



RELIGIOUS ADVOCACY AND STAKEHOLDERS' ENGAGEMENT IN THE ADVANCEMENT OF GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of sustainable development. Investing in girls' education is considered the highest investment any nation can make, which yields significant returns. In Nigeria, about 7.6 million girls are out of school (OOS). This study examines the significance of religious advocacy and stakeholders' engagement in advancing girl-child education in Nigeria. The study used a qualitative method to review and analyze relevant materials on the subject matter. The findings, among others, reveal that despite various efforts put in place by the Nigerian governments and non-governmental agencies in ensuring equal access to education for girls, gender inequality in education is still prevalent in the country. Factors such as poverty, early marriage, and cultural norms have been identified as critical barriers to girl-child education in Nigeria. In addition to other measures to ensure equal access to education for the girl-child, the study recommends religious advocacy and engagement that meaningfully engages the various religious leaders, bodies, and groups in the country. With such committed engagement in place, the study envisaged a reorientation and change in attitudes that would help dismantle the socio-cultural and religious ideologies that discourage girl-child education and ensure gender parity in education in Nigeria.

Keywords - Girl-child, education, religious, advocacy, stakeholder engagement

Introduction

The rights of the child, including the rights of the girl-child and women to education, have been globally affirmed. These rights are detailed in various international and regional instruments, such as conventions, covenants, declarations, resolutions, development goals, and, finally, charters. Among the conventions include; the Convention on the Right of the Child 1989 (Art.28:1a.b.c & d), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women, 1979 (Art. 10); UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, 1960 (Art. 4a). Covenant such as the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966 (Art. 13:1 & 2a.b & c) recognise the right of everyone to education, compulsory and free primary education to all, available and accessible secondary education to all and equal accessible of Higher education to all (Right to Education, 2018; WGG Education Group (2006). The ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, 2011 (Art. 31, no.1), and the Beijing Declaration, 1995 (Sect. L4) recognise and identify the right of every person to education and the elimination of



discrimination against girls in education, skills development, and training (cited in WGG Education Group, 2006).

UN Resolution A/RES/76/146 urges all stakeholders, including the United Nations and its agencies, governments at all levels and civil society, the private sector and academic to address the specific needs of the girl-child through actions such as: convention on the girl-child, safe and equal access to education, gender equality, Human Rights and Children's Rights, end poverty, Child protection, Harmful practices and violence against girls, health and well being (United Nation General Assembly, 2021). Resolution 66/170, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 19, 2011, declares October 11 as the International Day of the Girl Child to recognise girls' rights and the unique challenges girls face around the world (United Nations General Assembly, 2011). Both the Millennium Development Goals, 2000 (MDG 2 & 3) and the Sustainable Development Goals, 2015 (SDG 1, 3,4, 5, 7 & 8) recognize the need to attain child and girls' education. Regional instruments on girl-child education include, The African Youth Charter, 2006 (Art. 13:1,3f; 4h & I), African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990 (Art. 11, no.1; 3e & 6) and The African Charter on Human and People's Rights, 1981 (Art.17, no.1) and their various protocols (Right to Education, 2018).

Despite the above international and regional instruments on the rights of the girl-child to education, research by groups and individuals indicates that girl-child education continues to face challenges. Despite milestone agreements and promises to tackle gender inequality, millions of girls worldwide still cannot claim their rights as set out in international law. Millions of girls are disproportionately disadvantaged in education, health, work, and family life – particularly in the world's poorest countries (Plan International, 2017). Around the world, 119 million girls are out of school, including 34 million of primary school age, 28 million of lower-secondary school age, and 58 million of upper-secondary school age (UNICEF- FOR EVERY CHILD, n.d). 32 million primary-school-aged girls worldwide do not attend school (UNFPA cited in Plan International). 41,000 girls are forced into marriage every day ("Girls Not Brides" cited in Plan International). The global figure for out-of-school children is estimated at 121 million, of whom 65 million are girls (UBEC, 2018, cited in UNICEF NIGERIA, 2022).

