one of our human fundamental rights and has been described as a crucial factor for human development in the entire world today, most importantly, for the girl-child who wish to have a successful and prosperous life. Girls and women more often bore the consequences of poverty, lack of health care, education, climate change, and other inequalities which indicated unsafe and unhealthy condition of females as a result of poor education, thereby, resulting to poor empowerment, unhealthier families, and unsustainable economies of a nation. One major way of destroying the future of a female child is by denying her the access to education. According to UNICEF (2007), more than 64 million girls out of about 121 million girls were out of school and more than 75% of these female children were residing in Sub-Saharan Africa including Nigeria. Recently, the local, state and federal governments have made education for the girl-child compulsory by enacting a bye law and initiating various programmes. Interestingly, Federal Ministry of Education and United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF) have been succeeding in leading the campaign for girl-child education in Nigeria. Libraries as well as other information centres should also be considered as campaigning tools to strengthen and improve female child education in Nigeria and other developing African countries (Ifijeh & Odara 2011). In this work, the reasons for girl-child and women education as well as empowerment for sustainable health and development was examined.

2. Girl-Child and Women Education and Empowerment

2.1 Education of Girl-Child and Its Importance

A girl-child is a biological daughter from birth to eighteen years. Her early childhood comprising of crèche and nursery educations between birth and five years (0-5); primary school usually between six and twelve years (6-12), and secondary school is between twelve and eighteen years (12-18). Most times, the girl-child is taken care of, by her parents, older siblings or guardian during these periods until she becomes a young adult at 18. Between 0 and 18years, she is flexible, tends to build up her character as well as personality and apparently observes, imitates and also repeats most things her care taker does. The development of her spiritual, physical, emotional as well as mental lives starts and grows at that stage too (Offorma 2009). The National Child Welfare

Policy defined a girl-child as a person not more than 14 years (Ifijeh & Odara 2011; Ada 2007). This female child will eventually grow up to become a woman and marry. Then, her responsibilities will be to bear and raise children, take care of the aged parents or sick loved ones and cook meals for the family. She will be raised by her parents to obey, respect and be submissive. In a nut shell, 'she becomes her parents' property in childhood and her husband's property in adulthood' (Ifijeh & Odara 2011). The gender apartheid places females in a discouraging and disadvantaged position. This, however, causes suppression; less confidence and creates a poor mind-set in the girl-child.

Education provides information to boost as well as develop the emotional, economic, mental, physical, political, religion and social abilities of either a male or female person with little or no experience. This implies for one to be awarded graduates' degrees. He or she must have been found worthy in character and learning. That is, acquired relevant skills, attributes, values and knowledge will be needed to function optimally as citizens (Offorma 2009). Education is one our fundamental rights (Ifijeh & Odara 2011) and should be available at all levels. Shu'aib & Ayuba (2015) reported the Article 13 (1 and 2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 that the development of a system of quality education at all levels shall be actively pursued, and the material conditions of the teaching staff shall be continuously improved. Researchers have also reported another Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1949, that everyone has the right to education and it shall be made free at elementary and primary levels so as to make elementary education compulsory and the technical and professional education become available (Offorma 2009) and (Ifijeh & Odara 2011). Higher education shall become equally accessible to everyone on the basis of merit and also, parents have the prior right to choose the best education for their children too (Nwangwu 1976). The issue of gender inequality and sectionalism in education and empowerment is not emphasized on sustainable development since everyone have a role to play in economic, social, physical and spiritual development of a society. There are two forms of education namely formal and informal education. Formal education is the type of education that is so organized, planned and systematically implemented in different institutions whereas the informal education is not planned or organized and may eventually become random, sometimes chaotic or incidental (Offorma 2009).

When a child is born, he or she depends solely on parents, older siblings or guardians and then grows up to be informally as well as formally educated. The performance or contribution he or she makes in the society mostly depends on the degree and quality of education he or she gets. This, however, will enable him or her perform all duties and exercise his or her rights too. It is advisable to train children and allow the children train the next generation to come and goes on to the third, fourth, fifth generations, thus, making everyone benefit in one way or the other (Ocho 1988). Of a truth, 'if you educate a man, you train an individual but if you educate a woman, you train a nation' (Offorma 2009). This proves that it is paramount to educate a female child and summarizes the fact that every educable individual either male or female, should seize the opportunity of being formally educated. Education can also be seen as the bedrock of development and a vital tool for empowerment that will permit great contributions and ideologies to the society at large (Shu'aib & Ayuba 2015). Therefore, education helps to empower girl children, develops their skills including confidence as well as self-esteem and protects them from harm such as sexual harassment and HIV in life as reported by UNICEF (2007). Knowing the critical issues that can affect the girl-child could aid in proffering substantial solutions towards increasing the number of female educated children in our communities.

