

GENDER INEQUALITY AND GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN AKWA IBOM NORTH-WEST SENATORIAL DISTRICT

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Abstract

Education empowers global citizens for sustainable development to transform societal visions into reality. Unfortunately, the high level of gender disparity of women education in Akwa Ibom North-West Senatorial District in primary and secondary schools is worrisome. This study examined the effects of gender inequality on women education and early marriage on the girl-child education in Akwa Ibom North-West Senatorial District. Radical and Liberal Feminist schools of thought on gender inequality and women education was adopted and used as theoretical perspectives for the study. Descriptive survey method was adopted in gathering data from primary and secondary sources. The findings revealed that early marriage has a great effect on the education of the girl-child in Akwa Ibom North-West Senatorial District. The study recommends that the girl-child education's sensitization should be intensified and Akwa Ibom State Government should assist parents who are low income earners through skill acquisition empowerment courses to augment their current means of income.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Girl- Child, Education and Akwa Ibom North-West Senatorial District

Introduction

All over the world, the wave of globalization has greatly improved the lives of many women, particularly those in developing nations. Unfortunately, women remain deprived in many areas of life, including education, employment, health and civil rights, (Udoh, 2023). Studies by USAID and World Bank (2010) reveal that 57 per cent of females of the 72 million primary school-aged children do not attend schools with 4per cent of girls less likely to complete primary education than boys. According to Effiong, Mboho and Wordu (2018), this evidence signifies a strong existence of a wider global gender disparity in education. In general, girls from poor households have very few educational opportunities, and this inequality remains till adulthood (Nnachi, 2010). Observations by Udoh (2023) confirmed further that in most Nigerian families, there are more female children than male children who are not attending schools.

The projection of gender statistics by the United Nations (2010) shows that out of the 774 million illiterate adults worldwide, 64 percent are women, and this statistic has remained unchanged for the past 20 years. In Nigeria, the gender gap in primary, secondary and tertiary education is intense, even as education plays an important role in the quest to equally adapt to the

needs and interests of girls and boys, (Obanya 2007). Girl-child education is not prioritized, thus, many girls are less likely to access schools in most rural communities in Nigeria, (Effiong, 2019). In most countries, girls are less likely to attend secondary schooling, repeat classes, early drop out and consistently fail on important subjects (UN, 2010).

Observably, inequality in society inevitably has an impact on the provision and content of education. This, as noted by Offorma (2009) is because, certain traditional practices, stereotypes, and cultural and religious beliefs put female children in Nigeria at the risk of abuse and neglect. Education, according to Effiong, Ekanem and Ottong (2023) is a right to every Nigerian child devoid of gender priority, as enshrined in Section 42 of the Nigerian Constitution, 1999 (As Amended). Unfortunately, gender discrimination in girl child's education permeates every facet and comes in several forms in Akwa Ibom North-West Senatorial District of Akwa Ibom State, and this informs the study with the view to reducing the inherent discrimination that is bedevilling the girl-child education in Akwa Ibom State.

Conceptual Clarifications

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. It is a general problem to human existence, healthy relationships and development. It is a critical factor in structuring the types of opportunities and life chances faced by individuals and groups, and these strongly influence the roles they play within social institutions from the household to the state. Although the roles of men and women differ from culture to culture, there are no popular narratives in which the female gender is considered stronger than males. Male roles are generally more valued and rewarded than female roles (Ibrahim, 2004; Giddens, 2010). The call for equality in education for women and girls has become a concern to stakeholders in the education sector. This is because gender inequality between girls and boys in education is long-standing and highly visible.

Gender equality, according to Nnachi, (2010) is about providing equal opportunities, justice, equal hearing, and treatment to all members of a social group irrespective of their sex. The author observed further that equity in gender consideration refers to providing equal opportunities and treatment to all irrespective of their sex and that if more favourable considerations are tailored towards one of the sexes, this is inequity. Daniel (2010) affirms here that gender equity is not only fair but also an important means for society to fully integrate its members.

Girl-Child Education

The girl child emerges as a young female who grows to become a woman and marries. Offorma (2009) defines a girl child as someone who was born a female from birth and must be below eighteen (18) years of age. This period includes infancy, childhood, early adolescence and post-adolescence. She has to take care of the children, the house and the kitchen. She is taught the idea of obedience and made to understand that her character will endear her to a responsible husband when she grows. Gender discrimination puts girls in a vulnerable position. In the words of Agha, Ukommi, Ekpenyong and Effiong (2020), education not only helps people develop the skills necessary to play an active role in society, but it is also a powerful tool that shapes the culture of society.

