

## FEMALE – CHILD EDUCATION: A CRITICAL ISSUE FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIAN

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### ABSTRACT

*If you educate a female then you have successfully educated a nation, goes the sayings: so female – child education has become a contemporary issue to nations in the world because girls/women are usually discriminated against in all spheres of life including education. It is based on this, that this paper examines the female – child marginalization and with unequal access to education compared to male counterpart. The study reveals that cultural practices serve as hindrance to female-child education and that inaccessibility of the female – child education makes vulnerable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, early marriage, denial of fundamental rights and child labour. The paper concluded that if female-child education is fostered, she will be self-reliant, adequately socialize and well empowered to contribute meaningfully to the community as well as skills of problems solving to an appreciable extent. The paper therefore recommends that education should be made accessible to the female-child at all levels and awareness programme should be mounted to redeem the image of the female-child to make the world a better place for her to live.*

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### Introduction

It is a widely accepted fact that the main pointer to social and technological advancement of any nation is the level of educational development of its citizens. The role that education plays in the improvement of the quality of people's lives, acceleration of economic growth, harnessing of human intellect and potentials, realization of political stability, appreciation of tolerance and the institution of peace and unity, cannot be quantified. (Jasada, 1999).

Education is an important means through which the society reproduces itself, passes its main characteristics to the next generation as well as a dynamic instrument of change and development (World Bank, 1994). Education is therefore not for the purpose of white – collar jobs alone, but for the individual and societal development, hence it is desirable that everyone should have it including the female.

The female – child being the future homemaker and custodian of social, cultural and developmental values of the society, needs to be educated at least to secondary school level. An educated woman may have the ability to make a modern home, maintain a higher standard of cleanliness and attractive surroundings, socialize with her children, and maintain stable marriage and other ways of life necessary for human survival.

Educated female develops essential life skills, including self-confidence, the ability to participate effectively in societal welfares and protect herself from HIV/AIDs infection, sexual exploitation and pressures for early marriage and complicate child birth (Abdul, 2003).

The educated female also gains the skills and competence for gainful employment which enables them to be an economically productive member of the society, likely mothers to send their children especially girls to secondary schools. The educated female marries late and has fewer children to nourish them better, healthier and less likely to face child mortality.

Female-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 the whole nation (Frederick, 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 main objective of this paper is therefore is to sensitize people on the fact that an end can only come to poverty cycle through educating the female – child. The female – child also should be educated so as to help her to compete in the world of men and to give her instrumental skills as well as intellectual development that will help her in making comprehensive judgment about the world around her. And at the same time be sensitized as to the importance of her being educated so as to fight for her rights.

### **Socio-Cultural Impact on Female – Child Education**

The female – child in Nigeria from historical, social and economic viewpoint has unequal access to education in relation to her male-child counterpart. This inequality could be due to the early sex role of the girls, which influence the conceptualization of their later status, and occupational inclination. In most culture in Nigeria, the female-child only plays a subordinate role to the male child. The female-child is neglected right from birth. According to Uyanga (1995) parents are disappointed whenever the first born to the family is a girl and worse still when all children born to the family are girls. She further observed that the father of such family feels that there will be none-to propagate the family lineage or, take leadership of the family after death.

Adamu (2005) views the neglect of female – child education as something that has to do with culture and religion, but Rufai (1996) attributes the neglect to various myths. Some of these include unfounded cultural beliefs that; educated female – child do not make submissive wives, promiscuous, are usually barren and carry attitudes that are incompatible with their traditionally expected roles as future wives and mothers. Such myths go further to say that educated women always insist on being on equal footing with their male counterparts. Umar (1996), states that female – child particularly in the Northern Nigeria is made to believe that her place as a woman is in the kitchen and home and she is socialized into accepting her traditional role of bearing and rearing children

and also maintaining the welfare of her family. As far as parents are concerned, there is no need for female – child to be prepared beyond attaining to such traditional roles of being mothers and wives. It can be understood that this restricted view of female – child education resulted in persistent lukewarm attitude towards exposing female-child to western education in the northern part of the country.

