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**IMPACT OF SCHOOL-BASED SEXUAL  
VIOLENCE ON GIRLS' EQUAL EDUCATIONAL  
OPPORTUNITY IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS**

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**Abstract**

Giving boys and girls equal opportunity to acquire education is the bed rock of an equalitarian society and a means of developing a strong and dynamic economy. Studies have shown that despite the significant increment in the enrolment figure of girls due to global commitment to ensure gender equality in education, there has been a continual low retention, completion and achievement of girls in primary and secondary school levels. Poor retention and completion rate has continued to create gender inequality in boys and girls access to education. Beside economic and socio-cultural factors, sexual violence in school is another factor that is identified to be contributing to gender inequality in education. This paper tried to explain the concept of gender equality and sexual violence. It established the prevalence of sexual violence in schools. The paper also highlighted the impact of sexual violence on girls' access to equal educational opportunity. Recommendations were given on how to curb sexual violence in school. Some of the recommendations included creating more awareness on the evil effects of sexual violence by including sexual violence prevention strategy in the school curriculum.

Employment of more female teachers to make the learning environment more gender sensitive and by giving severe punishment to perpetrators of sexual violence to deter further occurrence of the problem.

## Introduction

Education is globally enshrined as a fundamental human right of every individual, irrespective of age, gender, family background, home location ethnicity, nationality and religious affiliation. It is described by Jekayinfa and Kolawole (2010) as a whole process that entails training and acquisition of special skills, knowledge, attitude and values that individuals need to be responsible and be able to contribute positively to the growth and development of society. Education aims at all round development of the individuals. It develops both the innate abilities and capabilities of individuals and makes them functional members of the society (De Serf, 2002).

Education helps in building a strong and dynamic economy that can lead to economic sufficiency, sustainable development, technological advancement, employment generation and poverty reduction. It is also a globally recognized instrument for human capital and societal development. Education develops the individual that develops the society. The quality of the education and its accessibility determine the quality of lives of the people and the rate of development of the society (Becker, 1993). Gender equality in access to education plays significant role in human capital and societal development.

Nigeria, like other nations of the world, has a commitment and an obligation to make education available and accessible equally to all her citizens to meet the developmental needs of the nation. This mean that boys and girls, male and female youths and adults are to be provided educational opportunities that can meet their learning needs and make them contribute positively to development of the nation. To achieve this objective, the government through the constitution and covenant to international bills such as Convention on the Right of the Child, The Universal Declaration of Human Right of 1948, Education for All (EFA), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other conventions, made a commitment to provide a free and compulsory primary education that promote gender equality and

to promote gender sensitiveness in levels of her educational system. This commitment brought about the mandatory Universal Primary Education UPE of 1976 and the present Universal Basic Education UBE that was established in 1999. The two schemes have help to increase the enrolment rate of females and males alike at all level of educational institution most especially the primary and the secondary school levels.

Studies have shown that Nigeria, like many other nations have almost achieved gender parity at primary and secondary levels of her education. This is revealed in the Millennium Development Progress Report that the net enrolment in primary education in all regions of the world has exceeded 90 % and many countries are close to achieving Universal primary enrolment (UNESCO, 2008). Kamani (n.d) after a review of literature from many countries also acknowledged that there was an expanded educational opportunity for female because there is increase in primary enrolment of girls in many countries and that the girls' enrolment rate has almost caught up with that of boys. This is an indication that good progress is being made towards the target set in the international bills and conventions. Despite the improvement in enrollment rate recorded in primary and secondary level, gender parity has not been achieved in Nigeria because many girls dropped out of school before the completion of education.

### Gender Equality in Education

Gender equality in education means boys and girls having the same rights, advantages and opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills that can develop their innate potentials and make them functional members of the society. It also means males and females having unrestricted opportunity to enroll, persist and complete educational gain without any form of interruption or discrimination from either the home or the school environment. Gender equality in education is emphasized in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the goal 4 and 5 of the year 2000 Dakar Framework for action. The issue of gender equality in education has been a prominent debate in Nigeria. The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) (2000) stated that gender disparity exists in the education of boys and girls in Nigeria, and the gap is wider for those

in the rural areas. This has continued to account for the low literacy rate of female which is 59.4% in comparison to the male literacy rate that is 74.4% (CBN, 2000). There is urgent need to eliminate gender inequality in education in Nigeria to make women more functional.

### Benefits of Gender Equality in Education for Girls

Gender equality in education is the foundation for all developmental goals. It provides equal opportunity for boys and girls to develop their innate capacities and capabilities that can make them contribute to the economic, cultural, and political development of their environment. It breaks the barriers created by structural inequality and make male and female to be equally valued in society (UNESCO, 2005). It will reduce female illiteracy rate and improve the quality of lives of girls and women. It will empower them and makes them active in taking decisions that affect their lives.

