

Girl Child Education: Importance, Barriers and the Way Forward

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Abstract

This paper examines the education of the girl child as a fundamental right recognized globally and enshrined in the Nigerian constitution. It discusses the role of education in the social, moral, political, and economic development of individuals and society. The paper highlights the significance of girl-child education and its potential benefits. It also addresses the consequences of denying girls access to education, emphasizing the gender disparity in school enrollment in Northern Nigeria, where the ratio of boys to girls in some states reaches as high as 2:1 or even 3:1. Additionally, the paper explores barriers to girl-child education and proposes measures that, if implemented by parents and policymakers, could reverse the trend of female educational disadvantage. The role of stakeholders in addressing this issue is examined, with a focus on participatory strategies.

Introduction

The importance of education in the overall development of an individual—socially, economically, morally, and politically in both developed and developing nations cannot be overemphasized. The education of individuals in every society provides the impetus for social, economic, and political development. Education empowers individuals to fulfill their duties toward societal development and participate in informed decision-making processes that enhance the well-being of their families, immediate communities, and the larger society.

The overall aim of education is to equip members of society with the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to function as responsible and productive citizens. Imhabekhai (1980) views education as a process through which individuals are prepared to integrate into the social system in which they live. Euphoria maintains

that the primary goal of education is to provide individuals with opportunities to acquire and develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for successful participation in socio-economic and political programs.

Similarly, Shuaibu (2010) reiterates that education is a process of training and instruction designed to provide knowledge and develop skills. It strengthens both the body and mind through careful nurturing.

Education, therefore, is meant to equip, empower, and liberate people, irrespective of gender, especially since it is a fundamental right of every individual in society.

Girl Child Education

The education of the girl child is as important as the education of the male child—not in competition, but as an equal right accorded to both sexes. However, the education of the girl child has never been given the same priority as that of the male child. According to a report by UNICEF, the gender gap between boys and girls attending school in Nigeria, particularly in northern Nigeria, is as high as 1:2 or even 1:3 in some states. This rate of enrollment continues to decline, and even those who are enrolled are not guaranteed completion of their education.

Girl-child education extends to women's education, and it is a well-known fact that women's education is often marked by misconceptions, misinterpretations, and gender-role stereotyping. The issue of unequal access to educational opportunities between males and females is more pronounced in developing countries, but it remains a global phenomenon.

Despite the fact that girls and women constitute half of the world's population, their societal roles have often been confined to that of a wife, mother, or caregiver rather than individuals with equal intellect and potential capable of attaining the highest levels of education and

career advancement, just like their male counterparts. Bulama (2004), cited in Nguru and Jimbo (2009), argues that for education to achieve its objectives, it must be provided not only universally but also equitably. This approach is the only way to ensure social justice and fairness.

Importance of Girl-Child Education

The significance of girl-child education can be observed in the achievements of the few women who have had the opportunity to be educated. There is an adage that states, "Behind every successful man, there is a woman." Women are the backbone of every society, influencing their families' major decisions. Educated girls and women become better mothers, leaders, and professionals. However, inequality in educational access has placed girls at a disadvantage socially, economically, and politically, limiting their opportunities.

Mukhtar (2009) rightly states that women constitute the majority of the illiterate population worldwide, including in developed countries where education is, in principle, universally accessible. This disparity has created inequality in access to education, which is recognized as a basic human right necessary for moral, spiritual, and intellectual development. The preference for male child education and the gender roles assigned to men and women have further marginalized girls. Macca (1976) found that the roles traditionally assigned to women confined them to the home as wives and mothers in domestic solitude, whereas men were placed in positions of control and authority. Consequently, women's status has been made inferior to that of men.

Cultural perceptions contribute significantly to this disparity. Many societies hold the belief that investing in a girl's education is a waste because she will eventually marry and leave her family, whereas a male child remains part of the household. As a result, parents often prioritize their sons' education over their daughters'. However, most of these reasons are cultural rather than religious, as both Islam and

Christianity emphasize the importance of seeking knowledge without gender segregation.

Wali (2004) supports this view, asserting that in patriarchal societies where girls and women are undervalued, the education of the girl child is given little or no importance. The conservative nature of such societies contributes to challenges such as early marriage, misconceptions about women's roles, preference for boys' education, and the discontinuation of girls' education. Cludebehu (2009), cited in Mustapha et al. (2002), further maintains that education is a fundamental right of every child. Unfortunately, girls have been denied this right for many years, adversely affecting national development.

