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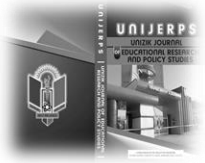
BARRIERS TO GIRL – CHILD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract
This paper examined the barriers to Girl- child education in Nigeria and strategies for improvement. The paper stressed that education is a right to every Nigerian child irrespective of gender, denying her access to education implies making her a dysfunctional member of the society. The paper went further to discuss the relevance of girl- child education to nation building. Some barriers to girl- child education such as cultural influence, sexual violence and abuse, religious chaos, economic factors, among others were highlighted. The paper suggests some useful strategies for improving the education of the girl- child. These include: creating awareness to parents that every child born into a family is important and deserves to be loved and treated equally especially by giving them access to education, abolishing the traditional practices that negate the girl child from going to school. The paper recommends among others that Government at all levels should fund education of the girl child and provide scholarships and grants for her; there is need for attitudinal change, a re-orientation of societal and parental values towards the education of girls.

Key words: Barriers, Girl- Child, Girl- Child Education, Strategies

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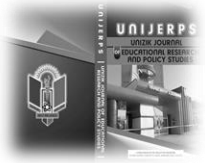
Introduction

Education is an inalienable right of all citizens irrespective of gender, age and nationality. According to FGN (2004), Education is seen as 'an instrument par excellence' which equips an individual with the right skills, knowledge, ability, competence, attitude, behaviour and values in order to function effectively in society. Education is equally a means to an end which assist citizens of a nation to develop their full potentials and capacity to contribute to societal development as well as to attain sustainable livelihood. Micheal (2011) described education as a key to a successful living, especially girl – child education. Girl- child education is a catch – all- term for a complex set of issues and debates surrounding primary, secondary, tertiary and health education in particular for girls and women (Omede & Agahiu, 2016). The authors noted that denying the girl child access to education implies making her a dysfunctional member of the society. A girl child by definition is a biological female offspring from birth to eighteen years of age.

Globally, about 121 million children are out of school, 65 million are girls with over 80 percent of these girls in Sub-Sahara Africa (UNICEF as cited in Omede & Agahiu, 2016).

Successive governments in Nigeria have over the years made concerted efforts in a bid to bridge the gender disparity on education in different ways. These include: the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Right Act of 1948; the Nigerian Child Rights Act of 2003 which states that a female child who becomes pregnant before completing her education shall be given opportunity after delivery to continue with education on the basis of her individual ability; the establishment of Universal Basic Education Act in 2004; the establishment of Education for All Goals (EFA), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), among others. These declarations have helped the present generation of girls to have better educational opportunities than their mothers. Recent statistics still showed that despite marked improvement in female enrolment in the country, girls still lack behind in the formal education system particularly in the North and South- South region of Nigeria. The paper therefore, seeks to address the

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barriers of girl child education in Nigeria and suggest useful strategies for improvement.

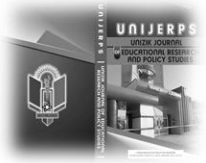
Relevance of Girl Child Education

The importance of education in the life of an individual particularly, the Girl-child cannot be overemphasized. Female education is very crucial for national development and the role of women cannot be under estimated. There is a general belief that 'when you educate a man, you educate one person but when you educate a woman, you educate a nation'. This statement reiterates the importance of female education for national development. Educating the girl child produces mothers who are educated and will in turn educate their children. Kiki (2010) asserted that the girl child needs to be educated to acquire knowledge and skills needed to advance her status for social interactions and self-improvement. The girl child education also prepares her to face reality in the society and teaches her to be a good wife and mother. Kiki further stated that when the girl child is educated, she realizes her full potentials and enables her to take decisions that affects her life.

Stressing on the relevance of girl child education, Agusiobo (2018) noted as thus:

Educating girls and women is an important step in overcoming poverty. Poverty reduction enables the fulfilment of her right to education and other rights of the girl child and young women which serve as a powerful tool in making a change in her life, enhances gender equality, self- esteem, empowerment, social wellbeing, leadership and critical spirit Pg. 9

Similarly, UNICEF (2017) noted that investing in girls' education transforms the communities, countries and the entire world. Girls who receive education are less likely to marry young and more likely to live healthy and productive lives. UNICEF further stated that educated girls earn higher income, participate in decisions that most affect them, and build better futures for themselves and their families. It is also pertinent to state that girls who go to school and complete schooling are able to have more access to social positions, better pay-jobs, and higher income. Educated girls are empowered, gain a lot of knowledge and skills that will enable them fit into every sphere in life without


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fear of gender discrimination and neglect and it negative effects, thereby making a remarkable change in their lives. Educated girls are able to take decisions that affect their lives without intimidation or molestation. Girl child education helps eradicate child marriages and early child birth. Most of these girls that get married before the age of eighteen suffer various reproductive problems such as VVF (Vesico vaginal Fistula) and if not properly handled, leads to death.