2.2 Critical Issues in Girl Child Education

Some of the critical issues in girl-child education include access to education, drop out from school by a female child and quality of education experience by the female child.

2.2.1 Access to education

In United Kingdom, provision of safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all coupled with legislation of the land that prohibits discrimination and imposes a positive duty to prevent discrimination on the basis of sex for access to education favourable to girls in education and make girls to perform better than boys. This means that neither girls nor boys can be denied the right to study a subject based on their sex. In fact, at tertiary level in the UK there are now more female undergraduates (56 per cent) than male undergraduates (44 per cent) as reported by British Councils (2016). It is widely recognized that the education sector is a key site for challenges and changes of the discriminatory gender norms that have spread in the media, homes and workplaces. The availability of education to the female children is quite limited and calls for more attention in developing countries due to low enrolment and poor performance as reported by Shu'aib & Ayuba (2015). For instance, in Nigeria, some female children do not really or fully have access to education unlike in Europe. It has been reported that both state and local governments make provisions for the education of their indigenes and citizens, but barely consider the peculiarities of the female children (Ada 2007; Offorma 2009; Ifijeh & Odara 2011). This, however, would make these female children have little or no access to education which apparently is their fundamental human right. Many challenges faced by the female children that would apparently hinder them from

gaining access to education include:

1. Some parents, guardians, sponsors, communities and children cannot afford the tuition fees or other hidden fees because of high tuition fees. Some of these children are given out as housemaids to the rich families and eventually forfeit their education because of poverty (Offorma 2009).
2. A poor environment which threatens the security of the society can be a major factor especially when the female children feel so unsafe as reported by British Councils (2016).
3. Women's position in the society as second in command. When parents and the society at large view the female gender as the weaker vessels, second in command and leave them at home to perform most of the house works coupled with marriage to a man which make her not to be a member of the family after marriage.
4. When parents most times, bear grudges and divorce, the children suffer from their disengagement and are faced with hardship, child labour or disdain (Offorma 2009). The female children may also be forced to get married in order to raise some money for the family.

These are some common factors that can hinder these female children from acquiring such ample knowledge in life. Others factors may include fear of violence and other things, backward cultural practices and mandate to care for the sick and aged in the family. African countries including Nigeria and South Africa involved in depriving female children from being educated, have devised some means to curb such situations, thereby increasing the number of female educated children and skilled women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and other work forces (Offorma 2009; Undyaundeye 2013). For instance, the high rate at which parents send their female children to school has rightfully reduced the number of house maids in some states in Nigeria, especially in Ebonyi State, where the Former Executive Governor sanctioned any family that gave out their female children as house maids. Then in South Africa, Human Rights Watch has warned that sexual violence and abuse are destroying girls' access to education (Offorma 2009). It is quite disheartening to know that as much efforts are made to increase girls' access to education in most African countries, other African countries deem it fit to continue the same old polluted and harmful practices. This includes, Kenya, where poverty and backward cultural practices continue to deny these girls' access to education (Mwangi 2004; Offorma 2009). Also, the introduction of free primary education in Kenya still did not improve or increase the girls' access to education because most of them were given duties by their parents or guardians such as care for younger ones; elderly ones and sick, early marriage or home chores. Most of these parents gave them out so early in marriage, in order to use the dowries to run the family. How much is the dowry and how long will the money last?

2.2.2 Drop out

According to research, the number of girls sent out of school per year in Sub-Saharan Africa, increased from 20 million in 1990 to 24 million in 2002 (UNICEF 2003). 15 countries out of the 25 countries studied, were in Sub-Saharan Africa. This happened as a result of low enrolment rates for girls; gender gaps of more than 10% in primary education and countries affected by a range of crises such as HIV/AIDS as well as conflict that deprived the girls of such opportunities. Nigeria, Sudan, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Chad and some others were among the 15 affected countries. According to World Bank Educator Indicator, Nigeria (2008), about 54% of the drop out students were girls whereas 46% were boys and then the total number of drop out students was 8, 649, 620. This result is quite alarming and shows poor quality of schooling eventually put female child education and development in a very discouraging, disadvantaged and fragile position due to preference given to male, early marriage, sex stereotyping, poverty, status of parent education and sexual harassment or unwanted pregnancy, religious belief (Undiyaundeye 2013; Ifijeh & Odara, 2011).