Benefits of Girl-Child Education

The education of the girl child has always been important, and its significance continues to grow. Educated women, when placed in appropriate roles, demonstrate expertise and professionalism, contributing significantly to their families, communities, and society at large. The World Bank, cited in Okebi (2009), states that "a country with more educated girls and women is not only healthier but also wealthier." The importance of girl-child education can be seen in the following key areas:

1. **Improvement of Living Standards:** Educated women manage households effectively, ensuring better family health, education, and economic stability. They serve as nurses, dietitians, teachers, mentors, and role models, fostering societal development.
2. **Influence on Society:** Educated women inspire and influence others through their actions and contributions, serving as role models for younger generations.
3. **Reduction of Early Marriages and Maternal Mortality:** Education provides girls with knowledge about reproductive health, enabling

them to make informed decisions about pregnancy and maternal care, thereby reducing maternal and child mortality rates.

4. **Lower Divorce Rates:** Communication is essential in marriage. Education enhances individuals' ability to express their feelings and resolve conflicts amicably, reducing divorce rates.
5. **Reduction in Illiteracy Rates:** Educated women prioritize their children's education, helping to break the cycle of illiteracy in society.
6. **Crime Reduction:** A lack of education contributes to crime. Educated mothers can positively influence their children and communities, reducing delinquency and crime rates.
7. **Poverty Alleviation:** Education equips individuals with knowledge and skills to secure employment or become entrepreneurs, reducing poverty and destitution.

These and many other factors underscore the need to prioritize girl-child education to promote equality at all levels of society and achieve sustainable development. Hyldgaard et al. (2007) emphasize that women's knowledge must be taken seriously and their learning must be supported.

Ensuring that girls receive equal educational opportunities is not just a moral obligation but a critical investment in the future of societies worldwide.

Barriers to Girl-Child Education

Barriers to girl-child education refer to the factors that hinder a girl's access to educational opportunities—factors from which the male child is often exempt. As Indabawa (2009) outlines, nine socio-cultural factors impede girls' education, including:

1. Early marriage
2. Girl hawking practices

3. Poverty levels of families
4. Poor parental support for girl-child education
5. Misinterpretation of Islam's stance on girl-child education
6. Society's poor attitude towards girl-child education
7. Irrelevance of the curriculum
8. Poor self-concept among females
9. Weak linkage between education and employment

Early Marriage

Early marriage, especially prevalent in northern Nigeria, is unfortunately perceived by many parents as a fulfillment of religious duty. This practice significantly limits girls' enrollment, retention, and completion of educational programs. Few schools accommodate married girls to ensure continuity in education. Additionally, cultural norms and parental concerns about security often lead to early marriages despite Islam making knowledge acquisition obligatory for both males and females. Indabawa (2009) asserts that the impact of early marriage is a significant concern for those advocating for equitable female participation in modern education, noting that "when girls are married at ages 10 to 14, their educational careers are disrupted, especially if avenues for second-chance learning are not provided."

Girl Hawking Practices

The socio-economic status of many parents, coupled with the high cost of education, forces them to send their daughters to hawk goods rather than attend school, as it provides immediate financial benefits. Hawking is particularly common in rural areas, where it is viewed as a means for parents to accumulate resources for their daughters' future marriages, such as household utensils, rather than investing in their education. This practice limits girls' intellectual development compared to their male counterparts. UNICEF (2007) observes that "as few as 20%

of women in the North-West and North-East of Nigeria are literate and have attended school."

Poverty Levels of Families

Many families live below the poverty line, surviving on as little as \$1 per day while supporting multiple wives and children. Consequently, educating girls is often deemed an unnecessary financial burden, with families prioritizing boys' education instead. Many households in northern Nigeria have limited access to employment opportunities due to illiteracy. According to an International Monetary Fund (IMF) study cited in (2007), only 30% of Northerners attend school. Without adequate education, employment opportunities remain scarce.

Poor Parental Support for Girl-Child Education

Yusuf (2005), cited in Sani (2007), argues that resource constraints in poor families often lead to prioritization of male children's education over female children. The rationale is that sons will carry on the family name, while daughters will eventually marry into other families. This preference continues to widen the gender gap in education.

Misinterpretation of Islam's Stance on Girl-Child Education

As noted earlier, gender disparities in education exist globally but vary across regions. In Nigeria, for example, the disparity is more pronounced in the North than in the South. In some northern communities, educating girls beyond culturally accepted limits is erroneously viewed as conflicting with religious principles. However, Islam not only encourages the pursuit of knowledge regardless of gender but also mandates it. Therefore, restricting girls' education is based on cultural misconceptions rather than religious teachings.

