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## **GIRL-CHILD/WOMEN EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Education is the power and key to a meaningful and fulfilled life. It propels and sustains life. Education allows the girl-child/women to have greater control of their lives, provides them functional skills to make meaningful contributions to their societies. Quality and accessible education for the girl-child/women accords them the right to take decisions for themselves and to impact positively on their families and communities. Functional education is what the girl-child needs because it provides the foundation for meaningful development and social benefits. Education of the girl-child/women has generated a lot of concerns and that is why world leaders find it necessary to enact policies and laws that will provide adequate education and conducive environment for children and especially the girl-child to thrive in their education endeavours for better life. This paper discusses the following: Concepts of sustainable development, The Unique nature of the girl-child/women, education for the girl-child, women and the imperative nature of girl-child/women education for sustainable development. The paper drew recommendation and conclusion.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Education is a fundamental human right and as such, the girl-child and women are legitimate beneficiaries. Nigeria is a signatory of the major conventions such as Rights of the Child (CRC 2003), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 2000) and the convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAM 2005) etc. The Nigerian government passed into law the Child Rights and Women Act which are aimed at facilitating the realization and protection of the Rights of all Children and women in the quest to achieving the objectives of the Millennium Goals and Education for All (EFA 2000). The Nigerian government also enacted the Universal Basic Education (UBE) to fast track education interventions at the pre-primary, primary and Junior secondary schools (UBE Act 2004). The importance of education cannot be overstretched particularly to a developing democratic society like ours. Education sustains and improves the lives of girls and women. It accords women greater chances of managing and planning for their lives and exposes them to worthwhile skills so as to contribute to the development of their society. Oduara (1999) envisaged that women are powerful agents of change and development and that development should start now..... This is a true saying in the sense that education would enable women do away with the old notion that the woman's bus stop is in the kitchen no matter how educated she is. Women have thrown away that notion long ago. They are seriously minded about their own welfare as well as of their families. The popular saying that 'to educate a man is to educate an individual but to educate a woman is to educate a nation' is actually a basic fact because the woman when educated infects her children with the education syndrome. Therefore it is imperative for the girl-child who will subsequently

become the significant adult, being referred to as the woman to be educated. It is in view of the above statement that this paper attempts to discuss the unique nature of the girl-child and women, the education they receive as well as the sustainability of such education for a life long development. But before discussing the unique nature of the girl and women education and sustainable development, it is pertinent to take a closer look at the term "sustainable development which is coined from two words – sustainability and development.

### **Concept of Sustainable Development**

Sustainability is the act of supporting or bearing the weight of some responsibility for a long period of time. Sustainability is to encourage, support or give nourishment to sustain life. It could also mean to endure, stand, maintain or keep a sound effort or project. While development, on the other hand, means the stage of advancing in different areas of endeavour e.g business, education etc (Revised and Update illustrated Oxford Dictionary,2003). The concept of sustainable development, on the other hand, could be described as the art of supporting, maintaining or keeping the progress or advancement being achieved in educational pursuit for meaningful goals. Thus the education of the girl-child and women should be such that would sustain a meaningful development that will be recorded in nation building. Sustainable Development could be viewed from various angles one of which is defined by Brut Land (1987) as that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. To the layman, sustainable development means policies, structures and behaviours that are instituted and are also maintained over a period of time. Asabe (2008) was of the opinion that sustainable development means social progress which recognizes the needs of every one, effective protection of the environment, prudent use of natural resources and maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and development This paper discusses how the education of the girl-child/women can improve the quality of life for sustainable development in our society.

