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Approaches to Reach and Teach the Most Marginalized Children in Nigeria: The Girl-Child Education

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Ajayi, Hannah Olubunmi - Institute of Education, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria
E-mail: holubunmi@yahoo.com

Bello, Theodora Olufunke - Institute of Education, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria
E-mail: beldore@oauife.edu.ng

Abstract

Education is to be the right of every child universally including Nigeria, without discrimination against any child based on whatever reason(s) and none must be denied. However, it has been discovered that many girl-child in Nigeria are at disadvantaged in comparison to their male counterpart. Despite that policy has been formulated and series of initiatives are in place, numerous of this target audience is yet to be reached. Hence this paper examined critically the challenges facing girl-child education in Nigeria and provided ways by which the nation can make head way towards the achievement of Education for All and Millennium Development Goals by 2020 that the nation has set as a new target year.

Keywords: Girl-child, Education, Marginalized, Policy

Introduction

Nigeria is a signatory to major conventions that are connected to the protection and the rights of children and women. Such conventions are the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Eradication of all forms of Discriminations against Women. (Girls embedded) and has joined other nations to advocate basic education and launched this in 1999. The programme, nine-year basic education, incorporates comprehensive early childhood education is meant to reach all and sundry children of the country. By implication, every child is expected to have access to crèche, pre-primary education and other phases of basic education (National Policy on Education 2004) which should be without any discriminatory factors such as gender, region, ethnics, religion or any stigmatizing factors. Suffice to say that even the most marginalized children would be adequately catered for in this education programme.

However, studies have pointed out that there are many children that are not yet in the educational programmes in Nigeria. Even the Federal Ministry of Education RoadMap (2009) indicated that 19.98 million children are at disadvantage among who are children of the nomads, immigrant fishermen; trafficked children, children with HIV/AIDS, children in conflict with the law or war regions, girl-child and children with special needs. Since there is a target period for achieving the set goal of reaching all and sundry educationally, it is imperative to appraise the approach that has been put in place so far to meet the needs of varied category of Nigerian children, especially the girl-child. This category is singled out because they have been more disadvantaged than male counterpart going by history in their access to education, whereas like any other child, they ought to have every rights to quality education judging from the saying that, educating a girl-child indicates educating a home and investing in the society at large.

Girl – Child Education

For decades, there had existed an enormous gender educational disparity in Nigeria as a result of cultural, social and religious factors and largely poverty (Okpukpara & Chukwuone, 2005; www.amplifyyourvoice.com.2010). Statistical report of Federal Government of Nigeria and United Nations Children Fund 1997-2001 indicated a ratio of 94:75 in the enrolment to primary schools at the national level, while the enrolment was twice higher in the Northern States, for example, girls' net enrolment in Sokoto (one of the six target states under the UNICEF African Girls' Education Initiative) is 15%, compared to 59% for boys. Other independent research presented a net

enrolment into primary school at 67% boys to 52% girls while in 1995; it was 67% boys to 47% girls (Oladunmi 1999, Oniye and Okoro, 2006). Also, Osita-Oleribe (2007) opined that more than 60 percent of all adults in Katcha community were illiterates, with females making up more than 64 percent of the group and a wide gap between the number of boys and girls as well as male and female teachers in their schools. The implication is that girl-child in Nigeria has been greatly marginalized educationally which is tantamount to denial of rights.

Since Nigeria has signed her commitment to Joint Committee Declaration of 1990 in Thailand and other subsequent summits advocating elimination of gender disparity, the government and non-governmental organizations have been embarking on various innovative approaches to address the issues. Some of such approaches are:

a. *Enactment of laws*

Laws were enacted to prohibit the employment of school age girls without exposure to educational opportunity. An example of such laws in Nigeria is the National Assembly compulsory free Universal Basic Education Bill, 2003. It is stated in the bill that

Every parent shall ensure that his or her child or ward attends and completes her primary and junior secondary education, while erring parent is to be reprimanded on first conviction and pay a fine of NGN2000 or face a month imprisonment on second conviction (National Assembly UBE Bill 2003, Onye and Okoro, 2006).