According to Eileen (2004), "... reaching gender equity in school enrolment is still a major challenge in most countries. Nothing illustrates this better than the failure of many countries to attain the only Millennium Development Goal set for 2005, i.e., "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education" (p. vii). The same observation was echoed by WGG Education Group (2006): "Educating girls has cascading benefits. Unfortunately, girls continue to be locked out of school and locked into inequality. Millions of Children (and especially girls) continue to be denied adequate health care, nutrition, education, and protection from violence (UNICEF NIGERIA, 2022). This situation worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Generation Equality Forum (2020), school closures to contain the spread of COVID-19 have put nearly 1.6 billion children out of school at their peak, including 767 million girls. For these studies, COVID-19 reveals and reinforces existing gender inequalities, spelling most vehemently the need for the transformative effect of girls' education on their lives and our societies.



Barriers to girl-child education are multifaceted and interrelated, including cultural, societal, institutional, and finally, systemic. However, the Generation Equality Forum (2020) identified the major drivers of these barriers as discriminatory and harmful social norms that define women's roles in society and at home, thereby creating critical gaps in gender equality (p.1). Recommendations and solutions to the barriers have cut across the various dynamics of the challenges, including institutional and system reforms, gender-responsive pedagogies and safety learning environment, stopping child and early marriage and discriminatory gender norms and harmful practices against the girls, abolition of fees and levies, sponsorship, family life education and enlightenment of parents, advocacy and engagement of key decision-makers and stakeholders.

The present study explores the significance of religious advocacy and stakeholders' engagement in advancing girl-child education in Nigeria. The impact of stakeholder engagement in any development project can never be ignored. Incidentally, religion, in all its dimensions, has always remained an indispensable social institution in every known human society, not only informing but also regulating the people's morality and worldviews, thereby underscoring the significance of the present study. As with every other study, it would be necessary to begin by exploring the dynamics of girls' education, with the hope of enhancing understanding of the concept.

Girl- Child Education- An Overview

The girl child, according to the description of Offoma (2009, as cited in The African Centre For Leadership, Strategy & Development, n.d), is a biological female offspring from birth to eighteen (18) years of age. This period comprises infancy, childhood, and the late adolescent state of development. Education is the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs through various forms, such as teaching, training, and researching. For the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2009), education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of sustainable development. It includes five levels: primary education (basic), secondary education (high school), tertiary education (college or university), vocational education (training for specific skills), and lifelong learning. Girls' education, on the other hand, refers to a process by which the girl-child who transforms to woman is equipped with the skills, knowledge, habits, and expectations that will enable them to be functional to themselves and members of the society (The African Centre For Leadership, Strategy & Development, n.d).

The goal of education, according to UNESCO (2010), is to empower individuals to reach their full potential, contribute to their communities, and lead fulfilling lives. The benefits of education extend beyond the individual level to society at large. From a personal perspective, education helps individuals develop their cognitive, emotional, and social abilities, enabling them to participate in the world around them. It is regarded as one of the fundamental requirements for a person to develop and contribute to society (The African Centre For Leadership, Strategy & Development, n.d.). Presenting both the individualistic and societal gains of education, Eileen (2004) observes:



At the individual level, education is the ultimate liberator, empowering people to make personal and social choices. Education is also the ultimate equalizer, particularly in promoting greater equity for women and for poor and disadvantaged groups, since education is the only capital such groups can aspire to acquire. At the national level, educated citizens are the foundation for well-functioning democratic institutions, and for achieving social cohesion... (p.vii)

Basic education, Eileen further observes, expands options and offers resources for renewal over a lifetime. This, in turn, translates into a range of national, household, and family benefits. For others, investing in girls' education is the single most effective investment a developing country can make ... educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment in the developing world (Summers, 1994). Prioritizing girls' education, nevertheless, is not beneficial only to developing countries; the developed countries need it too. For example, the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, having identified girls' education as an urgent development priority for the entire UN system, maintains:

If we are to succeed in our efforts to build a healthier, more peaceful, and equitable world, classrooms must be full of girls as well as boys. By educating girls, we will help raise economic productivity and reduce both maternal and infant mortality. By educating girls, we will improve nutrition, promote health, and fight HIV/AIDS. By educating girls, we will trigger a transformation of society as a whole—social, economic, and political (cited in WGG Education Group, 2006).

