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## Empowering women and girls through education

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### Abstract

In most third world countries, the girl-child, and by extension, women generally have not been accorded their natural right of place in the scheme of things as human beings, and as equal players in the affairs that concern them. They are short-changed, discriminated against, victimized, and stereotyped as hewers of wood and drawers of water, as well as mere labour providers on the farms and in homes. This paper explores challenges and opportunities for the empowerment of women through education. Based on a study of existing research, offering girls basic education is one way of giving them much greater power of enabling them to make genuine choices over the kinds of lives they live, greater access to the labour market, better earnings and personal empowerment.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Child, Women, Girls, Education, Discrimination

### 1. Introduction

The girl-child, and indeed women the world over, especially in Africa and Nigeria have had their destinies sealed from birth by tradition and culture which discriminate against them on account of their biological sex. They have been called the weaker sex in order to justify societal discrimination and oppression against them. They must remain silent hewers of wood and drawers of water, bearers of children, and toilers of arduous labour from sun-rise to sun-set. They can be seen but not to be heard in both the private and the public places of decision making. The girl-child by the natural status ascribed to her by male defined norms of societal conduct and behaviour, remains a property to be owned and commoditized. Consequently, her rights are circumvented by tradition, custom and the chauvinism of male patriarchy.

Across regions of the globe, while the numbers of children out of school have been declining for some time now, girls comprise a lower proportion than boys. In total, around 28 million males and 24 million females of primary school age are out of schools, globally. However, there are significant regional differences. There is also wide variation in out of school rates for girls of secondary school age across regions.

Generally speaking, in low and middle income developing countries, there is still considerable concern with the gender dimension in the access to primary and lower secondary education across different parts of the country. According to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20<sup>th</sup> 1959, education is one of the fundamental human rights which every child, regardless of gender, is entitled to. Again, in the UN Declaration on the Rights of the child, it is made very clear that there are to be no exceptions to the human rights entitlement of children, be he male or female.

Further to the above, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 34/180 of 18<sup>th</sup> December 1979 which created the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The convention came into force on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1981 and by March 2010, a total of 186 countries (including Nigeria) became signatories to the convention. The basis of CEDAW lies in its Article 2 (f) which enjoins states parties "to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women", in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in field of education.

Article 10 particularly urges parties to ensure on a basis of equality of men and women, the same conditions for career and vocational guidance, for access to studies and for the achievement of diplomas in educational institutions. Thus, equality shall be ensured at all

levels of education and in all types of vocational training. The convention calls for an end to any stereotyped concept of the roles of women and men at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging co-education and other types of education which will help to reduce female student drop-out rates and to encourage in organizing programmes for girls and women who have left school prematurely.

Special mention must also be made of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which elaborately spells out over 40 substantive rights of children which includes the “rights to proper and responsible education and vocation”. (See Articles 28 – 29). Nigeria ratified the above mentioned convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 and this culminated into the passage/enactment of what is now commonly referred to as the Child Rights Act 2003. Regrettably, only 24 states out of the 36 states of the Federation have so far enacted the Child Rights Act as law in their various State House of Assembly. Suffice it to note that the Child Rights Act 2003 adopted all the Fundamental Human Rights set out in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as rights also guaranteed to the child among which includes “Right to free, compulsory and universal primary education”.

Therefore, viewed from the perspectives of the above mentioned international conventions and statutes and the Nigerian Constitutional Provisions, it could be said that every child, without any exception whatsoever, whether a male child or a girl-child is entitled to such fundamental human rights as education without distinction or discrimination on account of race, colour, language, religion, birth or sex or other status, whether of himself/herself or of his/her family. But the Multi-Million Naira question that is seriously begging for an answer is this: To what extent has the Nigerian girl-child been availed of her fundamental human right to education?

This paper therefore, seeks to reposition the place of the girl-child vis-à-vis her inalienable rights as a human being and an indispensable ally and co-traveller in Nigeria’s strive towards the actualization and the attainment of empowerment of girl-child through education. It is indubitable that no meaningful agenda-setting and development objectives can be attained in a situation where the girl-child is sidelined and consigned to the kitchen closet without conscious policy consideration for empowerment through the acquisition of quality education that liberates and equips her for sound economic, political, social and cultural participation for self-actualization and development. Education is the bedrock of all development, Mama Tola in Hegher’s Aishatu (2002) <sup>[10]</sup>, reasons quite plausibly that, “without school, no job, without job, no good husband, no beautiful clothes, no beauty, yes, it is the end of the world... *“Lack of access to education is indeed the end of the world, because without it, there is certainly no future for the girl-child in the strict sense of full inclusion and participation in the development process, self-actualization, self-fulfillment and personal freedom”*. Education has been recognized as the most important tool man has at his disposal to develop his environment and improve himself. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations, education is one of the fundamental human rights. Every child, regardless of gender, has a right to it.

