

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF GIRLS' EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

It is a fact that quality education can be life-changing for girls, helping them develop to their full potentials and putting them on a path for success in life. Educating girls in particular can also kick-start a virtuous circle of development. The position of this paper is that girls' education is germane to sustainable national development. Thus, it examines the rationale for girls' education, essential elements of quality education for girls and challenges for girls' education in Nigeria. Girls' education programme interventions, strategies towards enhancing girls' education and ways to lift obstacles to girls' education are also examined. The paper concludes that Nigerian governments have a crucial role to play in providing an enabling environment for Nigerian girls to rekindle their hopes and faith in the ability of the system to provide avenue for development for its people irrespective of sex, age, ability, religious inclination and other mundane considerations. Based on the submission of the paper, it is recommended, among others, that Nigerian governments should provide effective leadership and capacity to promote girls' education, should strengthen community and parental participation in education policy, planning and budgeting processes in favour of girls' education, Nigerian governments, non-governmental organizations and philanthropists should also support girls' education by giving them scholarships and free education and that families need to make significant sacrifices to send their girls to school.

Introduction

Education is central to a person's ability to respond to opportunities and challenges that one encounters in life. By equipping young people with a set of competencies and skills, behaviours and attitudes, and a sense of cooperation and social responsibility that enable them to participate in society as productive workers and responsible citizens, education contributes to economic development, lowers poverty and inequality, and improves lives. Education yields its greatest benefits in societies undergoing rapid technological, economic, and political changes. It also has the potential to benefit most the people and

communities who have the least in terms of other resources. It also benefits society in other ways too, in terms of better health, enhanced ability to cope with economic and environmental shocks, and greater social cohesion, among others. Given these benefits, it is not surprising that individuals, families, and governments alike have been investing increasingly in education. Adekola and Abanum (2010), in Okemakinde (2014a), argue that development cannot take place without education. They stress that development requires an educated and enlightened populace, and that the difference between the developed and underdeveloped

countries of the world is related to the level of literacy among the populace. The importance of education for human development is one of the reasons why governments around the world are committed to ensuring its delivery to their populace.

Educating a girl is one of the best investments her family, community, and country can make. It is a fact that quality education can be life-changing for girls, helping them develop to their full potentials and putting them on a path for success in their life. Educating girls in particular can also kick-start a virtuous circle of development. Many educated girls, for example, marry later, have healthier children, earn more money than they invest back into their families and communities, and play more active roles in leading their communities and countries. This demonstrates that with shared goals and collective action among governments, international organizations, civil society, media, and the private sector, we can change the educational prospects for girls around the world (King & Winthrop, 2015).

Women account for almost two-thirds of the world's 774 million illiterate adults and there has been no drastic change in reducing this share since 1990 (UNESCO, 2014). The gender gaps in literacy rates reflect historic and ongoing gaps in enrolment and completion of basic education. Girls have a high risk of dropping out of primary schools and overall they are less likely than boys to make the transition to secondary schooling and complete lower secondary education. Poverty, gender norms and traditional practices, including early marriage, increase the risk of premature school dropout. In the traditional Nigerian society, there exists the belief that women are second class citizens (Bakari, 2001).

This has resulted in unfair treatment of women especially with regards to education. The average Nigerian parent would rather invest in the education of the son rather than the daughter (Tahir, 2005).

Educating girls is one of the most important investments that any country can make for its own future. Education has a profound effect on girls' and women's ability to claim their rights and achieve status in society, such as economic independence and political representation. In the words of Obi (2009), in Okemakinde (2014b), girls' education does not only bring the immediate benefit of empowering girls, but is seen as the best investment in a country's development. Educated girls develop essential life skills, including self confidence, the ability to participate effectively in society, and protect themselves from sexual exploitation.

