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Girl Child Education in Nigeria as Imperative for Women Empowerment: A Feminist Critique

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Abstract: ***Women empowerment is the focal issue in gender matters. Increase awareness of the loss of human resources arising from little attention paid to girl-child education has necessitated the formulation of strategies aimed at reversing the trend in Nigeria and Africa by extension. As one of the desired strategies, this makes a case for more proactive approaches toward girl-child education as a surer means to women in Nigeria and Africa generally. This paper focuses on the need for women empowerment, bringing out grey areas that will enhance girl-child education to avoid women being victims of deprivation. The paper in its thrust discovers cultural challenges that encourage the educational deprivation of the girl-child. The paper adopts feminism as a theory and concludes that education should be gender neutral to avoid the negative effect on girl-child education in Nigeria. It is the position of this paper that women are hardworking if given the right environment. The culture-imposed deprivation of women should be terminated by women as they constitute a part of the teamwork required for the advancement of girl-child education. Therefore, women's full participation and integration in girl-child education should be maximally promoted for their empowerment. This paper recommends that teacher and teacher's activities with children must be swiftly cordial to bring about a change in society's attitude towards women/female/girl-child education.***

Keywords: ***Girl-Child, Education, Women Empowerment, Gender Issues, Feminist Critique.***

1. INTRODUCTION

The need for girl-child education and women empowerment has of recent dominated discussions on gender issues. It has been increasingly realised that the girl-child (woman) has been a victim of undue deprivation, which is an infringement on her fundamental human rights. Recall that Opara (2000) speaks: "the corpus of Nwapa's works attests to an

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unequivocal authorial advocacy of women's financial independence. Nwapa in the vein of uhamiri, endows her female figures with affluence as well as industry" (p.53).

Since education is a process, women's limitation in educational development is symptomic of a girl-child malaise: deprivation of equal opportunity to education with her male counterpart. To effectively address the issue of women empowerment, it is important to approach the issue from the cause than effect. That is to say, that the low education of women, is a manifestation of the low attention given to girl-child education.

Prior to the formulation of the national policy on education in 1977, the existing educational policy in Nigeria had no focus, no structure and no spelt-out aims and objectives to lead the country to an expected end. The missionaries who first brought western education came with two intentions. Their priority was to train preachers and religious instructors. Any other thing was secondary. The colonial masters, who came after the missionaries to rescue the situation, had their own motives. Whatever they presented as content for education has emphasis on production of class teachers and craftsmen who could work in their workshops for a long period of time. Prior to the coming of the missionaries, the traditional African education placed emphasis on the character development and promotion of culture. Preparation for girls' future starts at an early stage.

This is due to the nature or the curriculum presented which they felt is not favourable for the girls. That is why most teachers, carpenters, mechanics and others during the missionary era were mostly men, because they wanted people who could withstand hardship and combine their work with the spread of the gospel. This will demand their staying away from home over a long period of time going from place to place. This certainly is not favourable for the women and contributed in affecting their early participation in education.

2. RELATED WORKS

Many critics have acknowledged and given many dimensions on the issues of girl-child education and women empowerment. To state the obvious, a lot of works have been done on gender issues among which, is Okereke (2000) on feminist consciousness where she states that "an individual's words and actions reflect her consciousness, and so feminist consciousness generates self-assertive utterances and acts" (p.94). It becomes imperative that women education and empowerment have taken centre-stage in works on gender issues.

The unequivocal fact remains that poverty booms largely in developing countries of the world and in Africa in particular. Preece, in Oduaran & Bhola (2006) reports that "70% of the world's poor are females and in African 60% of women can neither read nor write (p.57)". New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD 2002) reports that "it is a tragedy for more than 50% of the African population to be illiterate in the new century when knowledge is of utmost importance" (p.105). Similarly, Okoli (2000) posits that "women are in the majority and that a great number of them are illiterates and live in abject poverty" (p.57).

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3. METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts qualitative/descriptive method of analysis to explicate the concept of girl-child education and women empowerment as a feminist concept. Therefore, the paper is situated on feminism as the concept is interpreted in relation to its social contexts. Against this background feminism becomes very necessary in the thrust of this paper, given women's struggle for existence in a man-dominated world.

