

**GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION AND GENDER
EQUALITY: LIFELINES TO SOCIAL
JUSTICE**

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Abstract

Status of women and girls in Nigeria are the result of systemic and deeply entrenched discrimination that adversely affects the state of the nation. This paper shed light on implication of gender inequality on social justice. Thereafter, researchers examine factors promoting gender inequalities among Nigerians by conducting mini study on gender's report in Nigeria.

Descriptive survey research design was adopted. A total of 15 participants comprising of male and female lecturers were purposively selected. In-depth interviews and focussed group discussions were employed in obtaining relevant information and data collected were reported. Results revealed that socio-cultural practices such as male-child preference, poverty and religious beliefs are promoting gender discrimination. The study also revealed effect of gender inequalities in the society and how to ameliorate the situation by promoting female-child education among others.

Key Words: Girl-child education, Gender equality, Social justice

Introduction

The continual quest for social and economic reforms in Nigeria is unquestionable. Leaders at national and international levels have made several attempts to reform the society by adopting various strategies. For instance, at global level, the year 2000 marked a milestone for the development community. During the year, various United Nations Organizations set up a list of goals targeted for 2015. This is known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The goals focus on a more "human-rights based and multisectoral approach towards development" (UNICEF, 2004). Some of the developmental issues addressed by MDGs are: eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and creating a global partnership for development (United Nations, 2010). Also, the 7-point transformation agenda of President Goodluck Jonathan tailored towards women empowerment. The initiative of integrating these agenda and projecting same as the policy thrust of social transformation is a welcome development. But the question is, is it achievable and sustainable, bearing in mind the socio-political and cultural structure of Nigeria and due to negative attitudes and values to womenfolk? It must be noted that no human society makes meaningful progress without positive attitudinal change towards gender equality for social justice.

Conceptual clarification

Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships among and between women, men, girls and boys. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialisation processes. They are context and time-specific and changeable. In most societies there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-

making opportunities. (Adapted from UNDP (2008). 'Gender equality' refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women, men, girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration – recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a 'women's issue' but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men are seen both as human rights issue and as a precondition for and indicator of sustainable, people-centred development" (Adapted from UNDP (2008). This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities (UNDP, 2008).

Social justice is justice exercised within a society, particularly as it is applied to and among the various social classes of a society. A socially just society is one based upon the principles of equality and solidarity; which pedagogy also maintains that a socially just society both understands and values human rights, as well as recognizing the dignity of every human being (United Nations Children's Fund, 2007). Social justice is affirmed in numerous human rights treaties and recognized by governments as this recognition is exemplified in the international goals, strategies and targets that have been set during the past 20 years. The Education for All goals were established at Jomtien (Thailand) in 1990 and reaffirmed at the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar (Senegal). In the Millennium Development Goals, established in 2000, the world's governments committed to achieving universal access to free, quality and compulsory primary education by 2015. In 'A World Fit for Children', the outcome document from the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children in 2002, governments reaffirmed these commitments and agreed to a range of strategies and actions to achieve them (UNICEF, 2007). This can be achieved if it is based upon social justice. Furthermore, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action treats social justice as a purpose of the human rights education (Save Children, 2004).

So far, social justice in education describes the right of child

to education on the basis of equality of opportunity without discrimination on any ground. It also, covers the right of every child to quality education that enables him or her to fulfil his/her potential, realise opportunities for employment and life skills. However, lack of gender parity in education is tantamount to injustice.

However, non-discrimination is enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution-Chapter 4, Section 42 but in practice the majority of Nigerian girls and women are unable to claim their constitutional entitlement. Nigeria as a Federal Republic, each state has the authority to draft its own legislation. However, any law which is contradictory to Federal Law or the Constitution can be challenged in a Federal Court and cannot subsist. The combination of federation and a tripartite system of civil, customary and religious law makes it very difficult to harmonize legislation and remove discriminatory measures (Obot, 2004 and Ajibade, 2013). As of 2006, the Abolition of all Forms of Discrimination against Women in Nigeria and other Related Matters Bill' was under consideration; it is unclear whether this has been promulgated into law (Ajibade, 2013). Many of our societies, in spite of great leaps and strides of global community which have rightly buried such conceptions of the second fiddle place of the woman, have not succeeded in rising from this perception. They still see women from the prism of commodity of use.