Kaita (1972), in Iheanacho (2002), is of the view that the greatest problems that present themselves in female – child education are their home background, religion, as well as social / community sanctions. Accordingly, children are brought up right from the beginning with some feelings against western education. They are thus, indoctrinated and unwillingly forced to go to school for which they have already cultivated a traditional prejudice.

According to Gomwalk (1996), early marriage continues to play an important role in hampering female – child's access to secondary education. This is because in many parts of Northern Nigeria, girls of school age, between 9 – 13 years are usually married off at the expense of their education.

Rufai (1996) in his cultural deprivation concept maintains that the sub-culture of low-income group is deficient in certain important respects and these accounts for the low educational attainment of members of this group. This view, places blames on the educational failure of the child, his family, his neighborhood and indeed, the sub-culture of his social group. Such a child suffers isolation brought about by poverty, meagerness of intellectual resources, illiteracy or indifferences of his elders or of the entire community.

The African Girls Education Initiative AGEI (2001), in Korode (2008), admits that there is a pathetic low enrolment of girls in school. To them the following could be reason for low enrolment of female-children in schools especially secondary school.

- i. Poor conceptualization of the status and occupation of the women and girls by the societies. The report argues that in some cultures, the female-child only plays subordinate roles to those of the male child and is sent to school if it was convenient for parents to bear cost. The male child is given preferential treatment because of the notion that he will grow up to maintain the family identity. This trend, the report observes, has inevitably led to the low enrolment of girls in secondary schools and their high drop-out rate.
- ii. The attitude of the society to female education and occupational choice. The report opines that the society as it is today; is a male dominated one and preferences, choices and decisions are made in such a way that they favour the male gender. This attitude naturally determines the type of education women and girls are allowed to pursue.

- iii. Early marriage and unplanned pregnancies among girls have caused low female enrolment in secondary schools more especially in the Northern part of Nigeria where Islam permits girls to be married out early in life.
- iv. The school organizational pattern and location also constitutes some little factors. The report explains that in most schools, existing school set-up, instructional materials and other educational activities re-enforce the inequalities between the male and female child. Co-curricular activities in schools are more or less male dominated in nature and make no provision for the peculiar academic needs of the female child. By implication therefore, the functioning of the school tends to portray male superiority and domination.

The report concluded that these inequalities and causes of low enrolment can only be removed by a viable national policy and a strong political will to make for a change.

### **The Relevance of Female - Child Education in Nigerian Context**

It could be said that education is essential for both boys and girls, the benefits of educating female-child tend to be greater. This is so because female education has been found to have a more significant impact on poverty reduction and provision of sustainable development. Abdul (2003), referring to a UNESCO report (1991), says that the education of a girl is vital for the effective preparation of today's girls into tomorrow's responsible adult women. The female child, just like the male child is entitled to all the citizenship rights, one of which is access to compulsory basic education and opportunity for higher education depending on her ability.

According to Agun (1996) education should be given to all citizens irrespective of gender, because in the history of man, education is the most significant invention that has ever been made. Education serves as the means through which the society maintains its survival and perpetuates its self. Through education society is managed, maintained and prevented from falling into chaos and decay, and man is able to live, control and adjust to changes in his environment.

Adedokun *et al.*, (2010) on the view that the female – child can only claim these rights and exercise them if she understands what they mean and their implications upon her livelihood and dignity. The female – child should therefore be made to know that education is empowerment and when she is empowered, she can fight for her rights and exercise such. Education of the female – child therefore must be seen as a priority in the educational process of any nation. This calls for bridging the existing gender gap in education before any enduring success can be recorded. Lack of education of the female – child denies her the knowledge and skills needed to advance her status and so she remains below the poverty level, wasting away in abject poverty worsened by illnesses and diseases. When a female-child is educated, she is able to realize her full potentials, think, question and judge independently, develop civic sense, learn to respect her fellow human beings and be a good citizen (Abdul, 2003) in (Korode, 2008).

When the female – child is educated, her knowledge base is expanded, she is able to understand and undertake socio-economic, cultural and political transformations necessary to achieve development. Education of the female child is positively related to her living standard and the only effective scheme to alleviate poverty. To achieve this, is to expand the educational opportunities available to the female – child (Adamu, 2005).