UNICEF (2007) states that education for girls not only provide direct benefits through the empowerment of girls, but is also seen as a sound investment in the development of the country. Girl child education is not about political propaganda or the levels of educational attainment of girls over boys in society. According to Udoh, (2023), it is about equal access to education and retention of these students devoid of separate schools for both sexes. Several empirical researches in Nigeria reiterated the need for equal access for both the boy and girl child education.

Effects of Early Marriage on Girl Child in the Society

These have also militated against girls' attendance, retention, and achievement in schools, About 30% of school-age girls drop out of school having already begun childbearing before the age of 18 (Giddens, 2010). For instance, in Northern Nigeria, a study by Ofoegbu, (2009) revealed that the literacy rate for males is higher than for females due to early marriage.

Domestic Violence

The girl child problem starts from the home and the same continues as she interacts with the general society. Fisho-Orideji, (2001) argued that traditionally, to give birth to a girl in most traditional societies is almost synonymous with a curse. A girl child is born and socialized into the belief of being inferior or subhuman with attendant marginalization and abuse. She is often held responsible and punished for any misfortune of her parents. Physical, Verbal and other related abuses are common practices against girl children. These acts affect the psycho-social and educational performance of young learners, especially the girl-children (Charles and Charles, 2004).

Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse especially against girl-child, has assumed a worrisome dimension in Nigeria. This is done by adult relatives and in some cases by the step-father of a girl or a close relative in the family. There are many reported cases where girls are regularly abused sexually, threatened never to open up to anybody or else be killed, and some are forced to abort the pregnancies that might result from the abuse to cover up the abuse, (Mwangi, 2004).

Female Infanticide - Sex-Selective Abortion

Female infanticide is the murder of a young girl child, often occurring as a deliberate murder of a girl infant or young girl child or as a result of neglect. Selective abortion also called 'gender-selective abortion', 'sex-selective abortion' or 'female feticide' is the abortion of foetus because it is a female. Medical technology has made it possible for parents to discover the sex of a foetus at earlier stages of pregnancy. Thus, so many communities have a preference a male child and as well practice selective abortion. Female infanticide and feticide are predominantly practiced in India and Nigeria. One reason boys are more valued than girls is preserving lineage; a family lineage and family name are carried only by males in most societies. Igube, (2010) pointed out that to eradicate female infanticide and feticide in Nigeria, public awareness of the issues and grassroots support of local communities are essential. The government must take steps to implement programmes to educate the public and encourage NGOs to take action on these practices.

Theoretical Framework

This research work relies both on the radical and liberal schools of thought in examining gender inequality and women's education.

Radical Feminist Theory

Radical feminism theory propounded by Lengerman and Nieubrugge in 1995 was adopted in this study to explain the reasons for inequality and education challenges of women in Nigeria. At the heart of radical feminism is the belief that men are responsible for and benefit from the exploitation of women as well as education. The evaluation of patriarchy is a relevant concern. Patriarchy is viewed as a universal phenomenon that exists across time and cultures. Radical feminists often concentrate on the family as one of the primary sources of women's oppression in society (Igbube, 2004). He contended that some patriarchal structures restrict girl-children as well as women's education opportunities and help maintain male domination. These are paid employment, patriarchal relations within the household, patriarchal culture, sexuality, and violence towards females and the state. Each of these structures has some independence from the others, but they can affect one another, reinforcing or weakening different structures.

Offorma (2009) believes that paid employment has been and remained a key structure in creating disadvantages for women and children in particular. In traditional Nigerian society, the level of inequality between men and women in terms of wages, status and access to well-paying jobs has decreased. The gap between male and female wages has narrowed somewhat, and women continue to dominate in low-paying part-time jobs. When girls and women choose not to pursue formal education or seek paid employment, they do so largely because of the opportunities available to them, and because of cultural values that dictate that women's duties are limited at home. The state's policies and priorities are systematically biased toward patriarchal interests.

Two distinctive forms of patriarchy are identified as private and public, private patriarchy is the domination of women and girls which occurs within the household at the hand of an individual Patriarchy. Girls are socialized to the belief that they cannot make independent decisions on their own but males around them. Public patriarchy is more inclusive. Girls as well as women may be involved in public life such as education, employment and politics but the quality and levels of involvement are generally lower compared to their male counterparts (Igbube, 2010). In Nigeria, for instance, the enrolment ratio of girls to boys is generally lower in elementary, Secondary and tertiary institutions (Offorma, 2009). Igbube (2010) asserted that though women's population is higher than men's in Nigeria, the number of women in labour force is lower than men and more of these women are in low-paid informal employment.