This national effort moved some state governments to also promulgate edicts against collection of any form of fees in girls' schools as well as withdrawal of girls from schools.

b *Task forces on the Education of the girl-child*

In 1993, there was inauguration of task forces at the National, Zonal and State levels in Nigeria by the National Commission for Women Affairs. The major focus of the task forces is to create awareness on issues that have to do with girl-child education. The following objectives are to be achieved by the task forces:

- Identify areas of intervention in the education of girl-child

- Work out a definite programme of activities to bridge the gap between the level of literacy among boys and girls
- Identify those traditional norms, values and administrative practices that encourage and widen the disparity between girls and boys
- Eliminate, through mass mobilization, enlightenment campaigns and other programmes the socio-cultural practices that limit the full development of the girl-child

c. Formulation of Policies on girl child education

The National Policy on Women (2000) is a policy document which included issues relating to girl-child education. The objectives of this policy are:

- To expand the facilities for “second chance education to girls and women”
- To enforce legal provision of penalties for withdrawal of girls from school for marriage
- To provide education and relevant training for girls and women with special needs – the handicapped, gifted, nomads, out of school etc.

d. Joint effort by UNICEF and Federal Government

UNICEF in conjunction with the Federal Government and its partners are working to put in place the following procedure in order to improve on the enrollment and education of the girl-child in some states of the federation with the focus of lowering the rate of female illiteracy:

- Meet with traditional rulers, religious leaders, NGOs, and other community groups to conduct advocacy activities so as to build support for girls’ education;
- Promote employment of more female teachers who will serve as role models; establish more girls-only primary/secondary schools and organize rallies on the negative effects of child labour, especially for girls.
- Improve the quality of educational service delivery to encourage girls’ participation and promote learning outcomes, retention, and achievement, by providing in-service training for teachers, administrators and inspectors.
- Evaluation and innovation of the curriculum for gender sensitivity.

- Improve on the learning environment by renovating schools, provision of classroom furniture, books and materials for learning.
- Promote sustainability and community ownership of this initiative by empowering the community members.

Some other approaches are the establishment of clubs like Girls Education Movement (GEM), Mothers Club meant to monitor girls in the schools. Strategy for Accelerating Girls Education in Nigeria (SAGEN) launched in 2003 by the Federal Government of Nigeria is meant to focus on increasing girls' education especially in the mostly affected states such as Sokoto, Yobe, Edo, Ebonyi, Zamfara and Bauchi.

Apart from government programmes, non- governmental organizations such as Human Development Foundation of Nigeria (HDFN) and Millennium Hope put in place projects to reach girl-child. HDFN in Kaduna State focused on girls serving as house help, beggars' children and the orphans. Girl-child in these categories is enrolled in schools own by the NGO and supplies the need materials. Millennium Hope is another NGO project embarked upon by the one time Kaduna State Governor's wife, Aminat Namadi Sambo. Its focus is on Al-majiri and the hawking girls. The children are given western education in their Tangaya schools (Quranic schools) and needed materials such as school uniform, food, cloth are provided. UNICEF has also greatly contributed to the efforts of reaching these most marginalized through their organization of workshops and seminars to stakeholders especially the teachers as well as provision of materials that could make schools to be friendly to children.

To further improve the education of the girl-child in Nigeria, the wife of the former governor of Cross River State in person of Mrs. Mary Odili established a vocational training school where drop-out girls are housed and trained on any vocation. A brief interview with the initiator of the programme during a women meeting at the centre by one of these researchers stressed the need for the programme; in the sense that many girls stop schooling and drop out when they are impregnated by their male counterparts who on the other side continue with their schooling while the girl suffer.