### **Unique Nature of the Girl-Child/Women**

Musa (1977) cited by Kwabe & Nimron (2007) gave the age of a child as between 0-17 years. Kwabe and Nimron (2007) referred to the child as a young person male or female between the ages of 0-16years of age and the United Nations convention on the Rights of the child (1999) defines a child as a person, either male or female, at the age of 0-12 years. While the woman is simply referred to as a female adult human being (Encarta Encyclopedia 2005). The woman is also described as a female who has attained puberty but in legal term has attained the age of 18 years. A woman in the African context refers to any female who is above 18 years and who is married or has given birth to a child. The girl-child is a young female under the age of 18 years who is in the formative years and who depends solely on the significant adult for nurturance, training and guidance throughout the pre-school, primary school and secondary school periods before attaining adulthood. The girl-child who subsequently becomes the woman in the African context was expected to raise children as well as cook for the family. The woman has a lot of responsibilities to shoulder, for example, providing social and emotional support to the husband, nurturing children and as playing the

functions of a role model to her children. The girl-child who translates to the woman folk is such a unique person who acts as a vital instrument for rapid socio-economic development and transformation of her world. Based on the fact that the girl-child is the future woman, she needs to be fully equipped educationally for self actualization. Great importance is given to the girl-child as the various organizations, agencies, associations such as the United Nations (UN), The African Union (AU), the United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) etc make several declarations and proclamations on the African child and children the world over on Rights and Privileges of the child especially, the girl-child. This is now crystal clear that the girl-child is special and needs to be carried along so that she could become a responsible and responsive woman in the future thereby ensuring a sustainable development.

### **Girl-child/Women Education**

Education is key to sustainable development. In the light of this, the girl-child/women need to acquire quality education in order to develop optimally for successful living. Education is the basis and invariable index for the socio-political, economic, physical, moral, spiritual, scientific and technological development of the girl and woman in the society. Barakat (2007) affirms "women are the life vein of any society, the first teachers of all sons and daughters born in the society". It then means that women ought to be lavished with adequate functional, quality and accessible education as well as biologically and culturally suitable and relevant to their outstanding societal roles and consistent with their natural dispositions. The girl-child needs an education that will systematically transform her life. Horby A.S. Advanced Learner Dictionary of current English (1995) visualizes the girl-child education as a systematic training of the girl so as to acquire formal knowledge, skills, attitudes, character development and mental prowess necessary to enable her function adequately for nation building. Girl-child education is the act of giving the girl as a child the right to acquire knowledge in a formal setting for better understanding of herself, others and her natural environment. On the other hand, women education, as defined by Rahab (2006) is the acquisition of skills by the female gender needed to effectively participate in the society constructively, actively and efficiently. Thus such skills include: livelihood (vocational), basic hygiene and basic practices related to good behaviour and positive societal interaction. In the same vein Rahab (2006) affirm that the positive application of such skills acquired in education by the female gender places the woman at par with her male counterpart which in turn warrants the women opportunities to work and earn salaries and vie for position in the government, private, political sectors as well as enabling them cater for their basic needs and family needs. By these actions, women are able to acquire purchasing power which gives a boost to sustainable development. UNICEF (2001) classified women education as follows:- The development of self-awareness, friendship formation and ability to resist unhealthy pressures as well as the development of functional skills and capacity, critical creative thinking which enables them make rational decisions, solve problems and pursue practical tasks for sustainable advancement. It is so important to know that the older women need education for more awareness. This education could be geared towards the following areas or programmes such as :

- Functional literacy for those who dropped out of primary school to enable them acquire the basic skills of reading.
- Functional numeracy for women to handle basic mathematical concepts and arithmetic processes for application in every day life work and in written form.
- Basic technological and industrial betterment for women, as a supplement for basic scientific and technological education by acquiring specific training in the areas of commercial and industrial methods and skills be it in management, accounting, manual skills like in the use of machinery and equipment.
- Education for Women in Armed Forces where they will be trained in carrying out specific duties and how to carry out their roles in the family and the society effectively e.g Police, Prison, Air force, Navy, Army, Road Safety etc.
- Education for Handicapped women, where efforts are made to rehabilitate disabled women roaming the streets thereby exposing them to acquisition of skills for gainful employment, self-fulfillment and a sustainable measure of independence (Philips and Godiya, 2007).