This is a qualitative/descriptive research that uses basic research plan for information gathering and analysis; it adopts a basic library research method which, in the context of this paper, includes online materials and other internet resources. However, it might not be completely devoid of quantitative technique because our research has some comparative elements, for instance, in our effort to arrive at the deprivations of the girl-child through bad policies and practices of Nigerian government, we had recourse to the analysis of population figure of school dropouts, low enrolment of girls in school, the number of girls involved and in comparison to what is obtainable in some African countries. This research therefore as mentioned earlier in the paper, made use of primary data but relied more on secondary sources.

This comparison gave us an insight as well as an inroad into areas of further study and also points of emphases. We then relate these to the findings from our investigation of and result of our primary and secondary data as well as other materials generated from a panoramic survey of the subject area, that is, girl-child education in Nigeria and the wider circle of the treatment of the girl-child in African continent. We take a broad view of library research, to include textbooks, journals, other published and unpublished materials, mimeographs and others as well as non-text media including "new media" associated with online and internet resources. The data was in the form of textbooks and journals. These were sourced through library research and other means such as books, magazines, mimeograph among others. Since the qualitative research method is textual in nature, this is the reason the resources are sourced from a content-based analysis with no requirement for fieldwork.

Reference is made to literary text such as Sutherland's The Marriage of Anansewa and Nwapa's One Is Enough to give women's deprivations in the continent a literary colouration. The efforts of the past and present first ladies in Nigeria were buttressed to show concern of the female subjugation and predicament from Maryam Babagida's "the better life for rural women's programme (1989) to Remi Tinubu's "Renewed hope initiative programme (2023). All these are simple illustrations to ameliorate the female subjugation and deprivations.

The qualitative research method and feminist theory are the best option for this paper which interrogates the function of patriarchy-an ideology where women have been objectified, exploited and abused for which women have chosen to oppose.

The Concern of Girl-Child Education

A female under eighteen years of age is considered a girl-child. It is the period that the girl-child needs all the encouragement by the adult to actualise her potentials. The concern however, is that cultural practices detrimental to the development of the girl-child precipitated by most often than not, the poverty level of their parents, have not worked in the

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girl-child's favour. She has been used more than her male counterpart as a guinea-pig, suffering discrimination in terms of educational opportunities.

The girl-child, as a result, suffers higher incidence of illiteracy, ignorance and poverty making her vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. She is easily a prey to overzealous adults who exploit the situation to dehumanise her. She is easily a victim of child-trafficking, sexual harassment, prostitution and child-labour such as hawking and forced marriage. Various efforts by governments and non-governmental agencies in Nigeria are yet to yield the desired result in reversing this trend. Girl-child literacy level is still intolerably low.

Going by the common parlance that educating a man is educating an individual, while educating a woman is educating a nation; this suggests that any nation that neglects women education does so at its own peril. As homebuilders, the charity that beings at home, which is the mirror of any society to the outside world, rests on them. This is because good families are a function of better educated and trained mothers. Educated mothers are better leaders in terms of control of resources and power, hence, have more positive influences on their offspring. This is because the woman, more than the man strives to sustain and improve the living standard of the family.

Good education enhances the women's choices to engage in better skilled and high income vocations, which can be limited by their level of education. Women over the years have made inroads in areas considered as male preserves. Their performances in those areas call for a reassessment of cultural stereotypes inimical to girl-child development. Government must therefore, create the enabling environment for the promotion of girl-child education. Women who by their possession of high level of education and technical skills and who can be presented as pace-setters by virtue of the imprints they have left or are creating in society, should be highly encouraged. The list of such women is in exhaustive and could be considered as the dividends of the foresight of their parents who valued the education of the girl-child.

The Girl-Child as Mother Tomorrow

The girl of today is the mother of tomorrow. Eradicating illiteracy at the girl-child stage is a fiat accompli in the eradication of women illiteracy. It is also the laying of the foundation for an enlightened and empowered womanhood. Who then is the girl-child? The girl-child is understood to fall under 18years of age. It is the teen/adolescent and formative years which also coincide with the primary and secondary school education stages. Being dependant on the adult, the fate of the girl-child lies mainly on adult benevolence. This is her fate; whether she has the privilege to be educated or not depends largely on the prevailing cultural and religious prejudices, which provides the gauge for the value attached to girl-child education which in Nigeria cultural context is generally not in favour of the girl-child education.

Women Empowerment and Education

Empowerment can be seen as the capacity to be in control of one's surrounding and to act independent of any assumed situation in which someone is made to be productive to himself or herself and the society and thereby is in a position to assume vital roles in the economic, social and political life of the community devoid by any encumbrance. She is therefore in control of decisions that have direct impact on her life and environment.

