

# Gender Differences in educational opportunities: The case of girl-child education in Nigeria

Christopher C. Obi

Federal College of Education (Technical)

Asaba Delta State, Nigeria.

## Abstract

This paper X-rays the importance of educating the girl child and the factors that militate against it. Government and societal efforts at both national and international level are also discussed. It observes that in spite of government efforts a lot is yet to be done in the area of girl-child education for national development. Several recommendations are therefore made for the improvement of the girl-child education.

## Introduction

The contributions of women in the development of any nation are very obvious. These contributions begin from the family, which is the nucleus of the society. Hence, there is need to give them all the needed and necessary attention for their empowerment so that they will make positive contributions in the development of Nigeria in this democratic dispensation. This can be achieved through education which is regarded as the major instrument in the development of human resources of any nation of which the girl-child is a part. The education of the girl-child is the empowerment of the woman of tomorrow. Azikiwe (1988) attests to the fact that the rate of illiteracy as regards the girl-child in the country is alarming. In most Nigerian homes women or female children are relegated to

the background and their male counterparts are given preferential treatment. Some people do not even believe in the education of their female children (Abdulazeez, 2004).

However, when the girl-child is exposed to a type of education like the primary education, she will be able to read and write and therefore be in a better position to seek for further development of her potentials in higher institutions. Education according to Okeke (1988) is one of the major ways of empowering women to enable them contribute maximally towards national development. The popular saying that if you educate a man, you educate an individual, but 'if you educate a woman, you educate a nation' explains the importance of the education of the girl-child. This must be the reason why the girl-child and her right to education should be given a central place of prominence on the human development agenda, since it is clear that human capital development is one of the developmental agenda of this present government.

The educated girl-child is very valuable to the nation for the following reasons: She as a professional contributes to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). She can also contribute meaningfully to national issues which may lead to the resolution of conflicts within the nation. Her contributions can lead to a healthier nation since she will bring up her family in a healthy environment. This will also lead to savings both on the part of the family and the nation as less money will be spent on treatment of diseases. The healthy family can result in a nation's healthy manpower which will lead to higher productivity and a wealthier nation. Furthermore, she is able to read, write and then specialize in various fields of endeavors as well as being able to take care of her immediate family, thereby contributing to the building of a disciplined society She is able to take care of herself financially and otherwise instead of being a liability to others. Hence, the education of the girl-child should be given adequate attention in Nigeria. Since the primary education is the bedrock on which all other levels of education can

stand, it therefore means that enough attention must be given to primary education so that the girl-child can have an efficient and effective education for the nation to achieve the desired results.

### Recent Efforts to Promote Girl-Child Education

Government and non-governmental organizations in Nigeria, as well as international organizations have in recent times put in frantic efforts to promote the girl-child education. At the international scene we had according to Jekayinoluwa (2003) the following:- the World Summit for Children, New York 1990; World Conference on Education for all, held in 1990; 42<sup>nd</sup> Session of the International Conference on Education held in 1990; 6<sup>th</sup> Conference of Ministers of Education in African Member States, held in Dakar, 1991, the World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna, 1993; the Pan African Conference on the Education of Girls held in Ouagadougou, 1993; and the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conferences on Women held in Beijing, 1995; as well as other conferences organized by UNESCO. All these were meant to highlight the importance of girl-child education and the attendant's benefits to the nation.

Also in Nigeria many programs have been developed, all in the attempt to improve girl-child education. The programs that have been established to this effect include: National Association of Women in Science, Technology and Mathematics; Creation of women department in the Federal Ministry of Education; Creation of special awards for girls; the creation of women development centre. And the formation of the National Association of Women in colleges of education.etc .As part of other government efforts in girl-child education all Female schools were created. According to Jekayinoluwa (2003), out of the 62 Federal Government Colleges and Unity schools in Nigeria, 31 are

for girls only. There is also an all-female Federal College of Technology and an all-female Federal Technical College.

In spite of these efforts Money and Erhinyodavwe (2005) reported that the girl-child population has a very high percentage of illiteracy. Which means that the efforts made so far cannot prevent additional efforts from every stake holder in the educational sector because there seem to be opposing forces directed against the girl-child education. Therefore, no amount of money or effort geared towards the education of a girl-child both by the parents or the government is a waste (Ojo, 2001).