Kofi Annan in 2004 distinctly stressed that “if you educate a woman you educate a nation”. Of course one feels happy over this statement but when we take a closer look at the situation on ground, it will be so disheartening to say that girl-child/women education has not been given adequate attention in all the levels of education. This is a national and international problem especially in the developing countries where UNICEF (2003) posited that “the ratio of girls’ gross enrolment rate to boys in developing countries increased from 0.86 to 0.92, nearly two-thirds of developing countries improved on girls’ enrolment over the decade, with the substantial improvements experienced in Benin, the Gambia, Mali, Chad, Guinea, Mauritania, Morocco, Nepal, Pakistan and Sudan. Going by the above list, Nigeria is not included as there is still a wider gender gap between girls’ enrolment and their male counterparts. This ugly trend has affected millions of young girls and women who are relegated to the background in our society, and are vulnerable and without hope for the future as they grow into women, motherhood and grannies, who are underdeveloped to participate fully in the political, social and economic development of their communities. These classes of people are at high risk of extreme poverty, domestic violence, neglect, child labour, sexual exploitation and HIV/AIDS. Education in the context of girl-child/women is regarded as the process whereby women are enabled to improve or gain mastery over their lives and circumstances to the extent that they can contribute to positive change – development. Education of the girl-child and women will have to cover actions as enlightening or teaching other women to energize them to change the situation within communities where they live. As women move and act as a group to initiate some changes, there is the need for collective efforts by them to register and make it possible for them to gain some control over their social and economic circumstances. Essentially, these elements of education: include consciousness reawakening, participation in some specific social actions and the incorporation of the social actions in the various aspects of their lives. Thus the purpose of women education as stipulated in the philosophy of Nigerian education (1969)

cited by Philips & Godiya (2007) points to the important roles of women in nation development as follows:

- ❖ To enable them contribute meaningfully to life.
- ❖ To enable them adapt themselves to the society.
- ❖ To enable them develop pride in their achievements.
- ❖ To make them good citizens
- ❖ To develop and broaden their minds
- ❖ To develop their total personality
- ❖ To enable them have good relationships with other human beings.
- ❖ To develop in them self-confidence
- ❖ To enable them develop spiritually, physically, mentally, academically and morally
- ❖ To fill in the gaps for those who did not go to school or those who did not complete formal education.
- ❖ To enable them cope with domestic and family life
- ❖ To develop in them folk social, economic and political sophistication in their ability to understand, participate and contribute in community life.

In realization that formal education might not achieve the foregoing objectives in respect of our women folk, the Federal Government also highlighted the objectives of adult education in the National Policy on Education (1998). These objectives are directed clearly to women who could not complete formal schooling, those who dropped out of school, and those who are on the job and would want to increase their knowledge so as to develop themselves. All these efforts are geared towards sustainable development which will meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs.

### **Imperative Nature of the Girl-child/Women Education for Sustainable Development**

The vulnerable nature of the girl-child/women have attracted logical concerns throughout the world and that is why many commitments were made and are still on the making by the world leaders to the importance of both the child (girl-child) and women education. For instance, Article 28 of the convention on the Rights of the Child stresses the right to education and Article 29 of the convention reiterates that education should develop a child's responsibility, talents, mental and physical abilities to his/her fullest potential. One of such commitments was made in the year 2000 at the World education Forum in Dakar, Senegal and 180 countries were committed to ensuring that by the year 2015, all children particularly girls and children in difficult circumstances such as abuse, domestic violence, discrimination, early marriage, unequal access to schooling, poverty, political instability, high level of corruption, diseases, broken homes, including those affected by wars and those belonging to ethnic minorities have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality (Child Rights Acts, 2003). On the other hand, Article 25 of the United Nations convention on the Rights of Women reported that women constitute half of the world's population and are saddled with huge responsibilities such as home making and backbone of