Girl's education also helps in reducing children and maternal mortality rates, contributing to national wealth and controlling diseases and health status. Children of educated women are more likely to go to school and, consequently this has exponential positive effects on education and poverty reduction for generations to come. He further asserts that the educated girl-child is very valuable to the nation in that she would be able to contribute to the gross domestic product, contribute meaningfully to national issues which may lead to the resolution of conflicts at home and in the nation. Her contributions could lead to a healthier nation since she will bring up her family in a healthy environment. The healthy family can result in a nation's healthy manpower which will lead to higher productivity and a wealthier nation.

For all these reasons, girls' education has long been recognised as a human right (Department for International

Development, 2005). Educating girls is good for development; girls' education encourages economic growth, contributes to stable and secure communities, reduces maternal and child mortality, reduces fertility rates, raises schooling levels for the next generation and meets human rights standards (Okemakinde, 2014b).

Rationale for Girls' Education

Ultimately, girls' education is a powerful force for catalyzing a virtuous circle of positive development outcomes. King and Winthrop (2015) identify seven main reasons why countries should care about educating girls, these are:

- (i) More educated girls and women aspire to become leaders and thus expand a country's leadership and entrepreneurial talent: One of the pernicious features of gender inequality is that it feeds on itself; parents may have lower aspirations for their daughters than for their sons, and so their daughters too have lower aspirations for themselves. Yet, if given the chance, girls and women can have the confidence and skills to be change-makers. A recent review of the literature on women's leadership found that most women leaders started early, engaging in education and leadership activities as adolescents (O'Neil, Plank & Domingo, 2015). A number of cases have shown that having women leading in their communities can make a difference in leadership, driving policies and programmes that improve family and community well-being (Duflo, 2012; Akinsanya, 2011; Abbott, 2008).
- (ii) With quality education, economic growth is faster when girls learn: Empirical research finds that more gender equality in education is correlated with higher economic growth. Besides, research

concludes that years of schooling is not an adequate measure of educational progress. Instead, it is the quality of schooling that matters (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008). In other words, a big portion of the benefits of girls' education come from not just being in school but learning well while there.

(iii) More equal education means greater economic empowerment for women through more equal work opportunities: Education opens doors of opportunities for young women, especially when they cannot count on family wealth, property, or business connections. Women with more years of schooling are more likely to find employment, own and operate productive firms, and earn higher wages (Quisumbing, 1996).

(iv) More educated girls and young women are healthier and as adults they have healthier children: A child whose mother can read is 50 percent more likely to live past age five. Indeed, the global decline in child mortality has been traced to increases in mothers' schooling, even after controlling for household income (Gakidou, Cowling, Lozano & Murray, 2010).

(v) More educated mothers have more educated children, especially daughters: Empirical studies have shown that mother's education is critical for investments in the human capital of the next generation. (Behrman, Foster, Rosenweig & Vashishtha, 1999).

(vi) More educated women are better able to protect themselves and their families from the effects of economic and environmental shocks: More educated mothers are able to protect their children's welfare during economic or environmental crises through a higher quality of care and their greater ability to mitigate adverse shocks, such as food price changes, that might reduce food intake.

(Vii) Education is valuable for girls in and of itself: Even without all of the developmental and economic goodies that come from girls' education, we should care about educating girls because it is inherently valuable to them and is their right. Where social norms and poverty limit the opportunities a young girl may have to realize her full potential, a quality education can help inform and empower her to make good life choices (UNESCO, 2014).

Essential Elements of Quality Education for Girls

Basic questions germane to quality education for girls, according to DFID (2005), are:

- **Schools:** Is a school within a reasonable distance; does it have proper facilities for girls; is it a safe environment; is it free of violence? If not, parents are unlikely to ever send their daughter to school.
- **Teachers:** Are there adequate teachers; are they skilled; do they have appropriate teaching materials? Is it a female teacher? Are there policies to recruit teachers from immediate communities? If not, girls may not learn as much at school and drop out.
- **Students:** Is she healthy enough; does she feel safe; is she free from the burden of household chores or the need to work to supplement the family income; is there a water source close by? If not, she may never have a chance to go to school.
- **Families:** Does she have healthy parents who can support a family; does her family value education for girls; can her family afford the cost of schooling? If not, economic necessity may keep her at home.