Kamari (n.d) opined that giving girls and women equal access to educational opportunity as their male counterparts would enable them to enjoy the civil, political, economical, social and cultural rights. These rights according to him include the right to choose work and receive equal pay for equal work, the right to enjoy and benefit from scientific and technological progress and the right to be vote and be elected into political posts. Haralambos and Holborn (2007) were also of the opinion that equal educational opportunity for male and females would make the society more meritocratic. A meritocratic society is a society in which people occupy social positions based on intelligence and qualification.

Hayes (n.d) made a submission that giving girls unrestricted and uninterrupted opportunities to enroll, persist and complete education chain would make them achieve greater economic and political power and make them participate in decision making at a variety of level. Gender equality in education is essential for the development of human capital that is necessary for national growth, technological advancement, sustainable development, high performing economy and for attainment of the Millennium development Goals (Schltz, 2002).

UNESCO (2004) posited that the school has significant and instrumental roles to play in helping individuals, especially girls, to achieve their

economic, social and cultural objectives and in helping society to be better protected, better served by its leaders in a more equitable way. The school, in addition to imparting knowledge and skills to the learners, is expected to protect the right of every child. Schools are supposed to be a safe haven for learning for girls. Burton (2008) viewed schools as sites where individuals are prepared for the role they are to play in society at large. The learning environment therefore needs to be free from any form of violent behaviour that can make the school unsafe for the learners and hinder their access to education.

In recent times, UNESCO (2005) observed that the improvement in the enrolment rate of female children in primary and secondary education that was earlier reported is gradually giving way to looking for means of encouraging girls' persistence and achievement in schools. The recent data from the 2009 Nigerian Data Survey shows that 53 percent of 1.5 million children of age 6-14 that were enrolled but are not in school are girls (Gender in Nigeria Report, 2012). Several reasons have been given for the drop out in studies; Nmadu, Avidim, Oguntunde, Dashe, Abdulkarim and Mandadara (2010) found in their study that many girls in northern Nigeria dropped out of school before they completed primary education because of poverty and socio-cultural practices of early marriage, early pregnancy and unsafe educational environment. Chalmer (n.d) mentioned some other significant barriers to attainment of gender equitable outcomes from schooling and these include gender bias teaching, sexual harassment, lack of safety in some areas to and from school, continued wide use of textbooks that reinforced gender stereotypes and violence.

### The Concept of Violence and Sexual violence in Schools

Violence is one factor that has continued to make school unsafe for learning especially for female students. It is increasingly becoming a pressing social problem that needs to be urgently addressed in the school system to make girls persist in school and guarantee their equal educational opportunity with their male counterparts. Violence is described by the World Health Organization WHO (2002) as an intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury,

death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation. Violence, according to Article 19 of the United State Convention on the Right of the Child (UN CRC) includes all forms of physical, mental injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse. Although Leoschut (2008) observed that violence in the school is not a new phenomenon. It is increasingly evident that many girls are becoming victims of different types of violence in the school and the type of violence have shifted from cases of bullying to more serious problem of different kinds of sexual violence.

Sexual violence is an umbrella world that is used to describe any form of sexual act or attempt to initiate a sexual act using force, coercion, threat or surprise (Wilson, n.d). Sexual violence in school is an act of forcing the school girls to engage in sexually motivated activities without their consent and is often accompanied by other types of violence including physical and psychological ones ( Save the Child Denmark, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Women Affairs, 2008). Sexual Violence include, rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, sexual assault, abduction and seduction. Sexual violence can take place in the school, home, in care and residential institutions such as detention, prison and in the community (UNESCO, n.d). Sexual violence that takes place within the school system is referred to as the school-based sexual violence. School based sexual violence is becoming the most pressing educational issue internationally because it is making many schools unsafe place and denying many girl-children opportunity to persist and complete educational chain, thereby creating gender inequality in education.

Several reasons have been given in literature for the persistence of sexual violence on girls in the school. Some of the reasons given include the dearth of female teachers in primary and secondary school, impunity of perpetrators, natural beauty and attractiveness of the girls, indecent dressing that exposes sensitive part of the girls, age and authority relation between teachers and the school girls which made it easy for the teachers to perpetrate the wickedness against the innocent girls, lack of confidence by the victim to report the incidence due to shame felt by the victim and the fear of stigmatization (Burton, 2008, Jefthas and Artz, 2007, UNICEF, 2007, Wilson, n.d, Plan, 2008).