Education is one of the most critical areas of empowerment for women as affirmed in Beijing Conference in 1995. It is also an area that offers some of the clearest examples of

discrimination which women suffer. Among children not attending school, there are twice as many girls as boys, and among illiterate adults, there are twice as many women as men.

Having established the intellectual climate and direction of this discourse, one shall examine the basic conceptual issues, such as an understanding of the girl-child, and the concept of education, empowerment, the factors affecting girl-child education, importance of girl-child education and the benefits. Our discourse will end with conclusion and recommendations for a way forward.

### The Girl-child

The girl-child is a female homo sapiens of unmarried age that is defined by the anatomical and physiological characteristics that set her apart from her male counterpart. As a compound noun, the term connotes the sex and age bracket of the gender reference. There is therefore a rite of passage that allows a transition through adulthood culminating in old age. For the purpose of this discussion, there will be an obvious overlap of reference to both girl-child and woman as synonyms. Hughes, Krochler, and Zanden (1999) <sup>[11]</sup> define Education as a learning process that ushers in “*relatively permanent change in behaviour or capability that results from experience. Education is one aspect of the many-sided process of socialization by which people acquire behaviours essential for effective participation in society*”. In their contribution to the definition of education, Bullock and Stallybrass, Ed. (1977) <sup>[3]</sup> are of the view that it is

- A passing on of a cultural heritage;
- It is the initiation of the young into worthwhile ways of thinking and obeying
- It is a fostering of the individual’s growth.

Onyekwelu (2005) <sup>[12]</sup> sees education as a tool that “*teaches someone how to think, what is good and what is bad, how to solve problems, to know what is fair and unfair, rational and irrational*”... He avers that education imbues an individual with the confidence to adapt anywhere, it builds self-esteem and self-respect, it brings out the best in you and enables you to assert yourself positively, and most importantly, education helps one to identify his / her strengths and weakness. In fact, education encapsulates all these definitions and benefits because the end product is the emergence of a mentally liberated individual that is free to make decisions for himself / herself and shape his/her life, be self-reliant and contribute to national and community development. All of the above seem to underscore Nigeria’s National Education Policy thrust (2004) which seeks, among other things, to create and promote “*self-realization, better human relationship, individual and national efficiency, effective citizenship, national consciousness, national unity, as well as towards social, cultural, economic, political, scientific and technological progress*”.

In the past, education has not necessarily been a priority for the girl-child because of cultural beliefs, poverty etc. It is not surprising because particularly in the Northern part of Nigeria, educating the girl-child is not part of the culture, so girls are not allowed to choose education; neither are they encouraged to go to school. It is believed that the place of the girl-child is in her husband’s house. As a matter of fact, some cultures allow for girls to get married from the age of 8 which is why girls in the Northern region account for the highest rate of VVF in Nigeria.

Until now, it has been challenging to implement programmes

that will enhance education of girls and women in the Northern region – particularly in rural communities, since they are not at liberty to get an education. For instance, the percentage of female children attending school in Nigeria compared with their male counterparts is very low. This is very pronounced in the Northern part of the country where the highest rate of illiteracy among the female children has been recorded to be 70% as a result of early child marriage, according to information obtained from UNICEF, quoted in Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), Nigeria: (Focus on the challenge of enforcing children's rights, November, 2002).

It is also reported that about 36 million female children in Nigeria are not educated. This is in spite of the many International Conventions and Instruments and National Constitutions which make provisions for gender equality and prohibition of all forms of gender-based discrimination against women.

### The Importance of Education

- It is an important agent of socialization, shaping values of attitudes to the needs of contemporary society. It widens the mental horizons of pupils and teaches them new ways of looking at themselves and their societies.
- It is an agent of integration – This is because education has been used in the past to politicize future citizens through the inculcation of a common culture.
- It is both a direct and indirect means of training the future labour force; hence its importance in manpower planning and in the production of the requisite manpower needs of a society.
- Education acts as a strong force in the preservation of the status quo and in resisting social change.
- Education is an agent of social change – In Nigeria today, education more than ever before is being used to open up the citizens thought in order to make them appreciate important changes in society such as education for the prevention of AIDs and diseases.
- Basic literacy – It is mainly through the formal educational systems that individuals are taught how to read and write. This function is not limited to children alone, rather adults of various grades and even the old also benefit from this facility through adult education programme.