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Women empowerment literarily connotes placing women in a position that they can effectively participate in decision-making on matters concerning them and the larger society. It is a clamour for women equality in a world that places men on advantage right from creation and which is further entrenched by cultural stereotypes. Women empowerment seeks to improve the ability of women in exercising control, as are the men, through participation in all spheres of social life irrespective of culturally defined sex roles. It also aims at improving the level of conscientisation of women through uplifting their self-esteemed low status in society. The belief is that, what a man can do, a woman can also do and even, as is said, better.

Gender sensitive programmes have emerged over the years to actualise this cause. These include Maryam Babangida's "The Better Life For Rural Women's Programme", (1989); Maryam Abacha's "Family Support Programme", (1994); Justice Fati Abubakar's "Family Economic Advancement Programme", (1997); Stella Obasanjo's "The Child Care Trust", (1999); Mrs. Titi Abubakar's "Women Trafficking And Child Labour Education Foundation (WOTCLEF)", (2000); Mrs. Valentine Dariye's "Woman Alive Foundation", (2000); Mrs. Julie Useni's "Daughters Of Abraham Foundation" – a pet project aimed at giving new lease of life to repented girl-child prostitutes who would have passed through life in despair; Patience Jonathan's "Women For Change And Development Initiative" (2014); Aisha Buhari's "Future Assured Programme" (2015); Remi Tinubu's "Renewed Hope Initiative Programme", (2023) and Justice Mary Odili's "The Adolescent Project (TAP)", (2001). The focus of these programmes is to give a new lease of life to the girl-child by drawing attention to the unethical practice of institutionalised girl-child abuse in addition to empowering her.
As a country, Nigeria's government policies and programmes such as national policy on education (NPE) and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) emphasis on the equality of education opportunities as a means of giving every citizen, irrespective of any limitations, the opportunity of self-actualisation and the realisation of human worth. The significance of education to women empowerment needs no overemphasis. This is because education leads to specialised skills needed for participation in decision-making in relation to the control of power and the economy (wealth). It is therefore the key for equipping women for empowerment. Consequently, the Nigerian first ladies at both national and state levels strive to liberate women in their various endeavours and to change the popular mood of women.
There is no mincing of words that female gender has faced subjugation and systematic oppression throughout history, and the situation calls for improvement in their condition in society hence the clamour for women empowerment. In the spirit of empowerment, women should freely analyse, develop voice, their needs and interests without them being pre-defined or imposed. This means that the assumption that planners can identify women's needs runs against empowerment objective for the women. In the words of Nala (2005), "women empowerment is the activities undertaken to improve social, economic and political status of women in the world" (p.18).

Patriarchy is a widespread phenomenon that is not exclusive to single nation or region. It is a system where men hold subjective position as opposed to women who are left at the mercy of men. It is a societal structure where men are dominant. The woman has consistently been

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assigned the role of passive house wife who is completely dependent on the husband (socially, politically, and economically). In fact, the patriarchal system denies women the access to education, freedom to have adventures, and this is not unrelated to the stereotype of the weaker sex. It is a gendered stereotypes that prevent women from having complete freedom to explore their world and express their wishes and aspirations, which makes it challenging for women to advance or break through certain barriers. This has led to gender imbalance or inequality. Brown and Parker (1989) aver "[i] in many parts of the world, cultural tradition dictates that women are second class citizens: men eat first, are educated first, and make decisions for women" (p.1). The position of Brown and Parker above shows that in most cultures, women experience violence and are oppressed, suppressed, discriminated against and isolated from the scheme of things. Education can liberate women from cultural injustices.

El-Saadawi, Steady, Wa Thiong'o and Ogundipe-Leslie agree that "the black woman is to a large extent the original feminist". Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) position is predicated on production as it is a key to empowerment because true feminism is impossible without intensive involvement in production (p.52). With close reference to Anansewa in Sutherland's Marriage of Anansewa (1975), Anansewa's journey serves as a powerful narrative that exposes the profound challenges women face within patriarchal systems. Her narrative stands as a poignant testament to the broader struggle for women's empowerment and the imperative to dismantle structures that perpetuate exploitative practices. It is a rallying cry for recalibration of societal norms, a call to acknowledge women's intrinsic worth, and a pointer to the enduring relevance of feminist theory in dismantling the deeply rooted inequalities that persist in our world today. We are compelled to confront the imperative of forging a more equitable and inclusive future for all.