The type of education being prescribed for the female – child is one that will make her self-reliant (National Policy on Education 2004). With education, a female – child is made to be aware of fight against powerful social structures, cultural traditional practices and attitudes that may retard progress in the society.

Adedokun, and Olufunke (2010), opined that educating a female – child will therefore help her socialize, reproduce knowledge and even lead her towards the production of new knowledge. Gubio (1995), in Walkibe (2003), states that the female should be sufficiently educated to be accepted, loved, respected and adored in her society. With sufficient education, she is prepared to contribute to the development of the society, socially, economically, politically, morally, intellectually and spiritually as well as technologically. Gubio was particular about female education because he argues that an educated mind can hardly be misled but the uneducated and uninformed can be bent at any moment of emotional expression.

That is why Bukar (2004) argued that gender differences ought to be an irrelevant consideration in the schools, employment, the courts and legislation so that women and girls can participate in paid work on an equal footing with men.

Owing to this importance of education, it should not be seen as an exclusive reserve for the male-children, but the right to education should be for all. In education, lies communal spirit in that it helps people to respect the views of others by promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among the people of a community, races and nation (Anyanwu, 1992). To bring about all these positive changes that could result from being educated, the female - child must not be excluded. The World Declaration on Education for All (EFA, 1990), report emphasizes that learning opportunity shall be expanded for all so that every individual will participate in the process of national building. To include, everybody in the process of education therefore, suitable programmes should be provided according to the needs of the people in the curriculum. When the female – child is educated, she is able to further the case of social justice and is tolerant socially, politically and emotionally. For education to be effective and impactful on the female children, there is need for citizen – mobilization, there is need to bring awareness to parents on the importance of the education of the female – child and the pessimistic attitudes of people to the female – child change. The content of education should therefore be made more relevant to the female – child so that she will be motivated to learn.

This is so, because of her reproductive tendency and the influence she exerts on the children as the first teacher. To meet the needs of the society and to have poverty reduced, education of the female – child must be made viable in the light of the fact that

education is the key to personal as well as national development (Lassa, 1996). So gender equity in education should be promoted so as to create a healthy educated and productive human base. Ukeje (2000) states that education is so powerful that it can heal, kill, it can build up or tear apart; it can lift up or impoverish. Education is important in building up a sound individual with sound health for the price of illiteracy is poverty and poverty is intricately linked with health. The more a child suffers from poverty, the more prone the child is to illness, disease and malnutrition and the more the girl and parents are susceptible to health problems. Female – children who are not educated cannot have adequate access to information on how to prevent diseases and this unenlightened tendency will prevent them from having access to medical treatment and health care services in the hospitals (Adedokun, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine the issues surrounding the female – child as well as the community/nation through the education of the female – child. The paper concludes that educating the female – child eradicates poverty, backwardness, diseases and illnesses in any nation and it promotes personal as well as national development.

### **Recommendations**

In light of the above importance of educating the female – child, the following recommendations were made: The people must be sensitized to the community and social benefits of educating girls. Parents especially women, should be given opportunities for income generating activities by both the various Non – Governmental Organization (NGOs) and governmental agencies to make funds available for the education of the female – child. There is need for community participation in the planning and management of education so that those who had hitherto being gender biased would see the need for the education of the female and will work towards such.

The media should be employed to inform and instruct on the importance of the female-child education to the nation. The planning of education generally should be focused, realistic and interactive. The educative process involves changes, transition, adaptation and modification, so the education of the female child must be rooted in the immediate practical and social life of the female-child (Howard, 1991).

Gender balanced curriculum and education policies should be established to consider the interest of the female – child so that she is motivated to learn. Women should be given the opportunity to formulate and help execute policies especially those relating to girls/women. Gender inequalities that leave female – children of their rights thereby leaving them poor and forcing them to turn to sex for survival and in the process of which HIV/AIDS is contacted should be addressed. Programmes that promote female-child education should be promoted in all our communities. Each educated individual should spread the message of the female – child education and raise awareness on these issues.

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