

## FEMALE EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*The issue of gender inequality has attracted attention globally. International organization like the United Nations (UN) has been making efforts to ensure that women all over the world are given equal rights like their male counterparts in all spheres of life endeavours, education inclusive. It becomes very important therefore, for developing nation as Nigeria to totally embrace this campaign on gender equality as inequality and discrimination hinder growth and development. This paper seeks to examine female education and its significant roles in a sustainable national development. The paper equally tries to x-ray the Nigerian Universal Basic Education. (UBE) Acts of 2004, vis-avis equal rights of education for all Nigerian children with an explicit focus on gender equality. Some challenges on the education of the girl child were also outlined and discussed. Based on the foregoing issue, the paper recommends that the UBE programme should be compulsory and free to every Nigerian child, irrespective of gender. Total adherence to the fundamental human rights of women should also be upheld, if the nation is to experience a sustainable growth and development.*

**Keywords:** Female education, inequality, sustainable development.

### Introduction

Gender issues have attracted the attention of international organization, like the United Nations (UN), (FRN, 1987). This fact has made them to put up a struggle on how to fight the injustice and infringement on the rights of women. Girl-child education is very important for the overall development of the country. The place of women in the overall development of any society is fundamental such that any deliberate neglect of their education could point to danger for the entire society. As it is often said, to teach a man is to teach an individual but to teach a woman is to teach a family and whole nation (Fredrick, 1998). This is because she would pass on her knowledge to her peers and other family members particularly her daughters, thereby multiplying the effects of her own education. The reports of the United Nations as contained in Behebiafai (2000), shows that women are the custodians of social, cultural and fundamental values of the society and permanent change is often best achieved through them. Women are regarded as home builders and this role can only be perfected and achieved when they are exposed socially. This aspect of social exposure of the female folk is best realized through sound education. Education of the girl child is a vital tool to the development of any nation and it puts them in a better position for decision making. According to Behebiafai, (2000), the 1991 population census in Nigeria shows that female population is more than the male and as such he posits that the Nigerian government cannot afford to neglect women education if any meaningful development is to be attained socially, economically and politically.

### **Education of the Girl-Child and its Significance in National Development.**

Education is one of the most effective development investment that any nation can embark on. Adequate investment in education, facilitates the achievement of related development goals and increases the probability that progress will be sustained (USAID, 2008) Education builds the human capital that is needed for economic growth, and countries with educated citizenry are more likely to be democratic and politically stable.

In Nigeria, lip services are paid to education of the girl child at all levels, hence no better environment is created for the education of the girl-child. Therefore, barriers to learning persists and gender inequality continues to flourish (USAID, 2008). Education which should be core in addressing gender discrimination issues, has sadly not been attained and thus the widening gap between male and female gender in Nigeria exists. According to United State Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank, 57% of the 72 million primary school aged children who do not attend school are female. In every aged bracket, there are more female out of school than male. In a recent development, female in the Nigerian context were told that their education is suppose to end in the kitchen and the other rooms. Women are regarded as the "possession" of their fathers, they do not usually have the right to freedom of choice of what, how and when to do things. Education to a very large extent is a major tool for imparting skills and attitudes relevant for an individual to contribute positively to the development of his/her nation. But national development policies, and educational philosophy for equal access to educational opportunity for all citizens seems to be seriously compromised as those who are charged with the responsibility of ensuring this implementation seems to be biased on the relevance of the education of the girl-child.

Engine-Dehir, (2009) states that education is not a charity but rather a fundamental human right for all people, irrespective of the sex, race or economic status. Thus, he maintains that education is the key to sustainable development, peace and stability among nations. Education represent a major form of human resource development and this is determined by the availability and quality of the education to the individual. Education of the female, constitute a fundamental basis for material development and seen as the corner stone for the nation's fast socio-economic development.

King and Hills, (2010), argue that educating females, yield far-reaching benefits for female themselves, their families and the entire society in which they live. Onanya, (2005), states that an educated female is likely to be more productive, informed, a self-confident individual and a skill decision maker. Geiger, (2002) indicates that the objective of education of the female gender is to empower them to participate in the public, and political life. Currently, women education has become a critical development agenda because of its inherent values and benefits not only to the girl-child but also to the larger society. Women are agents of formal and informal education. The foundation of formal education is usually established at home through the mother's guide. The women teaches the child how to cook (rendering catering services at home) caring for the home and all other domestic works which can be transformed into a discipline while in school. The personality which the child takes from home to the formal school, depend on the upbringing, most especially from the mother who is regarded as a teacher and a moulder of destiny. According to Tuoye in Ugbede (1999), informal education given by women at home, most time, has helped to achieve half of the purpose of formal education. This is because, before formal

education, many children have developed self-discipline, good relationship, morally and physically and this helps in enhancing these acquisition and conditions.