2.2.3 Quality of education

Quality education is simply based on the necessary factors that will build the total well-being of a child in school. When there is an occurrence or presence of examination malpractice, child abuse, child labour, demotivated teacher, sexual harassment, lack of school facilities and instructional materials, gender bias curriculum, incessant strike actions and so many vices of corruption, the quality of education on both genders will be poor and affect areas of their lives, but the most affected sex is a female child. These issues and many more will hinder the girls from enrolling in school. However, in order to stop this madness, solutions have been made to tackle these critical issues.

2.3 Proffered Solutions to Critical Issues

In order to be gender sensitive in Nigeria educational development and empowerment, the following listed points are proffered solutions for critical issues of girl child education:

1. All Government parastatals should develop better policies and plans to either reduce the tuition fees in order for the populace to send their children, most especially, the girl-child to school or remove the tuition fees completely and perhaps charge for municipal fees only. This, apparently, would increase the number of female scholars and empowered women in the nearest future.

2. Re-evaluation of teaching practices and full-time involvement in community work will help to boost the quality of education and encourage the female children in research which may improve the health, economic, social and technological growth of the nation.
3. The initiation of special programmes will help to increase and sustain the girl-child education in our countries too.
4. In addition, public and school libraries should be established to assist in creating public awareness and social communication of both female and male children. These libraries are not for examination or leisure only but can be used as centres for current information and research on key matters including Girl-child education. For effective and efficient running of libraries, parents; organizations and institutions collaboratively, should support financially. Sadly, our country, Nigeria and some other countries, have been facing economic crises which resulted to the slashing down of budgets in the education sector (Mordi 2008). For this reason, these libraries must extend their search for funds from external sources such as international and other non-governmental agencies to execute already planned programmes and successful delivery of service.
5. Skilled staff having the right knowledge; relevant skills; proper understanding and experience, upgrading the curricula; introducing gender equality; monitoring education as well as accepting them from all backgrounds, will surely assist to solve these critical issues, thereby, making the communities and societies wealthier; healthier and perhaps safe, reduce child deaths, improve maternal health, curb the spread of many diseases including HIV/AIDS and train the female child to become a knowledgeable and confident woman since history, a tool for cause of action and effect helps to reconstruct their lives for effective citizenship (Offorma 2009).

2.4 Benefits of Educating a Girl-Child

When female children gain from offered quality and universal education, there tends to be progress in the family, nation, community as well as the society and destruction of so many vices in developing countries including Nigeria. The major benefits are as follows:-

- 1) Increase in literacy rates and girls' enrolment in institutions in most regions.
- 2) Increase in political representation and involvement across the globe.
- 3) Girl-child education will boost her level of confidence as well as self-esteem and open up new opportunities for girls to enable them discover and develop their potentials and skills.
- 4) When they embrace equal rights and access to education, poverty reduces because they fully participate in business and economic activity.
- 5) Decrease in infant and child mortality rates, maternal mortality rates and child malnutrition.
- 6) Decrease in gender discrimination.
- 7) Decrease in human trafficking. Women are more vulnerable to trafficking than men when particularly poor and not educated.
- 8) Decrease in early marriages and pregnancy in most regions where the female children are more educated than others.
- 9) There will be an increase in family planning in the family of educated women and men which will lead to less number of babies born into the family.
- 10) These girls will be empowered and turn out to be empowered women in the nearest future with boosted earning capabilities.
- 11) They will be protected against HIV/AIDS infection.
- 12) She will apparently have a positive impact on her family, better communication with spouse and children, better nutrition and childcare too
- 13) These benefits will be transferred from one generation to another.

As a matter of fact, there are no drawbacks for educating female children because they contribute greatly towards the growth and development of their families and society at large. They also solve major problems encountered as their male counterparts do. Both male and female children must be educated and share equal rights in the society.

2.5 Women's Education and Empowerment

According to Webster's Online Dictionary (2013), a woman is a human species belonging to the female class and has reached the puberty age. Wikipedia (2013) also defined a woman as an adult female whereas a girl is a young female being. Then, a female married child is automatically tagged as a woman. In my own opinion, a woman can simply be defined as a female being who is single or married and has attained the level or mind of handling life issues which should be capable of proffering better solutions and take appropriate measures to solve life challenges through acquired skill, exposure and knowledge.