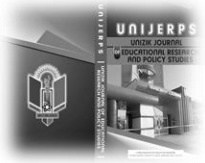
It is worthy to note that there are a lot of women who have made remarkable feat in Nigeria as a result of the education they acquired. Among them are: Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, Mrs Winifred Oyo- Ita, late Dora Akunyeli, Mrs. Sola Borna, Prof. Florence Obi, among others. All these women are products of investing in the girl child education. Girl child education remains an indispensable tool for national development. However, in spite of the relevance of girl child education in Nigeria, there are still barriers militating against the girl child in achieving its full potentials in the country.

Barriers to Girl Child Education

There may be numerous barriers to girl-child education, but for this article, the authors narrowed the barriers to the following, thus

Cultural Influence: A misinterpretation of the traditional norm or even Islamic holy text, the Quran may influence parents to keep their daughters out of school. Even some parents have the misconception that sending their daughters to school will bring about immoral behaviour among them. While some cultures see education of the girl child as a wasted investment. This misconception stems from the view and belief that a girl is often not expected to assume leadership positions in the community and may end up not providing for the family on completion of her education. Furthermore, that a girl is expected to marry and leave the father's house. Even if she does, end up eventually providing for her family, she will most certainly earn less than her male counterparts because of the gender wage gap.

Sexual Violence and Abuse: Sexual violence and abuse could result in intimidating environments and when in


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the environment the girl- child may also be unwilling to come to school because of possible abuse that may face them there. Alika, Aihie and Ohamaka (2019), posited a lot of consequences associated with school related violence, among which is sexual violence. In many schools in Nigeria, Corporal punishment is present and students may often get beaten for things they cannot help, such as not being able to afford and get a uniform or a book. Often times, girls often report having feelings of psychological adjustment due to being harassed by their male classmates and teachers. USAID (2012) has reported sexual violence against girls in schools, in many African countries including South Africa, Zambia, Sudan and Nigeria. The report identified series of sexual violence perpetrated by male teachers against female students from primary schools to the universities. Sexual harassment, abusive acts, promise of good grades or threat of failure were also identified to be used by many teachers to achieve sexual relations with students. This act of sexual violence becomes a threat to girl child education.

Religious Chaos: The ethnic values of some religions do not help matters, as they are often perceived with tremendous suspicions. **UNESCO and UN Women (2016)** ***reported that the emergence of religious insurgents in places, deny females access to western education. Nigeria is not left out where some religious sects terrorize female schools. Unfortunately, many Nigerian girls and their families are afraid to venture in education owing to security factors, especially after the Boko Haram incidences, when Islamic sects kidnapped and even gave out some schoolgirls as child brides. In April 14, 2014, the Vanguard Newspaper reported that about 207 Government Secondary School students, Chibok, Bornu State, Nigeria were abducted from their school dormitory by Boko Haram. In February 19, 2018, another set of girls were abducted from Science Secondary school Dapchi, Yobe State, Nigeria by Boko Haram, among others.***

Economic Factors: The economic situation in Nigeria could be seen as not palatable. Nigeria as a nation is undoubtedly characterized by very harsh economic conditions. This has given rise

to scarcity of resources. In the bid to meet up with the harsh economic situations, parents may be faced with the choice of whom to send to school. Most often, it is the girl-child that remains at home, girls get withdrawn from schools so as to help to supplement family income. UNICEF, (2007) pointed out that in some cases, the girls are given out as house maids or given out to early marriage to get a huge bride price.

Fear of Safety of the Girl child: In rural areas girls often walk many miles before reaching their schools. The walk can take over an hour, which makes the girl child's parents concerned for the safety of their child on the way to school.