The consequence of lack of education, it must be noted, is poverty, illiteracy, and despondency. This has been the bane of the Nigerian woman. Echoes of the low status of women education is highlighted in the low level of female enrolment in Nigerian schools, where girls are made to hawk or given out in early marriage instead being allowed to attend school (Sani 2003, p.17); a good number are ruined at their prime age through prostitution. Abubakar (2009) asserts that "as much at two million Nigerian girl-children were trapped in the hands of child-traffickers in countries such as Italy and Libya after being lured with promise of education and good jobs" (p.16). Similarly, Dashen (2002) shows that girls from both urban and rural locations were being deprived of education through being subjected to child labour practices such as hawking in Pakshin Local Government Area of Plateau State. The consequence of this deprivation of education on women is that the woman has remained subservient, depressed, poor and marginalised to penury in addition to suffering the overload of male chauvinism because of her illiteracy induced ignorance.

Because of their low education, women tend to assume dehumanised roles in society where they perform 80% of the manual labour based vocations (Abdullah 1990, p.13). This becomes worrisome when it is realised that the worth of a nation is measured by the quality of its human resources and most especially the value attached to its women, Nigeria may not reflect

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on the scorecard in this light. The strategy as a way out is in nipping the problem in the bud through girl-child education.

Cultural Challenges and Educational Deprivation of the Girl-Child

The start of the problems of the girl-child can be traced mainly to cultural stereotype. Most Nigerian cultures have presumed roles and performance capacity for the woman. The environment in which the woman operates is defined in terms of man's world. She is valued, not necessarily by her human worth, a creation in the likeness of God, but in relation to her marital status as should be exhibited in her complete allegiance to the man's overbearing dominance, arrogance and limitless control over her. The man is to the woman a husband and a boss from who she must take directives. It is always in the woman's interest to be a model in moral rectitude, faithfulness in satisfying the man's passion and his need for children. Her role was to do those lowly jobs, which the man would normally not do. Consequently, the woman's role within the cultural context was defined by the belief that:

a. The woman's place was in the home, concerned mainly with child-bearing, domestic chores such as cooking, fetching water and firewood, house maintenance and providing farm labour. She is associated to professions seen not to be too tasking such as nursing, teaching, secretarial duties and non-technical vocation.
b. Women education, especially, the girl-child was a waste of resources.
c. Politics was not meant for decent women.
d. A woman had no inheritance from her paternal lineage if married.
e. A widow was like a property to be inherited by members of her matrimonial extended family without which she forfeits all her rights.
f. It was a woman's responsibility to maintain high moral standard and values but the man could have his way.

These prejudices and misconceptions on the female gender have serious negative impact on the educational development of the girl-child. Since education is the key to empowerment denying the girl education will be disenfranchising her of an important fundamental human right. The irony is that girls who were priviledged to have attained some level of education are hamstrung to further their education independent of parental strings. Because of the complacency and prejudices of the society towards female education, the girl-child has suffered a serious violation of her fundamental human rights. These include:

Low Educational Attainment: Most girls hardly go beyond primary and secondary levels. It is on record that dropout rate at primary level is as much as 40% with most of it affecting the girl-child. Recently, states such as Bauchi and Bayelsa have raised echoes of concern on the low enrolment rate of females in their state schools as confirmation of this concern.

Child Abuse: The girl-child is a victim of child labour especially hawking, manual labour, engagement as nannies and sales girls. Of concern is the fact that most often, these activities take place at time of the day when classes would be on (Dashen 2002, p.98). Such children always find it difficult to do their homework or rest enough for the next day's school even if they had the opportunity to attend school. The girl-child is turned into a breadwinner. More

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than half of the over 250 million child-labourers in the world are known to have dropped out of school, while those who were able to combine the two have shown impaired learning capacity as a result of the long hours of labour (Awake 1999, p.28).

Forced Marriage: Cultural beliefs and practices see the chastity of the girl-child as best protected when given out for marriage at adolescent age, assumable, before she is "exposed". Parents, who believe in this position, place the girl-child at the level of a commodity to be negotiated usually by the parents with indifference to the girls' feelings.
Some parents go to a bizarre level to trace the girl to the school and coerce her into abandoning her education for marriage. She becomes enslaved to the wish of her parents. Girl-child marriage has resulted in many "baby mothers" who are usually not psychologically and physically prepared for the stress of family upbringing. The VVF scourge that is the trauma of such baby-mothers highlights this injustice on the girl-child.