The Challenges

It is true that many initiatives have been put in place at different levels and policy has been formulated, however there are still challenges that stand in the way of achieving the outcomes of the policy put in place by the Nigeria government. The questions are why is there a wide gap between the policy

implementation and the girl-child education? Has the policy formulated been faithfully implemented?

The current challenges include:

- Gender bias in the content of what is taught and in the materials used to carry out teaching and learning processes.
- High poverty rate with 70% of the population living below the minimum poverty level which sometimes leads to the girl-child being sent to early marriage or being asked to stay back at home to do some chores or hawk around to bring more income for the family. The act that exposes many girl-child to sexual abuse.
- Teenage pregnancy resulting in about 30% of school-age girls dropping out of school before age 17 while the boy who is responsible for the pregnancy continues with his schooling
- Inadequate school infrastructure with about 80 students in a class, this adversely affect teaching- learning process resulting in many of them getting out of school system
- Cultural and religious biases which make many parents, especially in large families with limited resources to prefer to send the boy-child to school instead of or before the girl-child. Some religions do not allow girls/women to be seen in public places or to mix up with their opposite sex, so it becomes a problem sending girls/women to school in those parts of the country.
- Inability of the proper implementation of the policy put in place to enhance the education of the girl-child. Many parents belief that the child is theirs and can do whatever they like with her as long as they are the one catering for her.
- With the policy statement that whoever fails to send a girl-child to school or withdraws her from school for marriage shall be punished by the law', the question is how many have been brought to face the wrath of the law or punished?

Way Forward

- Nigeria Government should put in place measures to make sure that the policies formulated are properly and fully implemented. Whoever does not comply should be made to face the consequences
- Parents should be empowered economically through provision of infrastructure and jobs which will enable them to cater for their wards. This will reduce exposure of the girl-child to unnecessary harassment or danger.
- Schools curriculum should be innovated to consider gender balance and materials like textbooks use should also reflect gender balance in things like figures, images etc.
- A policy should be made which will enforce the family of the boy that impregnates the girl-child to cater for her from the stage of pregnancy till when she weans her child, and also make the boy to suffer or serve the same punishment as the girl. Probably, adopting this type of measure may serve as a check.
- Adequate infrastructure should be provided in schools to provide good environment that will enhance effective teaching and learning process.
- Organizing seminars and workshops for parents, community leaders that would be geared towards encouraging parents to send their girl-child to school and to know that girls can do better than boys if given the chance.
- There should be increased community participation in initiatives that will improve girl-child education.
- Awareness campaigns on long-term values of girl-child education to be mounted on regular basis.
- Mass media should be used largely in the vanguard programme.
- Regular monitoring and evaluation procedure to be in place to assess the strength and short-comings of programmes put in place for the promotion of girl-child education.

- Scholarship programmes may be put in place for girl-child education as incentive to make many enroll in school, stay and complete their education.
- Many more non-governmental groups to come on board to aid girl-child education. Though, the operation of many non-governmental organisations should be monitored as there had been report of some NGOs that carry out animalistic act under the disguise of promoting girl-child education.
- Girls' forum programmes may be mounted where female-achievers are featured to motivate girl children towards schooling and completion.

Conclusion

If education is a right, accessibility to it must be enhanced. If the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as acclaimed by the Nigerian government are to be realized, then much more efforts must be invested in Girl-Child Education (GCE) because it is the sine qua non to a sustainable development worldwide. Educating the girl-child needs a special attention by all and sundry. Policies have been formulated, laws have been enacted, but these must be backed by serious commitment and support. The policies should be translated into practice to make them effective. Although, some efforts have been made within the context of educating the girl-child, lots more needs to be done. Some of the challenges in the way of the education of the girl-child had been highlighted and the way forward identified. It is hoped that the three tiers of government will discharge their responsibilities to education and especially, the advancement of girl-child education in Nigeria. There is need for the school, community and non-governmental agencies that work with girl-child to work hand in hand to save the nation from retarded growth by investing more in girl-child education.

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