In another dimension, women are recognized as strong weapon in formal education, considering their participation, dedication, efficiency and their role in educational administration and management. For example, as Tuoye (1999), observes, majority of the heads' and teachers in primary schools in the country are women. Their involvement in primary education ventures, enables the realization of educational objectives. "Majority of women school administrators are generally good and act as a model to the school community". Women education will also bring about poverty alleviation among women and even men. When women are empowered educationally, they will be competent to take jobs in any organization just like their men counterparts. It therefore means that women education will lead to more children being send to schools thereby bringing to the realization of the objectives of the Universal Basic Education.

#### **The Nigerian Universal Basic Education Act of 2004.**

The Nigerian Universal Basic Education Act, include a wide range of programmes designed to ensure free Basic Education for nine years to all Nigerian children, with an explicit focus on the girl-child and gender equality. In furtherance to this, government and non-governmental organizations committed to gender equality in basic education ensure that a Gender Basic Education policy was enacted. Gender equality suggests a situation where males and females have equal opportunity to realize their full human rights with capacity to contribute to and benefit from everything their society avail or possess. This suggests that there must be openness, parity and equity in every aspect of life especially equality in education (USAID, 2008).

Gender parity according to UNESCO (2003), is attained when the same proportion of boys and girls relative to their respective age groups enter the education system, achieve set goals and advance through the different life cycles. This is fundamentally related to sustainable development and it is globally accepted as a necessity for the promotion of human rights which must take into consideration the physical and biological differences between gender. Though Nigeria has a national gender policy, but there still exist significant gaps in all areas especially education, economic empowerment and decision making. This has resulted to gender disparity mostly in rural areas with Northern Nigeria taking the lead. If females in Nigeria are told that all their education will end "in the kitchen and the other rooms," (BBC News 2016). It therefore mean that the gender equality campaign is a wasted effort and resources and this may have a devastating consequences both on the female gender and the entire nation. It is against this backdrop that UNESCO (2002), has suggested that women who constitute a high percentage of the population in Nigeria must have equal access to quality education to be able to contribute to the development of the country. This is because sustainable human development cannot take place if half of the human race (the womenfolk) remains ignorant, marginalized and discriminated against their men folk.

#### **Barriers to Women Education in Nigeria**

The right to education "has been variously classified as an economic right, a social right and a cultural right. It is also a civil political right since it is central to the full and effective realization of these rights. It is largely recognized that education is much more than the individual who is learning, but also an investment in the future of a society and therefore must be appreciated that

both male and female should have equal access to it. In a society like ours, that is still largely governed by the force of culture and religious sentiments, with a legal framework and system designed to support gender discrimination, coupled with other persistent in balance, the road to gender equality therefore remain wavering with severe challenges posing a barrier to the success of women education in Nigeria. These influences could be religious/socio-cultural belief, economic status of parents, early marriage or teenage pregnancy.

**Religious/Socio Cultural Belief:** In most African countries with Nigeria inclusive, great importance is attached to the male child. The male child most times is treated as a king and seen as superior to the female or girl-child. The belief that the male children are the heir of the family and are to inherit the father's property and perpetuate family names, promote the preference of the male child to females. Under these guise of culture and belief, young girls are denied education and some are forced into early marriage, they are handed over to men often old enough to be their father as husbands. These practices are driven by the belief that female children must never see their first menstrual circle in their parents' houses; they are therefore denied the right to equal education with the male counterpart. Young (2004) argues that, religion/culture is one of the greatest barrier to the education of women. He maintains that male children often enjoy preferential treatment, like exemption from house chores, accelerated and unlimited access to education, right to property/inheritance among others, while the girls are barely tolerated and merely seen as passer-by, as they will one day leave for their husband's house. Also in some cultural/traditional setting, women are quarantined to home keeping and baby making alone, they are denied visibility as these according to their belief, is against their culture (Ifemeje and Ikpeze, 2012).

In some cultural setting also, some women suffer humiliation from their husbands' or kinsmen, just because they are unable to bear a male child who according to belief, will inherit the father's property. There are also cases where some women are sent away from their marital homes because of inability to have a male child, Mgbede (2003), observes that in some part of our country Nigeria, most young girls are denied the right and opportunity to go to school because their parents would prefer them married for their bride price. He adds that men and women do not have equal access to education especially at the tertiary level, a trend attributed to gender discrimination. According to Hanallai, (1986) one half of the population is denied access to education despite the Federal and State laws designed to promote equality in our society. Studies on education and the positions of women in Northern Nigeria, concluded that early marriages hindered the education of women in that area.

Anyanwu (1999), equally observes that the available data on primary, secondary and tertiary institution education enrolment in Nigeria shows that male usually outnumber the female since the colonial days. This according to him is because, females are treated as second class citizen whose roles are limited to domestic activities and child rearing. In schools today, some professions are indirectly restricted to males, especially in the sciences. At the secondary and higher institution, the system tends to prepare girls for what Bakari, (2001) calls, soft profession and cosmetic work. The problems confronting women education in Nigeria today, could not be so much in the domain of public and institutional arrangements but in the lingering culture, values of the Nigerian people, which tends to sustain gender discrimination in Education

(Badejo, 1991). The belief pattern of any society according to him determine the mode of operation, of such society.