#### Some Factors Militating Against the Girl-Child in Nigeria

There are many factors that militate against the girl-child education .In some Nigerian societies; they believe that it is an abomination to train a female. Their beliefs are that women are supposed to be good cooks and mothers. Education of women is seen as a treat to male chauvinism. Some men believe that once a woman is educated, she will be difficult to control and she could become loose, immoral and promiscuous. The society in most cases sees the girl-child as a second fiddle; as a result, little or no effort is made towards her education especially when the parents are made to make a choice between the male-child and the girl-child. According to Ekezie (1997), the traditional society gives little or no recognition to the efforts or contributions of women to national development. They believe that a girl-child is inferior to the male-child. This was emphasized by Igwe (1994) when he stated that the female sex has always been regard as weak, sometimes unintelligent, inferior and often emotional. UNESCO (1997) as cited by Jekayinoluwa (2003) suggests that “son preference” is curtailing the access of female children to school. This traditional belief has led to the relegation of the girl-child in the society.

In addition, some parents discriminate against the girl-child in terms of training, role models and skills. The parents, teachers and other members of the society see the girl-child's place as to be curtailed to house keeping jobs. This sex-typed experiences and orientation is given to the girl-child right from birth. But research finding have shown that both sexes are equal in most abilities. Rogers (1972) specifically stated that the sexes are equal in most abilities .But the superiority of one sex over the other sex should have resulted in the games played by each sex. The parents at birth give the impression that the girl-Child is inferior to their male counterparts and this makes them prefer training the boys first. Consequently, the home backgrounds also affect the child's education. In most Nigerian homes women or female children are relegated to the background while their male counterparts are given preferential treatment. Some people do not even believe in the education of their female children. The home background of the girl-child determines the accessibility to education. Girl children from the Affluent home get education and this group constitutes a low percentage of the population. The girl-child from the lower income is heavily discriminated against and therefore likely to be deprived of the opportunity of acquiring education Closely associated with this point is the fact that the girl-Child is seen as not important, therefore she can easily be given out for marriage as early as 15 years of age. Awoniyi (2003) quoting Essan (1994) and Abayomi (1995) pointed that 46.2 percent of girls between 15 and 19 have already begun child bearing. This early marriage into which the parents forced the girl-child prevents them from having formal education.

In Muslim dominated societies in the core north; women education is not taken as a necessity. Some Muslim parents believe that when they send their female children to school they could become promiscuous and would not respect their husbands and might even deviate from the practice of their religion. The result is that there is social inequality and gender discrimination which are

problems faced not only in Nigeria but worldwide. Some believe that positions of authority are the exclusive reserve of men. Some people believe that women have low I.Q. and as such are not expected to venture into some courses like Medicine, Engineering, etc. However, events have proved some of these assertions very wrong as we have women occupying posts formally seen as the reserves for men only. For instance we now have women Professors, Doctors, Engineers, Pharmacists, vice Chancellors, Provosts of Colleges of Education, Rectors of polytechnics, Chief Librarians, Accountants, Prolific writers, successful business women, Ministers, Commissioners, and Directors Etc.

The policies of the government can be those of the national policy on education and other educational policies introduced by various governments from time to time. The national policy on education (1981) is gender neutral since no specific Mention was made as regards women education. This gender neutral policy has led to a situation where the curriculum meant to stimulate women education was not built into the educational system from the on set. Apart from the national policy on education which guides education nation wide, the administration of primary school education in Nigeria is predicated on the various education policies which attempt to rationalize the political beliefs, decisions and actions of the policy makers. Subjecting education policies to the above factors therefore exposes our educational policies to risk. This point of varying education policies by various governments has also been condemned by Nwogu as cited by Udoh, Akpa and Gang, 1990, when they stated that:

“we jump from one education policy to another in utter confusion and apparent mindlessness and hence we often cannot even wait to see the Maturation and effectiveness of one policy before we abandoned it for a New one projected and hailed as the panacea of not the problem of the Educational system but also of the ills of the society itself”

The situation is that policies that promote girl-child education in one government may not be continued by successive governments. Eshak (1984) stated that the policies relating to the provision of primary education had been varied, unplanned and uncoordinated nationally. Each of the three former regions in Nigeria followed a policy of expansion that suited its environment and political characteristics. This uncoordinated attempt led to regional disparities in educational opportunities for females. The percentage of women with no form of education in the northern region is relatively higher when compared with other regions. Awoniyi (2003) who cited Essan (1994) and Abayomi (1995) stated that the Demographic Health Survey (DHS) in 1990 revealed that 87.8 percent of women in the Northwest zone as compared to 26.1 percent in the south west had no formal education. Jekayinoluwa (2003) also observed that gender gap exists or persists in favor of boys at all levels of the Nigerian educational system. He stated that available records of gross primary enrolment rate in Nigeria between 1990 and 1993 indicate that despite the steady increase in female enrolment rate, the gender gap was 17.3 percent in 1990, which fell to 14.9 percent in 1991 and rose to 18.4 percent in 1993.