Prostitution: Women trafficking mostly in the sex trade have been on astronomical rise. At the domestic level, many parents appear to have abdicated their responsibilities in the upbringing of their families, leaving the girl-child with no option than to engage in illicit activities to make ends meet. The dastardliest aspect of this circumstance is through child-trafficking in which girls, with the cooperation of their parents, are left in the hands of over-zealous sex-merchants as export commodities. In most cases, the girls are left ignorant of the real intentions of their captors sometimes deceiving them of an Eldorado. It is reported that Nigerian children, mostly girls are currently trapped in the nest of human trafficker's around the globe. In Italy, Nigerian girls are being humiliated and decimated to the level of animals in a carnal sex relationships. Apart from destroying the dignity of the victims, the danger of contracting the deadly and dreaded HIV/AIDS is eminent.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper has been able to view what education of the girl-child entails and the challenges and problems faced by women in the patriarchal society. The paper discovers the importance of the girl-child education in the growth and development of Nigeria and submits that the education of the girl-child (woman) has contributed positively to the welfare of the family as well as the general public and that when men and women co-exist as partners in progress, the nation moves forward. Education has actually come to shape the lives of women. With education, women can now be part of policy planning and decision making in any sphere of life. Through education, women have the ability to explain school work to their children, encourage them to read, punish them according to their school performances and making sure that they do their homework.
The paper identifies the educational deprivations of the girl-child such as societal/cultural challenges from the home background that impede their progress. It is discovered that these obstacles to the women are surmounted with the provision of adequate security for women in the educational sector in the philosophy and goals of Nigeria education system. With this in view, at home the girl-child will not be relegated to the background, and social equality is guaranteed as social inequality and gender discrimination have to be deemphasised in the

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society. Consequently, women empowerment will stop the subordination of women. The need for women empowerment, especially in higher education management and leadership has been stressed to higher degree of acceptance. The girl-child as opined in this paper is a mother tomorrow. In the paper, from available results, the women's performances in areas hitherto kept as a reserve for men calls for a reassessment of cultural stereotypes inimical to girl-child development. Some current programmes of government and non-governmental agencies suggest an increased awareness of the potential of women and the need for reassessment.

5. CONCLUSION

Current programmes of government and non-governmental agencies suggest an increased awareness of women. Feminism advocates strategies for achieving female/male relationships on woman's own terms which subverts the patriarchal agenda. African feminism also raises concern on feminist consciousness that tends to equip the woman for achievement as the multiple sites of gender politics and thus drives towards women empowerment.

To a large extent, feminism erases the misconception of African men who see women as personal property and so the idea of equal educational access and opportunity means nothing to them. In fact, females are intimidated in schools. Cases of sexual harassment, male chauvinism and the myth of male superiority are common place in schools, at all levels of education.

The government is signatory to many international declarations calling for attention to the plight of the girl-child. The Universal Basic Education Programme (UBEP) aimed at providing functional basic education to all Nigerians is laudable if implemented to the later. As welcoming as these efforts are, government must show that its commitment is beyond the level of rhetoric. The woman should not be portrayed as a victim. Modupe-Kolawole (1997) asserts that "…the woman is usually a mystery, an individual too supernatural to find fulfillment in the natural world" (Pp.81-82).

The education of the females liberates them from the shackles of abuse, oppression, poverty, exclusion, harmful cultural practices, and culturally based limitations on their rights. It elevates them to the state of partners in progress with men instead of continuing as a "liability"; and enables them contribute to the full development of their children. It also eliminates all kinds of gender inequalities and provides adequate female empowerment.

Recommendations

The issue of discrimination of men against women and girls in Africa must be rooted out. The negative effects of this practice on families and societies are obviously clear and acts as an indication of the urgent attention it deserves. Poverty alleviation is a necessity for Nigerian (African) females, and must be vigorously and aggressively tackled at all levels. There should be adequate public enlightenment to help change misconceptions and resistance to the cultural prejudices and stereotypes detrimental to girl-child education. Myths against the girl-child education must be stopped. There should be social welfare programmes for the education of the girl-child and a legislation against all forms of girl-child abuse including law against child trafficking.

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Special schools should be encouraged to take care of cultural peculiarities of the girl, including girl-child craft centres for computer training, sewing and other vocational skills. The greatness of Nigeria will depend on the foundation laid by progressive girl-child education policies and practice.

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