- **Societies:** Will the families and the girl's standing in the community rise with education; will new opportunities open up? If not, an education may not be in the family's interest.
- **Governments:** Does the government provide adequate resources to offer sufficient school places; do salaries reach the teachers; do teachers receive quality training; is the government mobilising other agencies to maximise the provision of schooling; is there a clear strategy and budget based on the specific situation faced by girls? If not, the conditions above are unlikely to be fulfilled.
- **Donors:** Are donors supporting governments to provide adequate resources; do donors contribute to analysing and addressing the challenges girls face; are donors conscious of local customs and traditions; are donors prioritizing the country's needs rather than their own agendas or existing programmes? If not, governments may simply not be in a position to provide a reasonable chance for all girls to get quality education.

Challenges for Girls' Education in Nigeria

Basic education has been enshrined as a universal human right over the past six decades, and the benefits from girl's education for development are fairly well-recognized in global fora, so why do gender gaps in education persist, and what are the best ways to further reduce these disparities? Past studies have included the following as factors affecting education:

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household wealth or income, parents' education, presence of parents in the household, age of child, household composition, the price or cost of schooling, ethnicity, characteristics of teachers and the school, and the perceived returns to schooling (King & Winthrop, 2015).

There are however some obstacles, within and beyond schools, to girls' participation in a full cycle of basic education. In the context of Nigeria, some barriers prevent or shorten girls' schooling. Such challenges include:

- **Economic barrier:** This manifests in school fees and costs, poverty, child work and employment. Most states in Nigeria do not charge tuition fees in primary education, and some have eliminated such fees even at the lower secondary level. Nonetheless, there are other direct costs that can discourage school attendance. When these other costs are gender-specific or when the opportunity cost of school age children's time varies by gender, the total cost of school enrolment for girls may be large enough to result in gender differences. Greater distance to school or the absence of a nearby school has stronger negative impact on girls' than boys' enrolments in many settings.

- **Socio-cultural barrier:** Social norms define the roles that women and men have in the family and the community, the expectations they have about their futures, their individual preferences and the kind of relationships they form. Social norms create powerful incentives that guide people's attitudes and behaviours; behaviours outside the accepted social boundaries can unleash formal and informal systems of social sanction. There are social taboos, for

example, against allowing unmarried girls in public or travelling far from home, but there are typically no such taboos for unmarried sons. These taboos make the cost of school attendance greater for girls than for boys.

- **Early marriage and teen pregnancy** keep girls out of school: Child marriage imposes heavy costs for girls socially, physically, and emotionally and undermines efforts to improve girls' education.

- **Pervasive school-related violence** harms girls and young women: The relationship of school-related violence to educational participation and academic performance is typically not well examined in research on the determinants of schooling, perhaps because of the absence of systematic information on its prevalence. However, there exists extensive school-related violence inflicted on girls. This violence ranges from extreme acts such as kidnapping, bombing, maiming, and killing-acts which are directly targeted at girls (e.g. Malala in Pakistan, Chibok girls in Nigeria). But, it also includes the often invisible but pervasive practices of sexual abuse, exploitation and bullying.

- **Political barrier:** Lack of political-will and sustainability of educational policies largely affect implementation. This manifests in inability to adopt and effectively implement Child Right Acts in many states in Nigeria which is greatly affecting the enrolment of girls in school and their rights to basic education. It also manifests in inadequate learning materials and infrastructures in Nigerian schools to promote girls- friendly school environment.