### Empowerment through Education

The definition of empowerment derives from the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as well as from the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) [2]. They emphasise equal access to education for both boys and girls, including actions to reduce drop-out rates among girls; equal access to education of the same quality, which draws attention to features of learning, teaching, assessment and management. Empowerment is also associated with ensuring dignity and an inter-connected framework of rights and well-being among children in education. Empowerment signals a connection with economic, social, cultural and political relationships beyond the education system, both as sites for the realization of education empowerment; and building of the insights and attributes associated with empowerment and education.

Empowerment and education offers a wide range of

definitions which draw out different facets of the relationship. Clark (2000) [4] identifies four dimensions of empowerment associated with education – the cognitive (critical understanding of reality), psychological (self-esteem), political (awareness of inequalities and capacity to mobilize) and economic (capacity to generate income). Monkman's (2011) [13] stresses empowerment in education must be understood as a process entailing individual and collective relationships, and working with boys and men.

The authors whose works have been reviewed offers also a wide range of definitions of empowerment. This may be represented by the high level policy agenda. Moghadam and Senftova (2005) argue that the Beijing Platform for Action redefined gender equality to focus on positive actions to promote empowerment of women, rather than reduce discrimination and gender inequality. This process is the subject of extensive critical reflection. These authors define empowerment as a 'multi-dimensional process' covering 'social, economic, political and cultural domains'.

### Factors Responsible for the Discrimination against Girl-Child Education in Nigeria and the Consequences

- **Economic Factors:** Nigeria as an independent entity is undoubtedly characterized by very harsh economic conditions. As a result of this, choice has to be made between whom to send to school. Most often, it is the girl-child that remains at home. Due to poverty, girls get withdrawn from schools so as to help to supplement family income through hawking, trading or even working on the farm so as to support the family. In some cases, the girls are given out as house helps or even sent into early marriage because of huge bride price. Often, it is such girls that fall victims of VVF as a result of immaturity. Husbands are known to have abandoned such young wives to their fate when this happens. Thus, poverty remains one of the largest barriers to access to education by the girl-child. Paying school fees is impossible for many families struggling to make ends meet, especially in light of the on-going food crisis.
- According to UNESCO, children from poor, indigenous and disabled populations are at a systematic disadvantage as are those living in slums. Additionally, girls are not likely to have access to education. UNESCO noted that this is due to sexual reliance, insecure school environments and inadequate sanitation that adversely affect girls' self-esteem, participation and retention. According to World Bank (2003), more than 350 million people, over half Africa's population, live below the poverty line of one dollar a day. This implies that poverty too, excludes children, including the girl-child from school.
- **Sexual Violence and Abuse:** This also hampers the girls from going to school. Due to this fear of sexual violence, most parents deny their girl children access to school
- **Political Factors:** Despite Nigeria's signatory to various international conventions on the right of the children generally, so far, very little has been achieved. The situation remains pathetic and serious. For instance, at the formation of the United Nations which is almost six (6) decades after UNICEF, children's problems are far from solved, especially in the LCDs like Nigeria.
- **The School Environmental Factors:** often, most parents are scared of sending their female children to

school in distant places and would rather keep them at home. According to Umar (1997), curricular, books and other learning materials are usually gender based. She opines that right from childhood, girls are channeled into stereotyped traditional career in form of textbooks illustrations and stories, consequently leading to the development of poor self-image at a tender age. Also, sexual harassments during educational pursuit create serious emotional and psychological strain on the girl-child.

- **Socio-cultural and Religious Factors:** In most African societies, especially in Nigeria, the role of the girl as a wife and mother is conveyed as the utmost priority not only by her parents, but also by the girl-child herself. However, in the Nigerian context, gender discrepancy in education is sustained by cultural factors. This wrong notion that her place is in the kitchen, to be seen and not to be heard has had very serious implications on the girl-child's ability at self-actualization. Afridi (2010) <sup>[1]</sup> notes that out of the 130 million children in LCDs without access to education, 81 million are girls. Also, certain cultural and traditional practice like female circumcision, early marriage etc is to say the least unprogressive, because they lead not only to absenteeism, distraction, but also to eventual dropout of girls. More so, the ethics and values of some religions do not help matters, as they are often perceived with tremendous suspicions.

One reason to agree with the above viewpoints is in the sense that some mothers feel that since they were not educated, their daughters do not need education.

Furthermore, some families do not believe in education of girls. Despite the introduction of free primary education in the country, which counted for an increase in enrolment, a sizeable number of children, especially girls, still find themselves out of school owing to a number of reasons. These reasons are: demands for their labour in the homes such as assisting in looking after younger siblings, child marriage, doing house chores, death of mother and looking after the sick member of the family. Some girls are given to marriage against their wish and when they refuse, they are threatened with death; the children are given to marriage at a very tender age in quest of dowry from the husbands.