**Parents Socio-Economic Status:** Today, Nigeria is considered a poor country, despite her abundant human and natural resources. The level of poverty in the country is so high that so many people cannot afford to send their children to school. Financial difficulty has compelled preference of education for boys over girls. The training of children in school has become so expensive that some parents had no option than to make the girl child drop out of school for the boy-child. In some large families, with limited resources, boys are enrolled for exams to the detriment of the girl child. Ali (2014), states that some parents in Nigeria regard education as an investment. They expect financial reward or assistance from their children afterwards, hence, they prefer to send their sons who they claim are permanent residents who will keep the lineage of their parents home, to school.

**Early Marriage/Teenage Pregnancy:** Moral promiscuity and sexual molestation are often form of barrier to girl child education. Female children unlike males, suffer sexual abuses, either through rape or willingly indulge in it. These unripe sexual activities most times result to unwanted pregnancy which sometimes leads to early marriage. In recent times, other forms of sexual abuses exist, like women trafficking or the new version of kidnapping girls and turning them into reproduction machines to produce fatherless children for sale. These evil indulgences bring negative effect on the girl child's right to quality education as early and unwanted pregnancy also prevent them from completing their education even when they are given the opportunity.

### **Effects of Women Illiteracy on Sustainable Development**

Education no doubt, is the key to development in any society. It is the greatest investment a nation can make for quick growth and sustainable development in all spheres of national economy, (Adebayo, 2010). Okohi and Amubade in Awonyi (2006), emphasize that when women are denied full access to education, only limited results are achieved in such a nation. The deprivation of education opportunity for girls is likely to exclude them from the mainstream development, increase the dependence ratio of the population and result in under development of a nation (Mbanefoh, 1995). Investment in the education of the girl-child is an essential investment for the future of a society at whatever stage of development. Evidence suggests that early investment in the educational development of the girl-child can bring improvement in the life of the child and also provide benefits to the development of the entire society (Young, 2002). Contrarily, it therefore signifies that failure to educate the girl child on the ground of traditional belief/culture, poverty level, child abuse and sexual harassment can stagnate the development of a nation and cause a total dependence of women on either their parents, husbands or government. These on the long-run, hinder growth and sustainable development of such nation. A Nation should be able to provide an educational system free from gender discrimination but trained the individual for a better appreciation of his own cultural traditions while at the same time equipping them with the ability to absorb good ideas, new information and data for resolving the constantly changing problem of their environment if a sustainable development is to be attained in such nation.

### **The Way Forward**

The need for fair hearing on gender issues in Nigeria has been long overdue. This paper attempts to discuss the relevance of education of the girl-child to a sustainable development in Nigeria. Women education is seen as given women opportunity required for them to gain adequate knowledge and capacity, confidence, freedom, the help and ideas to decide what is best for them and act accordingly in fulfilling their own potentials. With women being educated, they would be empowered and contribute socially, politically and economically to the growth and development of the country. Educating the girl-child according to Wahisstrom (2008), is a process of redressing the culture of violence and aggression and inculcating the value of peace, the concept of human dignity and right among citizens of any nation. Therefore education remains a vital key of change for a sustainable development, stable policy and viable economy.

The government should enforce laws already enacted to combat crude practices, such as early marriage that tend to undermine the girl-child education. The Universal Basic Education law on equal education right to all Nigeria children should be strictly adhered to. This can be achieved by mounting effective sensitization campaign programme, using the various educational organ on the special needs of the girl-child education.

### **Conclusion**

Education is a participatory and interactive process of instruction and learning. Okoro in Ari (2013), sees the link between education and sustainable development in any country as essential. The paper acknowledge the fact that women suffer deprivation and discrimination in so many ways, which has relegated them to the background. This paper maintains that education remains a vital key to evolution and progress of any given society. It has also been stated that education changes the women capacity to contributing their quarter to the advancement and development of their society. The need therefore, to ensure parity, equity and gender equality both at home and especially in the educational sector cannot be over-emphasized. The problem women face in their attempt to achieve parity with their male counterpart in education opportunities are real and daunting, since the problems of cultural biasness and societal abuse of the girl-child are more pervasive and deeply rooted in the rural areas especially the northern parts of the country.

### **Recommendations**

Based on issues of gender inequality and education, the paper recommends the followings

- Enlightenment campaign needs to be mounted and sustained by all tiers of government especially in the rural and Northern areas of the country.
- The Universal Basic Education (UBE) 'Act' (2004) which recommends free education for every Nigeria child should be upheld with all seriousness.
- Women who are educated should be given the opportunity to hold some reseanable position in the political setting.
- All forms of cultural and unscientific beliefs that affects the girl-child should be abolished and backed up with laws.
- Families are advised to embrace family planning so that they will be able to carter for the female child and the male child same way.

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