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## Gender Issues and the Challenges of the Girl-Child in Early Childhood Education in Nigeria



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### ABSTRACT

The girl-child is faced with several challenges in early childhood education. This paper addresses the issues relating to gender, the curriculum, pedagogy and practice. It also affirms the good news of the transformative powers of feminist consciousness and the bad news of the very slow and in some cases the total lack of progress in gender parity and understanding in most developing communities. The study structurally maps out the contemporary and theoretical debates in the fields of gender and education, and clearly provides an overview within gender and education. Recent changes and challenges in the field have been outlined such as gender disparity in school enrolment among others. The paper also catalogues the roles of schools, family, peer-group, the government in enhancing the girl-child education in early childhood.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the major challenges facing humanity today is the uneven assessment and treatment of gender issues and practices. Women are poorly or under-represented in politics, economy, science and technology. Enhancing the access of the girl-child to science, economics, technical and vocational education will in the long-run address the gender imbalance and make women full participants in human, material and environmental development. Until this imbalance is addressed at the early stage of education, “son preference,” which Charlotte (1997) describes as “another insidious force directed against girls and women” will continue to hold sway. He went further to describe “Gender disparity as a brutality that is not inevitable which is a construct of power and a means of maintaining the status quo. It must be dismantled now.

Oppression and discrimination against women and girls have been so deeply ingrained, for so long in virtually every culture. Attempts at dismantling the societal structures that tolerate them will require understanding, practice, commitment and on all fronts.

In most developing societies, the most enduring challenges to female dignity, progress and security are ignorance and cultural beliefs built and bent on presenting male dominance and female subjugation. These they often defend in the name of venerable traditions. The provision of qualitative education, right from childhood, is the solution. Education will redress the concept of male honour and fear of female empowerment, which are often recognized and defended as strands of the cultural wave.

Gonda (1988) states that some people believe, without real basis that women do not need careers that they do not need to work for a living. Everyday experience in the Nigerian society shows that this is not true and that a majority of the Nigerian women work for survival as they take seriously to their jobs, and compete favourably with the men. Thus, the adage that “a woman’s place is in the kitchen” was only true in the past, when being in the kitchen was not paid for, and when women did not realize their potentials.

Over the years, Government, UNICEF, UNESCO and related agencies have placed special emphasis on the girl-child education. The impact of early childhood education cannot be taken for granted or overlooked. For education is the bedrock for any meaningful development, it is efficient language and tool of the pure and applied sciences, the art and

sociology, the engineering and technology of development of any society or nation. No nation can progress meaningfully without sound educational system involving all genders.

A sound girl-child education designed to bridge the gender inequality must cater for the following:

- i. Basic literacy leading to functional existence in the society.
- ii. Shared basic concepts and principles as preparatory ground work for further studies.
- iii. Essential skills and attitudes as preparatory ground work for application of knowledge for development.
- iv. Stimulation of creativity and the sense of belonging.
- v. Inter-gender understanding and relationships.

### **Girl-child Education in Nigeria**

There have been several studies into the various aspects of early childhood education and professional bodies like Curriculum Organization of Nigeria (CON), Science Teachers Association of Nigeria (STAN), among others, through workshops, seminars, conferences, etc. encouraged and promoted girl-child education. Harry Sawyer, in a workshop on Quality Education in 1997 opined that “good schools not only instill basic skills, they also educate children (both boys and girls) about their rights.” The curriculum used in schools of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is probably best known for its success in placing girls in quality schools. A workshop sponsored by UNICEF and the Nasarawa State Government in Lafia in 1999, stressed that one of the goals of Nigeria’s education reform programme is to get more girls in the classroom.

In a statement made at the launching of UBE (Universal Basic Education) in Sokoto in 2000, the Minister of Education stressed that “Universal Basic Education cannot be achieved unless efforts are made to make schooling equally accessible to girls.”

UNESCO (1997) observed that appropriate education for the girl is crucial (especially in Africa) for raising the scientific and technology literacy for the next generation of children. This, according to Maichibi (2004), has led to special project for scientific, technological and vocational education for girls in Africa. Addressing this gender disparity at the level of early

childhood education is considered crucial in the development of proper concepts, right attitudes and positive orientation of the girl-child into tomorrow's accomplished woman.

### **Gender Disparity in School Enrolment and Retention**

Gender disparity in education is the most pervasive violation of human rights. Its forms are both subtle and blatant and its impact on the socio-economic political and cultural development of the people of nation is profound. Harper (2000) categorically stressed that school environment ratio and gender consciousness is a country's commitment to balanced education with gender consciousness beginning from the basics. He went further to describe gender consciousness in education as one of the important steps in promoting social progress and national development.

A number of factors have been identified as being responsible for the low enrolment, poor retention rate, poor performance and general neglect of the girl-child in early childhood education programme. These include the following:

- i. Home related causes.
- ii. School related causes.
- iii. Teacher related causes.
- iv. Peer-group related causes.
- v. Gender related causes.
- vi. Examination related causes.
- vii. Government related causes.