Girls' Education Programme Interventions

According to UNICEF(2010), the following are some interventions aimed at improving girls' education:

- Raising national awareness in girl-child education and increase political and financial commitments through advocacy and sensitization of policy makers at all levels, parents, school authorities, other leaders and girls themselves.
- Developing schools' technical capacity and pedagogical skills to create a girl-friendly school environment that enhances the participation of girls and improves learning outcomes.
- Establishing child-friendly school principles as minimum benchmarks for effective schools linked to community empowerment and development.
- Creating school based management committees with community involvement and participation.
- Collaborating with governments and other stakeholders in reviewing existing curricula and teaching materials for gender sensitivity.
- Promoting the employment of more female teachers to serve as role models and mentoring out-of-school girls.
- Monitoring and evaluating of girls' education programmes and mobilizing and strengthening inspectorate.
- Promoting synergy between girls' education and poverty alleviation programmes.
- Service delivery on a partnership basis with all stakeholders providing more girl-only schools and improved facilities for the

promotion of quality education.

Strategies towards Enhancing Girls' Education

Taking action on girls' education should not be confined to the halls of government offices or multilateral institutions. Civil society networks, business leaders, media organizations, academia, social enterprises, philanthropic communities, and individual global champions all have a role to play. King and Winthrop (2015) suggest these streams of strategies:

Lean in with girls' and women's leadership: This proposes specific initiatives that are well positioned for engaging diverse actors, including women's groups, technology companies, media partners, transparency and education NGOs, and government education planning departments. These initiatives are envisioned as catalytic that if given sufficient financial and political support, could be scaled up within a short time period. They also represent an attempt to explore relatively new approaches to tackling the decades-long girls' education problem. They are also recommended with the notion that while not directly confronting violence and early marriage; they will certainly help empower girls to push back against these forces.

Focus systemic reform with a gender lens: Ultimately, the best approach for helping girls get educated is to ensure that there is a strong education system, one that enables all children to access good schools and learning opportunities. Good schools must be places where girls and boys alike must be given the opportunity to thrive and grow. Applying a gender lens to the process of sector plan development can ensure that the key tools for national education system reform and associated policies and strategies promote effective actions that advance gender

equality. This entails that the school environment is free of violence; school culture emphasizes respect and equality; teachers are caring, motivated, and trained to teach; infrastructure is adequate and accessible; textbooks and other materials are relevant, present, and used and reflect messages of equality, and students spend their time in school engaged in learning activities.

Girl-generated data initiative: Gender-related data that can be used to monitor, evaluate, and advocate for gender-sensitive programmes and policies are needed to promote further progress in gender equality. To date, citizen transparency and governance initiatives have not typically leveraged girls' and women's leadership or involvement. Girl-generated data has the potential to radically change the power dynamics with girls themselves generating regular information about their circumstances, needs and achievements that is translated into digestible and timely insight for policy makers and educators.

Funding prioritization: International donors should prioritize more of their funding toward areas that should be expected to make significant improvements in the education and gender indicators that are lagging behind. Continued support for filling the gaps in gender-disaggregated data and knowledge gaps about gender-focused reforms is necessary for a powerful public good.

Female teachers teaching female students: It is also advocated that only female teachers should be teaching female students in basic education. Some of the reasons for the advocacy for female teachers are summarized by Kirk (2006) as:

- In some conservative communities, parents will not allow their daughters to be

taught by a male teacher. In such settings, mothers feel more comfortable talking about their children with a woman teacher. Parents may regard the presence of female teachers as partial protection for girls from unwanted attention from boys or male teachers, and even from sexual abuse and exploitation.

- In the school, female teachers may act as advocates for girls, representing their perspectives and needs, and promoting more girl-friendly learning. For example, women teachers may be able to advocate for better toilet and washing facilities, and for providing female students with accurate information about their own bodies and how to look after them.

- The presence of female teachers can support and encourage girls by serving as role models. They represent possibilities that can open up when girls continue their studies. They demonstrate that women can be active outside the home and be agents for community development.