Today, there are still societies which see a woman as subservient to man, in mental and biological capacity. However, in spite of glaring monumental achievements of women in the globe and phenomenal rise of the role women play in the world, gender sensitivity or perception of women having mental equality to man has remained unappreciated.

SUMMARY OF DATA ON GENDER IN NIGERIA REPORT 2012

Nigeria ranks 118 of 134 countries in the Gender Equality Index.

- Women make up only 21% of the non-agricultural paid labour force.

- At every educational level women earn less than their male counterparts and in some situations men with less education earn more better than educated female peers.
- Nigeria has one of the lowest rates of female entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of women are concentrated in casual, low-skilled, low paid informal sector employment.
- Only 7.2% of women own the land they farm, which limits their access to credit and constrains entrepreneurship and business activity.
- Only 15% of women have a bank account.
- A gender bias in allocation of tax allowances means that women taxpayers are taxed disproportionately.
- In eight Northern States, over 80% of women are unable to read (compared with 54% for men). In Jigawa State, 94% of women (42% of men) are illiterate.
- Nigerian girls who enrol in school leave school earlier than their male counterparts.
- More than two thirds of 15–19 year old girls in Northern Nigeria are unable to read a sentence compared to less than 10% in the South.
- Only 4% of females complete secondary school in the Northern zones.
- Over half of all women in the North are married by the age of 16 and are expected to bear a child within the first year of marriage.
- 94% of 15-24 year olds in Kebbi have no knowledge of contraception.
- Girls from poorer families are more likely to marry young and have worse health outcomes.
- Nigeria has 2% of the world's population but 10% of global maternal deaths.
- Each day 144 Nigerian women die in childbirth, which is equivalent to one death every 10 minutes.
- A third of 15-19 year olds in Northern Nigeria have delivered a child without the help of a health professional, traditional birth attendant or even a friend or relative.

- Poorer girls and women are particularly disadvantaged. Only 7% of women in the poorest quintile deliver in a health facility, compared to 56% in the highest quintile.
- Women are politically under represented. Their upper and lower house representation fell from 7% in 2007 to 6% in the 2011 election (the African average is 19%). Only 7 of 109 Senators and 25 of 360 Representatives are women.
- Most 15-24 year old women in Nigeria think it is reasonable for a husband to beat his wife if she burns the food, refuses sex or goes out without his permission.
- Nearly half of unmarried women in parts of Southern Nigeria have experienced Physical violence.

Source: Gender Report in Nigeria by British Council, Nigeria, 2012

Gender Report in Nigeria by British Council, Nigeria, (2012) outlined above showed the status of women and girls as it adversely affect progress and national development.

The Effects of Gender Inequality on Social Transformation

A complete picture of how discrimination against women is affecting social transformation may not be exhausted but some of them are stated below:

- (1) Due to lack of women in decision making positions, there is low investment in such sectors as health and education that are crucial to human development outcomes;
- (2) Women's reluctance to take responsibilities in politics due to lack of economic empowerment to actualize their ambitions;
- (3) The increasing incidence of insecurity, violence and crime such as armed banditry, kidnapping, prostitution, child trafficking, cultism, increasing culture of begging are due to poverty in the society which women empowerment can ameliorate;
- (4) Limited contributions to household cash income and limited influence on spending at the family level. Of serious constraints to economic growth are the facts that women are petty traders, subsistent farmers and house helps (Nigeria Gender Report, 2012;

Adamu, 2008; UNICEF, 2004).

Why Women/ Girl -Child Education for Social Justice?

“Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process” (Action Aid Programme of Action, paragraph 4.2).

“Education is important for everyone, but it is especially significant for girls and women. This is true not only because education is an entry point to other opportunities, but also because the educational achievements of women can have ripple effects within the family and across generations”. Other benefits are:

1. Reduction in poverty: Investing in girls’ education is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty. Investments in secondary school education for girls yield especially high dividends (Akunyil, 2010).
2. Safeguard Human Rights: Education helps girls and women to know their rights and to gain confidence to claim them (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005).
3. Increasing women’s labour force participation rates and earnings: Education has been proven to increase income for wage earners and increase productivity for employers, yielding benefits for the community and society. Educated mothers are more likely to be in the labour force, allowing them to pay some of the costs of schooling, and may be more aware of returns from schooling (UNICEF, 2007 and UNDP, 2008).
4. Strengthening democratization: Countries with smaller education gap between rates of boys’ and girls’ schooling tend to enjoy greater democracy. Democratic political institutions (such as power-sharing and fair elections) are more likely to exist in countries with higher literacy rates and education levels (Obasanjo, 2002).
5. Lowers maternal, infant and child mortality rates: Women with formal education tend to have better knowledge about health care practices, are less likely to become pregnant at a very young age, tend to have fewer, better-spaced pregnancies, and

seek pre- and post-natal care. They are better informed about their children's nutritional requirements, and adopt improved sanitation practices. As a result, their infants and children have higher survival rates and tend to be healthier and better nourished (Save Children, 2005).

6. Protecting against HIV/AIDS infection: Girls' education ranks among the most powerful tools for reducing girls' vulnerability. It slows and reduces the spread of HIV/AIDS by contributing to female economic independence, delayed marriage, family planning, and work outside the home as well as greater information about the disease and how to prevent it (Iyiola and Gbadamosi, 2006).
7. Creates intergenerational education benefits: Mothers' education is a significant variable affecting children's education attainment and opportunities. Mother with a few years of formal education is considerably more likely to send her children to school than uneducated mother. In many countries each additional year of formal education completed by a mother translates into her children remaining in school for an additional one-third to one-half year (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010).

The Study

Gender discrimination phenomenon has become a global issue. Efforts are being made at different level to combat the problem of discrimination against women as it affects social transformation. Several scholars have suggested various measures of promoting status of women in the society. However, despite these laudable means, gender discrimination keeps on growing. This might not be unconnected with the fact that some root causes of the problem have not being identified. In the light of this, the following research questions are stated for this study:

1. What are the factors influencing gender inequalities?
2. What are the effects of gender inequalities in the society?
3. What can be done to alleviate gender inequalities in the society?

Method

This study adopted descriptive survey research. In-depth interview and focus group discussion were used to get the opinion of 15 lecturers purposively selected from School of Education, Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Oyo. Some of the items utilized for the guided discussion were drawn from Obot (2004) titled Interview Guide on Women and Society, whose validity and reliability have been ascertained. Responses were collated and discussed.

Discussion of the Results

Findings from focus group discussion revealed factors influencing gender inequality. These are culture and values and traditional belief; poverty; religious beliefs; inferiority complex on part of women; marital responsibilities and health factors. This result is in consonance with findings of Ajibade (2013); Gbadamosi (2012) and Chukwu (2012).

It was equally noted that discrimination against women resulted to high level of poverty among women; Increase in drop out especially among girls; early marriage makes girls susceptible to diseases that leads to high maternal death during labour; under representation of women in politics; high rate of illiteracy among women and high rate of physical violence against women. These support the findings of (Nigeria Gender Report (2012); Akunyil (2010); Adamu (2008) and UNICEF (2007).

In the light of the issues identified above, suggestions were made by the participants on measures of alleviating discrimination against women such as female child education; public enlightenment on importance of family planning; equal education opportunity for both sex; women should have access to credit facilities like their male counterparts; financial assistance e.g scholarship, study leave; women should be encourage to participate in politics; enforcement of law that is against early/child marriage (United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, (2006); Iyiola and Gbadamosi, (2006) and Save the Children (2005).

Conclusion

Gender equality is a fundamental condition for the safeguarding of rights of girls and women and promoting gender equality worldwide should be the priorities of all. Violence against women, gendered

poverty, women's exclusion from decision-making in political and economic life, are examples of issues which must be resolved if social justice is to be achieved. Overcoming these inequalities requires profound transformations in social structures and relations between men and women. Closing the gender gap in education is a development priority. If Nigeria is to maximise its "demographic dividend" as the population of working age increases and fertility declines, it must prioritise investment in women and girls to ensure that the next generation of all young adults are healthier, better educated and more able to contribute to economic growth and development. Investing in adolescent girls and women is not simply a question of human rights but also productive. The 1994 Cairo Consensus recognized education, especially for girls, as a force for social and economic development, in the sense that if girls are not educated, they remain dependent on their families before marriage, on their husband after marriage and on their children if eventually their husbands die. As a father or mother would you like to see your daughter in this condition? Absolute NO! This then calls for a Clarion call on GIRL- CHILD EDUCATION for SOCIAL JUSTICE.

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