Liberal Feminist Theory

Liberal feminist theory is a conceptual orientation that is premised on the understanding that individual ignorance has contributed to gender prejudice. To address this prejudice the affected individual has to take action. Education is therefore seen as a variable that can be used to improve the situation, (Effiong, Ekanem and Ottong, 2023). Liberal Feminism is also concerned with equal rights and freedom of the individual. Hence, it therefore should be reformed; such reform should be gradually introduced without radically upsetting the status quo. Liberal feminism has moderate aims, it does not radically challenge the existing values and as such it aims for gradual change in political, economic and social systems, (Haralambos and Holborn 2000).

Gender disparity has been attributed to several factors including culture and the way men and women are associated within the culture. Another factor includes the discriminating attitude of individuals. All these can be changed through empowerment and education. Generally, liberal feminism calls for gradual reforms through advocacy for equal rights for all, laws and policies that promote equality. Liberal feminism explains gender inequalities in social and cultural parameters; they seek gradual change. They seek to “Focus their energies on establishing and protecting equal opportunities for woman through legislation other democratic means” (Giddens, 2001). The liberalist argues that education fosters personal development and self-fulfilment it encourages the individual to develop his mental, physical, emotional and spiritual talents to the full. The relevance of this theory in education of a girl-child is that government should provide free education for all because by providing free education it gives everyone an equal perspectives, academic credentials are awarded on merit in a system of fair competition in the same way jobs are awarded on merit and there is a strong relationship between educational qualifications and occupation status. The liberalist are of the view that the expansion of education will reduce inequality in society particularly as the educational attainment of members of the working class rises, their bargaining position in the market will improve and as a result their income will rise.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey-based descriptive research method. The need for survey design is predicated on the fact that a large pool of information from the respondents within the study area which is made up of ten (10 Local Government Areas) to help determine the relationship between gender inequality and the girl child education in Akwa Ibom North-West Senatorial District of Akwa Ibom State. Respondents were purposively selected from across the sampled area for the study.

Discussions of Findings

Females in some of the local communities in Akwa Ibom State especially Akwa Ibom North-West Senatorial District encounters socio-cultural and religious challenges which hinder their regular participation in Education. Traditional practices/beliefs impose a lot of restrictions on female education. It is regrettable that despite our progress as a society there is still an underestimation of the value of the girl-child. The psychological effect of gender inequality and socio-cultural beliefs on women is the internalization of the low value accorded them by society. Inequality has other serious implications on women's education such as it leads to absenteeism in school among pupils and students; Absenteeism leads to an increase in dropout. This aligns with studies by Okoro (2002) and UNICEF (2003) which noted the rate at which females drop out of primary and post-primary institutions in Nigeria.

Most children walk far distances to schools in remote areas. Access is the opportunity provided for the girl child to be educated. Access deals with the availability, convenience and ability to be educated Okeke, Nzewi and Njoku (2008). This incident has prevented millions of girls from having access to education which is their fundamental human right. Poverty and the level of education of mothers are some factors hindering females' access to education. In line with that, over 70 per cent of Nigerians live below the poverty line (UNICEF, 2010). This has prevented many Nigerian parents, especially large families with limited resources from enrolling their female children in schools while their male counterparts are given preference. Some parents also keep their daughters out of school due to economic and religious beliefs.

Gender-based discrimination is a problem that limits girls' education and causes poor enrolment and attendance in primary and secondary schools while girls continue to face many obstacles that impede their part to learning. Statistics show that the enrolment percentages of the boy child are consistently higher than that of the girl child, and out of the number that enrol in primary school in Nigeria, only 43 per cent gain entry into secondary school, (UNICEF, 2003). Most children who drop out of school usually experience psychological trauma. WHO (2010) explained that abused girls are more likely to suffer depression, anxiety as well as psychosomatic symptoms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The past years have witnessed improved, but not significant enrolment of the female population in primary and secondary education. However, a closer analysis of secondary education statistics revealed the different nature of the problem in different socio-cultural and economic contexts. Several cultural barriers still exist in the Nigerian Society which seriously impedes women's development as citizens and professionals. Efforts to improve female education in Nigeria need to go beyond rhetoric and should involve policies and programme with measurable results.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. The sensitization on the need for girl-child education in Akwa North-West Senatorial District be intensified.
- ii. Parents and children should be well informed on the rights and privileges of a girl-child.
- iii. The government and NGOs' should carry out programmes and policies that will promote girl-child education across States in Nigeria.
- iv. The State Government should put up a free and compulsory education programme to support girl-child education in Akwa Ibom State.
- v. Parents who are low-income earners should be empowered through skill acquisition and training to boost their means of livelihood.
- vi. The media (Press) should play their role by informing, educating and creating awareness on the benefits of education disregarding gender disparity through programmes, jingles, adverts, etc.

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