the family. Women are also custodians of social, cultural and fundamental values of the society thus ensuring sustainable development. Philip & Godiya (2008) are of the view that without adequate understanding, cooperation and effective participation in education, there might not be any positive change in the living condition of the girl-child/women. Education of the girl/women will equip them with appropriate skills that will enable them appreciate the culture and traditions of the society. This development according to Philip & Godiya (2008), could accord the girl-child/women better position to sift the good from the bad for sustainable development of our land. There is no gain saying that educated girls and women are cultured and know how to behave in accordance with standard values. Acquiring basic knowledge is a prerequisite necessary for the girl-child/women and the entire human race for sustainable development. If women and the girl-child are adequately educated, it will enhance their active participation in development for sustainability. Imperatively, education of the girl-child/women will go a long way in improving their lots in the following ways:- equipping them with the specific skills to participate in increasing family income, reduce fertility rates and advocate later marriage, reduce infant and maternal mortality, produce better nourished and healthier children and families, low birth rate, low death rate in children and pregnant women thereby sustaining development.

Girl-child /women education helps in transforming the female-folk as they become highly equipped with skills and strategies that enable them improve and maintain their self esteem. They, therefore, become aware of their civic and fundamental human rights and become actively involved in family and community decision making for sustainable development. The educated women/girl-child status could influence their children's lives in a tremendous way such that the children could also have a better life than their mothers thereby maintaining a good standard of living which translates to better society. It is imperative to note that the provision of better education for the girl-child/women could go a long way in empowering women to be economically independent in the sense that they do not have to depend on parents, husbands or any other relative for empowerment. It would empower the women folk to have a sense of responsibility and knowledge of how to make personal adjustment to home life, family relationship, community relationship as well as nationally and international relationship. It could also empower the girl child/women in developing and appreciating the arts of their society e.g language, food, clothing, dressing etc. Educated women participate in decision making as such they can help create a society where discord and unrest are replaced by harmony and peace. Summarily, there is the implication that every educated woman will train and educate her children and this bears on sustainable development in the present and for the future generation. The benefits of girl-child/women education cannot be overemphasized as such government should be committed to the following:

- Develop structures that will continuously evaluate the development of girl-child/women education.
- Open new programmes that could afford wider category of women access to education.

- Introduction of more awareness campaign for the education of the girl-child/women through the use of jingles, posters etc.
- Making education accessible to the disabled girl-child/women to reduce gap between the special needs children and the average children. All of these efforts could guarantee sustainable development in our country.

## **CONCLUSION**

Education is a right to every girl-child and women; it is the key to transforming their lives and the lives of their community members. Without education, the girl-child and women are denied the opportunity to develop their full potentials and to play productive roles in their families, their societies, their countries and the world at large. Although the Nigerian government is trying it best to improving the education of the girl-child/women in all the various levels of education i.e pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary/higher. A good deal effort needs to be done for better quality and accessibility for all females irrespective of age and inclination to be educated for sustainable development. It is imperative for the government and other stakeholders to become more proactive in advocating the importance of girl-child/women education for sustainable development.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To adequately empower the girl-child/women for sustainable development, the following measures should be adopted:

- ❖ Government should invigorate the establishment of more schools to cater for the teeming population of the girl-child/women.
- ❖ Women should be encouraged to acquire adult education in order to make up for the initial losses in primary and secondary education.
- ❖ Girl-child/women should not be abused by family members, security agents or any other persons for they are human beings with rights to life, education, freedom of speech and expression, play etc.
- ❖ Laws should be strengthened to ban early child marriage. Schools should be accessible and compulsory for every girl-child and women to be literate.
- ❖ Girl-child/women in the grassroots should be sent to school by their parents, husbands or relations.
- ❖ Community leaders should ensure their members, especially children, attend school at the right time.
- ❖ Government should embark on enlightenment campaigns to sensitize people on the importance of girls/women education.
- ❖ Government should provide adequate funds for the establishment of more schools, upgrading of schools, providing teaching/learning materials and equipment.
- ❖ Recruit more qualified teachers to teach in all schools especially female teachers.
- ❖ The girl-child/women should be awarded scholarship so as to feel the impact of government commitment to their education and welfare.

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