Training a girl-child to become a woman and properly manage her home after marriage is part of informal

education as reported by Eseyin *et al.* (2014). The informal training has been in existence since the 18th century. Recently, women's education has upgraded from informal to formal by teaching them how to manage small, medium and large business organizations. Acquisition of formal education ensures effective and efficient contribution of these women to the management of different sectors of the society. The formal education is mainly to empower both male and female gender in order to contribute greatly and equally to the advancement of the society. The introduction and provision of primary, secondary, tertiary as well as health education particularly for female is *Women education*. Women education involves the systematic means of equipping women with skills, abilities and experience through formal education for personal as well as professional growth and development of the society. This acts as an instrument for providing sustainable economic development as reported by Baba (2012). Women must grasp these relevant skills and knowledge to be fully empowered and to assist in upgrading and developing the society despite the challenges such as sexual harassment, insecurity, low self-esteem, insufficient infrastructures, fear of dominance from their male counterparts and cultural beliefs (Eseyin *et al.* 2014). Women use the multi-dimensional social means and processes to actively gain more power and control over their lives as a major aspect of *Women's Empowerment* (Page & Czuba, 1999). The use of this power is to develop and secure the community and society by tackling important pressing issues. This, however, is a very crucial way of attaining gender equality, which is apparently the rights and opportunity of individuals to perform various functions irrespective of the gender.

Women and children have been paid less attention to, in terms of government programmes in providing socio-economic benefits for several years. As occupying a large percentage of the society, women's opportunity to discover, contribute and harness their potentials for the development of the society has been ignored. According to the report of UNESCO (2010), women make up one half of the world's population; perform two-thirds of the world's work; earn one-tenth of the world's income and own about one-hundredth of the world's property. This, however, shows that these women gain little or nothing despite their great contribution in the society and have been deprived of the opportunity to contribute exceptionally to the growth and development of the society. Most of the women fail to explore all options to speak in the society where their population and dexterity can surely make a difference and also shy away from making good quality presentations at conferences or seminars, running apprenticeship programmes, developing their skills and acquiring quality informal education as well as formal education towards embracing gender equality with their male counterparts in the society (Eseyin *et al.* 2014). In as much as reports have shown massive improvement in the creation and sustenance of gender equality in African countries and the world at large, there still remains a lot to be considered and executed to achieve gender equality and women empowerment in our various countries (Carmon 2013).

2.5.1 Importance of women education and empowerment

The benefits of education and empowerment of women in the society include:

1. The women will develop a sense of self-worth, self-confidence and high self-esteem.
2. Boldness to make her own choices and gain full access to surplus resources as well as better opportunities to make a good choice and pursue.
3. Absolutely take control over their lives everywhere.
4. Ability to create a positive change in the society both nationally and internationally.
5. To reduce or close the gender gap and create a neutral ground between men and women before gender equality can be reached, maintained and sustained (Warth & Koparanova 2012).
6. Women empowerment increases their participation in the labour workforce particularly STEM workforce and their contributions to national and family income.
7. Their large income always has a positive effect on the children's health, nutrition and educational prospects.

2.5.2 Ways of empowering women

The millennium development goals (MDG) and sustainable development goals (SDG) can be accomplished if women are empowered with the following ingredients:

1. **Educate and train women:** Reading signs on a road, labels on medicine bottles, communicating with others, saving a woman's life during childbirth and so many other things may make life unbearable for illiterate women. Educating and training women will help to perform so many tasks in life (Ogato 2013). For instance, the local midwives have the relevant acquired skills and knowledge to deliver babies, save the woman's life and protect her from several illnesses, especially in countries such as Sierra Leone, Bolivia and Afghanistan. Access to education for women introduces family planning which resulted to reduction in number of children born and poverty; rape and violence over time (Genta 2010), enables them to earn higher salaries and invest in businesses. In short, they will fully participate in the development process and impact health as educated women.
2. **Build good mentoring relationships:** Good mentors would make their female mentees exhibit leadership by giving them high-visibility initiatives, help in harnessing their individual strength in order