Society's Poor Attitude Toward Girl-Child Education

Generally, societal attitudes toward girls' education remain unsupportive. Many leaders, parents, and guardians disapprove of it, often due to misconceptions about its benefits. Indabawa (2009) notes

that these societal perceptions contribute significantly to gender-based educational discrimination.

Irrelevance of the Curriculum

The curriculum in many educational institutions often fails to align with the expectations and needs of parents and students. Many educational programs lack relevance to students' aspirations, leading to disinterest. Additionally, a shortage of qualified female role models further weakens girls' motivation to pursue education.

Poor Self-Concept among Females

Many girls perceive themselves as subordinate to males, believing that they do not need education or self-development. This self-perception discourages them from striving for academic or professional success. Unless this mindset is actively challenged, the goal of achieving equitable education for girls will remain elusive.

Weak Linkage between Education and Employment

Participation in education is often motivated by the expected outcomes, such as securing employment. However, due to high unemployment rates, many families, especially those in the middle and lower-income brackets, perceive education as an uncertain investment. The expectation that education will guarantee a white-collar job is no longer a reality, further discouraging investment in girls' education. The educational disadvantage faced by girls is rooted more in cultural practices than religious beliefs. The socio-cultural and religious backgrounds of Nigerian society, particularly in the North, afford men more opportunities in education and economic advancement than women (Isara, 2012).

The Way Forward for Girl-child education

The challenges facing girl-child education can be overcome through the collective efforts of all stakeholders. If the barriers preventing girls from accessing education are removed, the following measures can be

implemented to ensure that girls attain the same educational level as boys:

1. **Discouraging Early Marriage:** Early marriage significantly hinders girls' education. Legal frameworks should be strengthened to enforce the minimum age for marriage, and awareness campaigns should be conducted to highlight the long-term benefits of educating girls. Empirical studies indicate that girls who complete secondary education have lower child mortality rates and contribute more to economic growth (UNESCO, 2019).
2. **Regulating Hawking by Girls:** Street hawking often prevents girls from attending school regularly. To address this, alternative sources of livelihood should be provided for families to ensure that girls remain in school. Data from UNICEF (2021) show that financial assistance programs have effectively increased school retention rates among girls in low-income families.
3. **Implementing Favorable Economic Policies:** Governments should introduce economic policies that enhance the financial stability of parents, enabling them to provide equal educational opportunities for girls and boys. Studies indicate that conditional cash transfers significantly improve girls' school attendance (World Bank, 2020).
4. **Conducting Awareness Campaigns:** Governments and non-governmental organizations should launch extensive sensitization and advocacy programs to educate parents and the general public on the importance of girl-child education. Research findings suggest that community-based awareness programs can shift societal attitudes towards female education (Jones & Chant, 2018).
5. **Leveraging Religious Teachings:** The two dominant religions in Nigeria strongly support girl-child education. Religious leaders should emphasize these teachings through sermons in mosques and churches

to counter misconceptions that deny girls access to education due to cultural biases rather than religious directives.

6. **Changing Societal Narratives:** Societal perceptions that undermine girl-child education should be corrected through a coordinated effort by stakeholders. This can be achieved through media campaigns, social gatherings, community-based seminars, and religious sermons. Additionally, government agencies and community-based organizations should incorporate the issue into their programs to intensify sensitization.
7. **Redesigning School Curricula:** Educational curricula should be revised to include locally relevant content with an emphasis on entrepreneurship. This approach would equip girls with skills and crafts that provide economic sustenance, reducing their dependence on street hawking. Empirical studies indicate that entrepreneurship education fosters financial independence among women (Ahmed & Olaniyan, 2021).
8. **Encouraging Self-Realization among Girls:** Girls should be enlightened on their dignity, potential, and ability to achieve great things. Role models, particularly successful female professionals, should visit schools to inspire young girls and encourage them to pursue education.
9. **Expanding Employment Opportunities:** Political leaders should create job opportunities in both public and private sectors to absorb graduates, particularly females, and encourage more enrollments, retention, and completion of educational programs.

These interventions can only be successful if there is strong political will to improve the condition of the girl child and to change the disheartening statistics on the boy-to-girl enrollment ratio. Rufai (2003) notes that baseline data show more boys than girls are enrolled in primary schools across the 19 northern states of Nigeria.

Conclusion

The status of girl-child education in Nigeria, particularly in the North, remains critical. Addressing this issue requires a participatory approach involving the government, religious institutions, and civil society. As Shekarau (2006) states, "Community members must be actively involved in educational interventions through planning, implementation, and evaluation." Ensuring equal access to education for all children, regardless of gender, is essential for sustainable national development.

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