

Curbing the Retrogressive Tendencies of the Girl Child Education in some Northern States of Nigeria: A Historical Perspective

L.I. Maigoro
Department of Arts and Social Science Education,
Faculty of Education,
University of Jos, NIGERIA

Abstract

The peak of Africa underdevelopment is traced to colonialism. But the most disturbing issue is why these seeming indices of underdevelopment are continuing at a fast rate even decades after colonialism. In some northern states of Nigeria today, the girl-child seen to be an endangered specie in terms of educational opportunities with a colossal amount of retrogressive elements posing serious threat to their educational advancement. The article identified these inherent barriers and tried to chart a new and better dimension for educational upliftment of the female gender in the northern states of Nigeria.

Introduction

Generally, gender studies in Nigeria and particularly northern states of Nigeria are at their infant stage. The term gender is used variously. However, for the purpose of this write up, we shall refer its usage to the female human beings who are engaged in the act of active production for societal development. In Nigeria today, women constitute more than 56% out of the estimated 140 million population Magashi (2006). Yet, they are faced with enormous constraints which hampers their path to educational glory. These have tended to tilt educational opportunities between the males and females in favour of the males. This disparity is most pronounced in the northern part of Nigeria where inhibitions of female gender on rights to educational opportunities are perpetrated with impunity by parents and the society while the girl child is left at the mercy of God. It must be stressed here that education is synonymous with development, Lar (2006). As such, all elements of gender marginalization within the fabric of the Nigerian Society must be eliminated in order to give equal opportunity for all to contribute their quota towards national development. This paper therefore identifies these barriers militating against female gender education in northern states of Nigeria and tries to proffer ways to curbing the trend.

The Statusquo

The current status of women today seem to have changes for the better over the years due to increasing awareness on the need for equal opportunities being extended to both sexes in all ramifications. In time past, women were considered as properties, possessions, serfs, second rate citizens who

could be battered (beaten, deliver children) and discarded without the slightest feeling of guilt. They belonged to the class of citizens who could be maltreated with impunity.

Today, however, the situation has improved to a large extent where we have female lawyers, doctors, politicians who aspire to the highest office in the land (president). All these have been achieved due to a certain level of education these women have attained, Kogotho (2004). But a careful look at these levels of prosperity by women reveals that most of them hail from the southern region of Nigeria. Why is this the case? The answer is simple. Southern Nigeria did not impose unnecessary bottle necks, most of which are cultural on the path of women education. In other words, education for both sexes was encouraged without bias to any sex. This view is further sustained by available data on the enrolment ratio of males and females in northern Nigeria. For instance, Adedeji in Maigoro (2006) reported that in 1965, the rate of enrolment of girls in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria was 62,949 while that of the boys was 146,066 and 65% of the girls enrolment rate was from the south while the north had 35%. Again as reported in Sule (2001), by 1995, the number of girls of school age was 6,282,999 but only 2,094,279 got enrolled in schools with the highest number coming from the south.

A more recent statistics obtained from two local government areas in Kano has further buttressed the fact that female education in the northern states of Nigeria is not given the much needed attention it deserves. For instance, in Kano the whole enrolment rate of boys in 2003 was 456,538 while that of girls was 410,831. In Kano north senatorial district in the same year 2003, the enrolment rate of boys was 300,292 while that of the girls was 147,804 almost three times less that of the boys, Kano State Primary Education Board (2003).

Moreso, Ruwa in Elaigwu (2006) stated that the federal office of statistics in 1996 revealed that the female literacy level in some states or northern Nigeria were thus: Borno 11.5%, Jigawa 7%, Kebbi 6%, Yobe 8% and Kebbi 10%. So far, there is no possibility that the statuesquo has changed much especially given the fate of drop outs of girls from schools in this part of the country. For instance, Piwuna in Elaigwu (2006) noted that in 1996, out of the 6,511,748 girls enrolled in Nigerian Primary Schools, 131,527 dropped out of school and in comparison with their southern counterparts, girls from north usually record the highest number of drop-outs from school in view of the colossal odds against their educational prospects. The available data however suggest that the situation of the girls' child education in some northern states of Nigeria is not encouraging and therefore requires urgent attention.