- to succeed in life and boost them in their career development. This scheme reduces poverty rates, poor-performing schools, and eventually stop violence and human trafficking.
3. **Sponsorships and loans:** Microloans or mega loans assist women financially to start up any type of business and support the families. These loans help women to gain financial independence which will prevent domestic violence from taking place. Scholarships and grant will help to solve gender inequality issues and make the women contribute greatly towards the growth and development of their homes and society (Ogato 2013).
 4. **Build a good networking group:** A good networking group or scheme connects women with experts, mentors and their peers in both developing and developed countries. They tend to inspire each other, learn to stand for their fundamental rights as well as great opportunities to which they are entitled to. With increased exposure, more confidence, initiatives and out spoken nature in their networking group, sophisticated ideas would sprout up a new investment for economic growth which will certainly be achieved.
 5. **Appreciation:** Charity, love and care begins at home. Family members should always express gratitude to their mothers and female siblings anytime help is render to them. Extend such love and appreciation to your female neighbours, colleagues at work, customers in the bank or market, church and other places. Sometimes, pick a gift or a cup of coffee for your colleague or assist to ease the burden of your female neighbour and colleague. By so doing, Women's happiness is established in their hearts and will also motivate them to keep going in life.
 6. **Availability of appropriate infrastructures:** Research has proven that women require a well-organized environment for study more than men because men can naturally survive under pressure in achieving specific goals including education whereas women cannot. The presence of infrastructures for women's education can aid to empower women, encourage women to make better decisions and occupy leadership roles, improve their access to education and moreover, reduce discrimination against women (Eseyin *et al.* 2014).

2.5.3 Empowering women for sustainable development

The empowerment of women for sustainable development is a gradual process. Firstly, the gender equality gaps where women who are still underrepresented are identified and resolved as illustrated in this communication. Secondly, a safe and conducive environment to execute or perform all exercises should be established and encouraged for women to boost their skills, abilities as well as knowledge. Finally, women should be involved in everything especially in decision making at various levels. Their full participation and cooperation is essentially needed to tackle socio-cultural, economic and environmental issues, particularly in crucial areas such as education and healthcare thereby attaining gender equality, improving their lives and promoting their countries for long term. Some of the detailed benefits obtained from educating and empowering these women in ensuring development in developing countries, particularly Nigeria include:

1. **Building and sustaining a healthy nation:** Women's education acts as one major point to build and sustain a healthy nation. A clean and healthy lifestyle may be adopted and arrest minor health challenges by educated women. This, however, will preserve human lives, reduce infant deaths, girls' vulnerability and increase the lifespan of individuals. A healthy nation can be linked to a wealthy nation. According to the report of Shu'aibu & Ayuba (2015), Education of women brings improvement of their health practices. In his report, It can be observed that women suffer deprivation in any form and are allowed to function as the 'total woman' when denied holistic health and cannot be said to enjoy the full facilities of health, which the World Health Organization defined as a state of complete physical, mental, emotional and social well-being of an individual. Unhealthy cultural practices such as female genital mutilation will be a thing of the past if women are educated (Shu'aibu & Ayuba 2015).
2. **High quality leadership:** Most women are excellent managers of their homes and as such, can apply acquired managerial skills in the management of several units of the economy. Women would bring peace, equality, transparency and protection of human rights which will apparently aid to build a stable nation rather than violate human rights, mismanage national resources and abuse power as men in authority do, that destroy sectors of the economy.
3. **Reduced rate of dependence:** Educated women tend to become self-sufficient, help sustain the country's economic resources in terms of development, reduce their demands from spouses and sponsors, and finally meet up with their personal and societal needs.
4. **Increase in nation's workforce:** The increase in educating women will reduce the gap between male and female employment and will aid to increase the GDP in most developing countries. This will apparently increase the various workforces in the nation (Eseyin *et al.* 2014). Moreover, according to the report of Shu'aibu & Ayuba (2015), uneducated and illiterate women suffer poor conditions especially in the third world countries and women employed in subsistence agriculture, petty trading and handcrafts, are being displaced by the emergence of agricultural marketing mechanisms. Education

has become the primary avenue to increase economic structures; thus women with poor education are subjected to unemployed or unskilled low paying jobs.

3. Recommendations

For the girl-child and women to contribute greatly towards the sustainable development of the nation and growth, the level of education and empowerment plays a significant role and the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. The provision of human, material and financial resources to support the girl-child and women education in the country are necessary.
2. Establishment and proper implementation of laws and policies for defence of their rights and privileges especially in terms of tuition fee, deprivation of girl and women's rights on education and empowerment, and many other infrastructures.
3. Provision of safe and conducive environmental conditions for learning will make positive contribution to the health of girls and women, hence, improve the nation's development and growth.
4. Contribution from private and public educational stakeholders, school management, guardians and parents towards acquiring quality education for the girls and women for sustainable development.

4. Conclusion

The girl-child and women education contributes positively in national development and achieving national transformation. The deprivation of quality formal education to women in a society could result to an irreparable and uncountable loss in most sectors of the economy. This great loss affects Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and other workforce around the globe. Therefore, it is most expedient that girls and women acquire quality education in order to greatly contribute towards the growth and development of the whole nation.

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