#### **i. Home related causes:**

A realistic school curriculum must acknowledge the demands of an externally exposed curriculum both in theory and in practice. We must offer realistic strategies for home related activities with the guidelines contained in the school curriculum. Unethical behaviours by children (absenteeism and truancy), the lack of interest in schooling and poor approach to related causes. Ella (2010) stressed that parents must be persuaded to understand that education is more valuable in the long-term than their children's contribution from an

unskilled job or domestic duties. With this, they will do whatever it takes to send their children to school. The lack of physical and emotional attention in early childhood, which are essential for the development of young minds and bodies are bound to result in unethical behaviours on the part of the children. As such the parents should do the needful.

**ii. The school related causes:**

A good and functional (relevant) curriculum of studies must highlight the people's history and culture, the environment and national aspirations. Care must be taken to include the two genders in policies, plans, illustrations and examples. Good schools not only instill basic skills, they also educate children about their right. Recognition of such rights will improve the child's self-respect and build trust and cooperation among the genders. The school needs to be a stimulating place for children and this depends on the quality of the teachers and the curriculum. Palme (2000) referring to the situation in sub-sahara Africa, picks on Ghana as an example, where a quarter or more of the girls are not enrolled in primary schools. He further said that getting them into the classrooms is one of the goals of the current programme to improve education quality.

Besides free, compulsory and Universal Basic Education aimed at expanding access to education, teaching quality and school administrative competence must be improved through new training programmes and scholarships in institutions of higher learning. A new curriculum must be developed localizing education at this early stage. The curriculum must continue to address new challenges and trends, thus, eradicating the harmful traditions, effectively preparing the children for today and for the future. These must be more vigorously pursued. According to UNESCO (1997), education at any level is not only a fundamental right, it is also the best tool governments have for guaranteeing that their citizens have the ability to claim their other rights.

**iii. Teacher related causes:**

A child's perception of education as a painful exercise, difficult and segregational or vice versa, is dependent to a very large extent on how the teacher teaches and organizes his or her class. The teacher must establish a basis for togetherness, mutual understanding and respect and the sense of worth in every child. UNICEF (2000) in a report on "Teachers are key," stressed that the classroom needs to be a stimulating place for children and that depends on the quality teachers. Teacher's thinking and classroom practice can be a determinant of the

children's perception of themselves, their relationship with one another and of their school activities.

**iv. Peer-group related causes:**

Peer-group relationship both within and outside the classrooms often pose certain painstaking questions such as the following:

- Where should the girl-child learn?
- What should the girl-child learn?
- How do the girls see themselves?
- What factors determine their activities?

Peer interactions are so critical in early childhood development, and bonds that exist between them are quite different from those established with parents or other adults. Access to age and gender, mates, acceptance and constructive interaction with them are all necessities of early childhood education and development. Wilkinson (2016) says that the concept of peer-group describes the various ways in which people of similar height, class (if in school) and status, relate and adjust to each other. He stressed further that peer group is an extremely important group owing to the fact that they have a number of characteristics common such as feelings, reactions and problems, and that in most cases, the peer group tends to be more loyal to themselves than their family group. Peer-group relationship and activities are often more pronounced among girls, perhaps because they see themselves as vulnerable, socially deprived and discriminated against.

**v. Government related causes:**

Government related causes in gender disparity in early childhood education involve educational objectives, national assessment procedures and consciousness. Until 1990s the governments of most developing countries including Nigeria did not have “spelt policies” to address the gender disparity in early childhood education. Enrolment of girls and their retention in schools was poor. Then girls were needed more at home for domestic chores and economic activities. According to Harry Sawyer (1997), girls with lower rate school attendance result from a complicated set of issues stemming from poverty and cultural

practices to their domestic duties and teachers' preferential treatment of boys. Others include the lack of female teachers, fear of sexual harassment and rape, distance from schools, lack of sanitation and traditions that put greater value on educating boys than girls.

#### **vi. Examination related causes:**

Examination related causes involve the various modes of assessment of the pupils' works. These often raise some pertinent questions such as the following: How far is the assessment of boys and girls fair? Is there difference in performance among genders in certain courses or in general? How can classroom assessment be developed to be more effective in assisting the learning process of girls? In developing countries, there are often fundamental issues in the sociology of educational assessment of girls. Quite often, their competency-based assessments are based on the demonstrable limitations of the more conventional assessment, especially in predicting work performance among genders. The Beijing World Conference (1995) strongly recommended policies and strategies likely to help in improving the access of females to education and their assessment in science and technology courses, which for long have been the preserve of boys and the men.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The paper concludes by posing the following questions:

How can we genuinely address the challenges of educating the girl-child for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What aspects of schooling are particularly problematic to girls? How do issues of sexuality impact on girls' educational experience? These are questions governments, communities, parents and concerned agencies need to take seriously. How can we strive for educational equality through schooling while community values still affirms gender differences? We must explore the practical implications with regard to relevant curriculum and pedagogy.

Currently, both nationally and internationally, there is considerably interest in the issue of equal opportunities, most of it directed at the underachievement of girls. Girls have been under-represented in several areas of studies, which include Mathematics, the Sciences and Technology. Today, this is gradually changing in schools, in sports, in business, politics and religion. A girl's place! A woman's place in life should be where her skills (ability) determine.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

- More girls should be enrolled in schools to encourage and promote girl-child education.
- Government and professional bodies should more up with a realistic curriculum to address the challenges in childhood education.
- Teaching quality and administrative competence must be improved through new training programmes.
- Parents and guardians should be sensitized on the need to prioritize the education of the girl-child.

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