Barriers to Female Education

Although women constitute more than 50% of the world's population (UNESCO 2003), with reasonable contribution to new developments in

their various countries, there are a lot of odds on their path to achieving some level of educational equality with their male counterparts. This view is also supported by Obanya (2003), when he described their situation as "dwindling". Their dwindling situation is more pronounced in the northern part of the country due to the following factors:

Religion

Some parents still harbour the misconceived view that modern education is not for Muslim girls and as such, prevent such girls from going to schools to acquire modern education. Their unfounded fears are probably based on the advent of formal education in Nigeria via the Christian missionaries and thus, embracing it was synonymous with embracing Christianity. Though Christian missionaries used it to spread Christianity, there is now a clear distinction between formal education and Christianity and therefore, by now, it shouldn't be a regarding factor but unfortunately, it still is-needless to say Islam encourages Muslims to go as far as China in search of knowledge, while encouraging the good and forbidding the wrong.

Another dimension to the religious factor is the role of Purdah or female seclusion as a major decisive factor towards female education. This mostly applies to married women where their husbands prefer to put them in seclusion thereby depriving them the golden opportunity of getting basic education even as married women. All these arise as a result of misconception of the teachings of Islam.

Economic Background of the Parents

The United Nations through its various agencies has ranked Nigeria as one of the poorest nations in the world. In Nigeria, the disparity between the rich and poor is such that the rich get richer while the poor becomes poorer by the day. The situation is so serious that most families live on less than one US dollar, Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia (2008) per day due to unequal distribution of national wealth. As a result, there emerge a trend where boys are preferred to be sponsored in schools compared to their girl counterparts hence parents cannot afford to sponsor both due to poverty. Girls are thus often at the receiving end where a choice is to be made as to who gets sponsored to school.

Cultural Roles of Girls

In most communities of the Nigerian state especially in some northern states of Nigeria, the cultural or society functions of the girl child are such that serve as bottle necks to their education. Girls are often seen as people who must perform their domestic roles of future house wives and nothing more. Apart from that, the next societal approved role was hawking in order to generate income for their parents at the expense of education as observed by Indabawa (2006). Sometimes the girls could be lured and kidnapped thereby exposing the child to hazardous situations.

Early Marriage

Every society has its marriage norms and practices which cannot be prevented. But where the conduct of such marriages affect the educational advancement of the child and the society, then it should be prevented at all cost. A situation where girls are married off at the tender age of 11 – 14, mostly at the instance of their parents, should be discouraged because their education is halted mid-way. What is even more worrisome is the fact that they do not stand the chance of either starting or continuing their education in their matrimonial homes, hence the husband may decide to put them under Purdah or seclusion. This trend is mostly perpetrated by illiterate parents who unfortunately, constitute a large population in the country.

Towards a Better Female Education

Successive governments in northern Nigeria, who are bent on providing education for all seem to forget the fact that there is the urgent need to make education opportunities available for both sexes in order to arrest the gender educational imbalance. However, below are probable solutions to the lingering problem.

There is the need for governments in the northern part of the country to launch a special programme aimed at massive enrolment to boost female education in these parts of the country. This could be done in conjunction with international agencies like UNICEF. It is not enough to launch these programmes but a proper way of maintaining these schools should be devised. Such programme could take the form of establishing pure female secondary schools. This will allay the fears of some parents who feel negatively about mixed schools.

Government could establish centres for continuing education for married women whose education was halted mid-way due to early marriage. Such centres should be located in at least every community. This will go a long way in ensuring that illiteracy among married women is highly reduced as marriage would no longer be seen as a means of terminating female education.

Government could make it mandatory to every community to constitute a committee made up of traditional and religious leaders to create awareness on the need for equal educational opportunities for both sexes. If this is done, some parents who rely on conservative religious dogma due to ignorance to deny their female children might now begin to think positively towards female education.

The role of non-governmental organizations in this respect should also be courted. Such NGO's could include those within and outside the country to assist in the advancement of education in the educationally backward states.

Individuals who are well established could also render assistance to the

female folks. This could be done by giving scholarship awards to the female gender in cases where poverty is the problem.

Conclusion

Gender education should be taken seriously especially by governments in some northern states of Nigeria, hence the female folks also have crucial roles to play in the development of the Nigerian State. To deny them the right to education, virtually means denying the Nigerian nation the chance of enjoying contributions from this quarter towards its development.

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