Olagunju (2008), while citing a recent UNICEF report of 2008 said that 10 million Nigerian children of school age are currently out of school. A breakdown of the figure shows that 6.2 million are girls while the remaining 3.8 million are boys. This also is an abnormal situation, which government policies therefore should aim at correcting.

### Recommendations

Education is an important tool for both social and economic transformation of a nation. The primary education is an important level of

education that determines how strong the upper level of education will be. Since the girl-child plays an important role not only in their life but in the life of others, she therefore needs an effective and efficient primary education to participate actively in our complex society.

In view of the importance of the primary education to the girl-child in particular and the nation in general, all stake-holders in the education sector will have to do more to eliminate these factors militating against the girl-child education by: Restructuring the primary school curriculum to eliminate all gender stereo typed experiences; Training the present set of teachers through seminars on the dangers of gender biased teaching; Restructuring teacher training curriculum to eliminate all gender stereo typed tendencies and ensuring that parents do not bring up the children in a gender stereo typed environment. Furthermore, all children irrespective of sex should be exposed to the same experiences. The public should also be enlightened on the importance of the girl-child education and the dangers of gender stereo typed education.

Government should take stringent measures against parents who refused to send their children to school. And parents should be encouraged to send their daughters to school either by the award of scholarship or reduction in fees paid to government. There should also be more adult centers for the training of adult women in the society, which should spread across the country especially in the rural areas. And more women should be included in the policy-making bodies, so that the interest of women will be reflected in policies.

### Implication for Education

This paper is meant to discuss the state of the girl-child education, state the values derived from their education, highlight those factors militating against it and recommend how this situation can be improved upon. If the nation is to



improve on all sectors of human endeavor it is therefore necessary that certain actions should be taken to improve on the girl-child education. The nation has to adequately pay more attention to the girl-child education. Some steps required are as follows: There should be awareness campaign on the part of the government. The society should be enlightened through jingles or drama on the values of getting the girl-child educated. This will encourage the parents to send their girl children to school. Parents should be discouraged from sending their children into early marriage or discriminating against the girl-child. The primary school education should be made free in terms of payment of such fees as tuition, facilities and equipment as was done in the universal primary education era. This will break the barrier of poverty and discrimination against the girl-child as they can decide on their own to go to school if they are aware that the government is fully sponsoring education at this level.

The girl children and parents should be given incentives in form of an additional award to the best three or more female children in each state of the federation every academic session. This will bring about the spirit of competition in the children and will further improve the quality of the primary school education. The government should provide more primary schools so that the strain of getting admission into the primary schools in the federation will be reduced. Easy admission procedures will mean more girl children in the primary schools. Government and the private sectors should empower the masses through the provision of jobs, which will lead to improvement in the standard of living. So that parents can afford the girl child education and the cases of children selling on the streets or staying at home to take care of the home will be reduced. The government should have a new and uniform curriculum and educational policies, which should govern every child of the federation, irrespective of the region.

The present crop of primary school teachers should be re-trained with the new curriculum so that there will be no hitch in the implementation of the

curriculum. The teacher education programs like teacher colleges should include new orientation, which is meant to reduce the gender stereo typed activities and experiences. This new training will enhance the new approach of the government aimed at encouraging the girl child primary education. The primary school education should be made relevant at the end of the program. The primary education should not be seen as ending abruptly, programs should be put in place to absorb the primary school leavers if they decide not to go into the other levels of education. A way of doing this is through the encouragement of small-scale industrial growth, which will offer jobs to primary school leavers.

### Conclusion

Education is important for the girl-child especially now that the nation is striving to achieve higher level of development in all spheres of life. The education given to the girl child will enable her fit properly into the rapidly changing world. The effectiveness and efficiency of education as regards the girl-child can only be achieved if we eliminate the factors militating against it. The co-operation of the government, private sectors, parents, teachers and members of the general public in the implementation of the measures stated above is therefore needed if the nation is to succeed in educating the girl child to enable them contribute their quota in national development.

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