Sexual violence in the school includes sexual abuse, harassment and exploitation of girls either by classmate, teachers or any staff of the school. These are manifested in unwanted sexual touching, verbal and physical harassment with sexual connotation, rape and sexual exploitation in which the girl sexually abused for grades or economic benefits. The abuse can take place in the school toilet, classroom, uncompleted building within the school, library, laboratory, staff room and other secluded area within the school. Although there are currently no reliable estimates of how much of sexual violence in and around the school (Plan, 2008), the World Health Organization (2002) estimated 150 million girls and 78 million boys under the age of 18 that had been raped or suffered other forms of violence in school. This shows that both the boys and the girls can be victims of sexual violence although the effect is more detrimental on the female students.

#### Prevalence of Sexual Violence in Schools

Studies have revealed that sexual violence exists in schools and that it has detrimental effect on the education of girls. It has negative impact on the learners, the parents, the educational system and the society as a whole. Sexual violence in the school has continued to create unequal access to education in terms of rights and opportunity. This is because several girls were sexually molested in school after their enrolment and this has influenced the quality of education that many of the girls received and it has brought many more complication into their lives and eventually led to their dropping out of school (UNESCO, 2005).

Mirembe and Davis (2001) reported that sexual harassment of girls exists in most schools in Africa and express dismay that the problem is being handled with levity with the perpetrators going without any capital punishment. A research report by the Human Right Watch (2001) also revealed that many girls in South Africa experience sexual violence in school. The report indicates that teachers are mostly perpetrators of sexual harassment. A study by Mitchell and Mothobi-Tapela (2004) in school in Zimbabwe showed that learners are sexually abused by their teachers. The findings of Federal Ministry of Education (2007) also indicate that sexual violence against children occurs in basic education levels in Nigeria although it is under-reported.

### Impact of Sexual Violence on Girls Access to Equal Educational Opportunity

School-based sexual violence has detrimental effect on enrolment, retention and achievement of learners in schools most especially the female learners. It denies girls right to access and remain in education until completion. The denial has negative impact on both the present and the future social and economic lives of the victims and the nation. It can lead to poor economic and human development. Studies have shown that school girls drop out is directly linked to school violence. Evidence from studies show that children that are victims of sexual abuse tend to be absent from school, participate less in class and perform poorly academically (UNICEF, 2010).

Sexual violence in the school has a detrimental influence on the girls' access to equal educational opportunity with their male counterparts. It denies girls the right to quality education and right to respect and non-discrimination in school. This is because a girl that is sexually abused might end up being pregnant which automatically brings either a break or an end to her education (UNICEF, 2010). Parent of sexually abused girls tend to withdraw the victims from the school and the girl might not have any second chance of returning back to school. It is also a powerful factor influencing parents to want to keep their girls away from school for fear of molestation and the shame and trauma that come with it (Plan, 2008).

According to Taub, (2002) and Farrington (1995) cited in Federal Ministry of Education (2007), children who are a victims of sexual violence in the school often suffer from decreased self-esteem, truancy, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and in extreme cases, suicide and violent retaliation. This will result in fear and disillusion; drop out, having problems with sleeping, not wanting to eat and other challenges in basic bodily functions; aggressiveness, anxiety and other problems in regulating emotions; difficulties with peer relationships; and problems with attention, concentration and school performance. Aside from interfering with the learning process, the long term effect of school violence affect the whole community.

The study of Dunner, Leach, Chillisa, Maundeni, Tabulawa, Kutors, Dzamaand Assamoah (2005) also revealed that a number of students reports have shown that fear of or experience of sexual violence in



school is a major reason why some girls under- performed or drop out of school altogether. Victims of sexual violence in school suffer both physical and social trauma and the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV (Kim and Bailey, 2003).

### Conclusion

Equal educational opportunity is the key to sustainable development of Nigeria. It will make Nigeria a meritocratic society in which every individual compete and benefit maximally from economic, social and the political opportunities equally. Sexual violence to girls in the school is recognized as the cankerworm that needs serious attention to prevent gender inequality in retention and completion of boys and girls in the schools. The fight against it must be done with all seriousness to reduce the illiteracy rate of women and girls and make them functional citizens of Nigeria.

In order to reduce the menace of school-based sexual violence, promote girl child persistence in school and ensure equality of opportunity between the boys and the girls. The following recommendations are given to prevent or reduce to the barest minimal the occurrence of sexual violence in schools.

1. More awareness should be created on the evil effect of sexual violence by including sexual violence prevention strategy in the school curriculum.
2. Severe punishment should be given to perpetrators of sexual violence to deter further occurrence of the problem.
3. More female teachers should be employed to create a more gender sensitive learning environment.
4. More girls only school should be established in rural and urban areas to give many more girls access to education in a more gender sensitive environment.

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