Some parents justify the denial of girls of their rights to education to prevent them from bringing shame to the family through early pregnancy. Yet others believe that women who are at the same level of education as the men are a disgrace to the community because more often than not, they will not get manied and if they do, it will be to a foreigner. For such parents, early marriage is the best way to prevent this and at the same time, preserve traditions.

From the foregoing, it would then be seen that the Nigerian society is essentially a patrilineal society with deep-seated prejudice against the girl-child. Emphasis is usually placed more on the education of the male-child than that of the girl. This prejudice against girl-child education is rooted in the cultural tradition that an educated girl is a bad investment for her immediate family or parents on the ground that she will eventually marry and go and serve her husband.

These cultural beliefs and practices tend not only to reduce the status of women to a subordinate and subservient position, but also inhibited the womenfolk from progressing beyond the doors of their households/kitchens, which is regarded as the woman's quintessential primary roles and

fulfillments.

The painful consequence of this is that the uneducated girls of yesterday have become the uneducated wives and mothers of today. It can be said that the girl-child is an assurance of continuity of the human society. Without the young girls of today, there will be no society of humans tomorrow. Yet, they are the most vulnerable members of the society. Education will no doubt equip the girl-child with the mental, intellectual and emotional capabilities required to face life. Moreover, it is now generally accepted worldwide that educated mothers are better equipped than their uneducated counterparts to raise and train their children.

### Conclusion

UNICEF says that going to school will transform the life of a girl-child. It will offer her learning and an expanded sense of her own potential, increasing her self-confidence, her social and negotiation skills, her earning power and ability to protect herself against reliance and ill-health. It is the belief of this paper presenter that women have the same God given potentials as men and that women should be given the tools of opportunity, education and health so that young girls are able to have some authority over their own lives because women have as much diversity in their feelings, their hearts, their minds as men do, and that women should be given opportunities in every society to fulfill their potentials.

It is therefore evident that the girl-child faces a lot of problems that hinder her from going to school. Such challenges are both the internal and external. Education is the right of every girl everywhere and key to transforming her life and the life of her community to develop their full potential and to play a productive and equal role in their families, societies, countries and the world at large. Girl-child education is therefore the key to the empowerment of female children. It allows them to claim their rights and prepares them for the future to assume responsibility as duty bearers for the next generation.

This is why this study has recommended that Government should as much as possible ensure that girl-child education is encouraged in all parts of the country. Since the young girls of today would eventually become the future wives and mothers of tomorrow, and since the kind of wives and mothers we will have in future is dependent on the type of education received by or denied to the girl-child today, every effort must be made to ensure that the girl-child in Nigeria realizes her fundamental right to education without any gender based discrimination.

### Recommendations

For this to be optimally achieved, the following recommendations are suggested in this discussion:

- The Child Rights Convention and other International Conventions as enshrined in the Child Rights Act 2003 must be adopted and implemented in all the 36 states of the Federation.
- The government at all levels must ensure full compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child and the Child Rights Act 2003 which set the marriage age at 18 years. This will put an end to the rampant cases of early childhood marriage which regrettably brings to an abrupt end, the education of the affected girl-child.
- The government should implement policies geared towards the eradication of all forms of gender

discrimination against the girl-child, including policy of integration in formal education.

- Societal beliefs and cultural opinion should be re-orientated and re-moulded as to ensure the protection of the rights of the female children to help meet their basic educational needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potentials in life, like their male counterparts.
- Relevant Curricular – learning materials should be relevant to the girls' background and be in the local languages at the early stages of their formation (0 – 12 years). Government must make sure that they avoid reproducing gender stereotypes.
- Parental and community involvement – Families and communities must be important patrons with schools in developing curriculum and managing childrens' education.
- Low-cost and Flexible Time-tables – Basic education should be free or cost very little. Where possible, there should be stipends and scholarships to compensate families for the loss of girls' household labour. Also, school hours should be flexible so that children can help at homes and still attend classes. In other words, school should be very close to families / homes.
- Schools close to Homes – With women teachers – many parents worry about girls traveling long distances on their own. Many parents also prefer to have their daughters taught by women. It is therefore recommended that Government should employ more female teachers than male teachers because of the dangers associated in men harassing innocent girls under their care.
- Preparation for School – Girls do best when they receive early childhood care, which enhances their self-esteem.
- Even though there are some states in Nigeria where girl-child education is not a priority, we really do hope that these other states will start and push for free-education for the girl-child at all levels, because as we seek to attain the MDGs, education will continue to play a pivotal role in the development of young women and society at large.

Remember, when you educate a woman, you educate a home, and in turn, society will be better for it.

**The time for the change we need and want is now!!  
Yesterday is gone and tomorrow is already with us –  
right now and at this very moment!!!**

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