Lifting Obstacles from Girls' Education

Some of the ways from lifting obstacles to girls' education are:

- **High-quality and gender-sensitive curricula and learning materials:** Textbook provision is almost universally accepted as an important tool for teaching and learning when they are utilised. But thumbing through textbooks used in primary schools in Nigeria, one gets an immediate sense of the traditional and accepted gender roles in them. Blumberg (2007) found that gender bias in textbooks exhibits a strikingly common pattern across developing countries where females tend to be greatly under-represented; males and females are associated with certain personal traits; they are depicted in stereotyped ways in both occupational and domestic spheres. The evidence suggests that insufficient work is

occurring in most national educational systems to modify curriculum content, textbooks, and teachers' skills and understanding of gender issues.

- **Girl-friendly infrastructure:** The most common government intervention in education is the direct provision of public schools, which includes the construction of school buildings and classrooms, the allocation of teachers, and the distribution of textbooks, school supplies, and classroom equipment. However, not all spending for infrastructure and school inputs adds to learning; these inputs are not effective when they are not accompanied by complementary programmes such as teacher training or curriculum reform (McEwan, 2014). Schools and classrooms must be environment conducive to learning. Programmes that focus on improving infrastructure and school inputs should be designed with incentives for girls in mind to ensure that they improve girls' education outcomes (Ackerman, 2015).

- **Great teachers:** A focus on the role of teachers in addressing gender disparities is well-deserved. There is strong evidence of the positive relationship between teachers' education, experience, and cognitive skills and their students' academic performance. Having a great teacher entails advancing grade levels or more; but having a weak teacher means mastering less than half of the expected subject content (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010).

- **Cost-reducing mechanisms:** Demand-side interventions which reduce the costs of schooling tend to have the clearest gender-differentiated results on enrollment (Glewwe, 2002). Two broad types of mechanisms are those that transfer

cash to households in exchange for children attending school (a means perhaps to compensate households for the foregone work, domestic work, or work for pay of children) and those that eliminate or reduce direct costs associated with school attendance.

- **Safety in schools and freedom from violence:** Burde and Linden (2013) argue that equalizing the quality of education that all students receive might be a national policy intervention that can reduce school-related violence. They also advocate the benefit of shortening the distance to school to girls' education.

Conclusion

If Nigeria is committed to achieving education for all, it is imperative that its education statistics are reliable, accessible and consistent. The institutions responsible for the collection, storage and analysis of education data at all levels, need to be equipped with the skills and technology to generate robust and up-to-date data. To promote girls' access to quality basic schooling, these data must be accurately and appropriately disaggregated to support efforts towards gender equality in education in Nigeria. Empowering Nigerian girls towards national development should be a matter of national top priority which demands the attention and genuine commitment of every responsible member of the society. The Nigerian government has a crucial role to play in providing an enabling environment for Nigerian girls to rekindle their hope and faith in the ability of the system to provide avenue for development for its people irrespective of sex, age, ability, religious inclination and other mundane considerations.

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Recommendations

Based on the submission of this paper, it is thus suggested that:

- i Nigerian governments should provide effective leadership and capacity to promote girls' education.
- ii Nigerian governments should strengthen mechanisms to monitor gender equality in the education system. They need to put in place policies that create an environment where girls have access to schools and can learn effectively.
- iii Nigerian governments should strengthen community and parental participation in education policy, planning and budgeting processes in favour of girls' education.
- iv Nigerian governments should take appropriate measures to tackle abuse and violence towards girls.

- v Nigerian governments should expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged girls.
- vi Nigerian governments, non-governmental organizations and philanthropists should support girls' education by giving them scholarships and free education.
- vii There is also the need to raise national awareness on girls education and increase political and financial commitment through advocacy and sensitization of policy makers at all levels, as well as parents, school authorities, other leaders and girls' themselves. Moreover, families need to make significant sacrifices to send their girls to school.

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