Poverty: Poverty can be seen as a barrier to girl child education in Nigeria, considering the fact that **e**xtreme poverty prevents the education of a girl. Alika & Hillary (2012), report, Nigeria as a country with 70 percent of people living below the poverty line, many poor Nigerian families are known to force their girls out of school to make them work full time. Often girls are sent to hawk on the streets. Extreme poverty also can make families unable and unwilling to pay for school necessities such as uniforms and books.

Strategies for Improving the Girl-Child Education

The word strategy can be referred to as a plan of action to bring about a desired result, such as achievement of a goal or solution to a problem. In this study, a strategy is a way of overcoming the barriers of girl child education to enable them self- actualized.

One of the strategies for improving girl child education in Nigeria is by creating awareness to parents that every child born into a family is important and deserves to be loved and treated equally especially by giving them access to education. This is necessary because the discrimination of the girl child starts from the home.

Another is by abolishing the traditional practices that negate the girl child from going to school. There is this belief in most Nigeria societies that the girl child is meant to stay at home and assist in house chores and the boy child sent to school because when the girl child is educated, she becomes an asset to her husband. This is mostly seen in families

where there are so many children to carter for. This belief is still on in some south and northern part of Nigeria.

In addition, UNICEF (2007) maintained that one of the ways of improving the girl child education is through advocacy and sensitization to different stakeholders like policy makers, traditional leaders and even through social media on the relevance of girl child education.

The need for the government to establish second chance education in all the states of the federation and encouragement of girls who dropped out of school to enrol in non- formal education programmes in order to acquire technical and vocational skills to be useful to themselves in the society.

Furthermore, Otu (2016) noted that one of the strategies to improve the girl child access to education is for the government to lower the cost of education to parents by:

- Providing scholarships for girls particularly those from poor homes and rural areas
- Providing textbooks in the core subjects (at primary and secondary level) and uniforms
- Finding ways of reducing the need for girls' labour particularly among the low- income families.

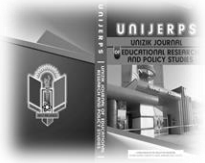
Other strategies for improving girl child education can be enumerated as follows:

A. To locate schools closer to communities- Reducing the distance that girls travel to go to schools will encourage their participation in education. Parents are more comfortable about the safety of their daughters when schools are located near the communities.

B. Employing female teachers- Employing female teachers improve enrolment and retention of girls in schools because the female teachers act as role models to them especially when the girls come from poorly educated families. Consequently, the presence of female teachers reduces parents' worries about the safety and morality of their daughters in schools.

C. Reducing girls' labour - in most African countries, girls contribute more to household productivity than boys. Girls spend much of their time in housework, carrying fuel and water, food processing and child care. Programmes must therefore be

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designed to reduce this labour on the girl child.

D. Retooling curriculum to suit practical needs – School curricula must be made to be relevant to girls' lives. Gender stereotype should be avoided. The curricula should be expanded to include practical knowledge and skills that will help girls perform their daily tasks. Hence, their chances of enrolment would be increased.

Conclusion

From the above discourse, it can be concluded that education is the right of every child irrespective of gender. The girl- child deserves education especially in northern and South- South region of the country to enable her realise her potentials as well as making her a responsible member of the society. Although, there are barriers militating against the girl child having access to education which have been discussed in this paper, there are also some strategies pointed out that would help improve the girl child education in Nigeria. It is true that some efforts have been made by successive governments to improve the girl child education in Nigeria. Much still needs to be done if women must fully contribute to the development of the nation.

Recommendations

In order to overcome the barriers of girl child education in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

1. The need for government at all levels to give more attention to girl child education becomes imperative. Governments at all levels should fund education of the girl child and provide scholarships and grants for her. This is because if the girl child is well educated, she will have chances of contributing to the nation.
2. There is need for attitudinal change, a re-orientation of societal and parental values towards the education of girls would be necessary as there is a negative conception of perceiving girls' education as worthless or valueless.
3. Early marriage especially in the northern part of Nigeria should be outlawed and parents should be educated about the benefits of later marriage. Child labour, rape, female genital mutilation and other forms of child abuse should be abolished. The government should not just enact polices but there should be

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strong enforcement of these laws and the violators should be severely punished.

4. Girl- child education should be all-inclusive; the disadvantaged groups, the disabled group, the nomadic and fisher- folk must have access to a good and quality education. This will go a long way in enhancing female education in the country.

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