The impacts of educating the girl-child are felt across all sectors of the economy: economic, health, social, political, and, lastly, human rights. From an economic perspective, investing in girls' education increases income for individuals and nations. It drives economic growth by reducing poverty through the contribution of girls and women to their family economic well-being and national growth (WGG Education Group). Health-wise, girl-child education has strong effects on fertility rates, leading to lower fertility among mothers, reduced child and maternal mortality rates, and child stunting, improving healthy reproductive lives and reducing disease and improving nutrition (Eileen, 2004). Socially, girls' education contributes to more stable, resilient societies that give individuals, including boys and men, the opportunity to fulfil their potential. It helps girls to recognise and resist gender-based violence and discrimination, and reduces gender inequality in society. It helps to delay early marriage and childbirth, which challenges girls in many societies across the world (The African Centre For Leadership, Strategy & Development, n.d; UNICEF-FOR EVERY CHILD, n.d).

The political and human rights implications of educating a girl-child are not to be ignored either. Educating a girl-child, as past studies observe, empowers her not only to participate in decisions that most affect them, but it also helps them to make informed decisions that challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures and norms that promote gender stereotypes and gender-sensitive policies in society. Education increases girls' political engagement, leadership, and decision-making capacities. Empowerment of the girl-child goes a long way in helping her to understand both her legal and reproductive rights. With such awareness, they (girl-child) can protect the full and effective enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms. However, as Eileen



(2004) would observe, the single most important benefit of education is to the woman herself. Education empowers women to take advantage of opportunities that benefit them and their families, helping them build better futures.

The cost of not educating the girl, as indicated by past studies, is huge. The list includes: constraints to development, poor economic growth, and social cohesion. Low levels of educational attainment, especially among women, represent a severe constraint on development in most Sub-Saharan African countries. This constraint hampers progress for individual nations alike (Eileen). Research shows that the national economic and social costs of not educating girls and of not achieving gender parity in education are high and, in fact, are higher for Africa than for any other region. For some other persons, gender inequality in education is not simply a feature but a cause of poor economic growth.

Finally, investing in girls' secondary education is considered one of the most transformative development strategies. Thus, Abu Ghaida and Klasen (2002 as cited in Eileen) contend that while any one of the many well-documented benefits of girls' education could be achieved by another intervention, research now shows that no matter how the effects are defined, girls' education achieves them all. This finding alone provides a new incentive for the manager.

Girl-Child Education in Nigeria

The projected population figure of Nigeria in 2022 was 216,783,381, comprising 108,350,410 males and 108,432,971 females, or roughly 50% of the population (UNICEF NIGERIA, 2022). Adolescents (ages 10-19) constitute 23% of Nigeria's population (World Bank, 2022). The statistics of girls' enrolment and school attendance have indicated that nationally 63% of girls are enrolled in primary school (GPI 0.88), and 30% in secondary school (GPI 0.77) (UNESCO, 2009), with considerable variations between states, and between boys and girls in urban and rural areas (Actionaid, 2011). 7.6 million girls are out of school (OOS) in Nigeria: 3.9 million at the primary and 3.7 million at the junior secondary level. In each cohort, 1 million girls drop out between the first and last year of primary school, and 0.6 million between P6 and JSS1. More than 50% of girls are not attending school (Cambridge Education, 2021). The rate of OOS girls in the North West and North East was placed at 48% (UNICEF NIGERIA, 2022). Gender parity in net attendance ratio is between 1.0 in 10 states (primarily in the North), but is decreasing in 15 states (National Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF, 2017).

There have been significant policies and interventions by the Nigerian government and non-governmental agencies to advance girl-child education in Nigeria. Remarkable among the Government policies include: the Universal Basic Education Act 2004 and associated State UBE laws that provide free and compulsory education for all Nigerian Children(UBE dedicates 2% of Nigeria's Consolidated Revenue Fund annually to UBEC, even though the 3 years of senior secondary education are not free); Child Rights Act(this has been adopted in 26 states even though provisions against child marriage are yet to be incorporated into state laws) and as such, loopholes permitting child marriage persist; and the last but not the least, is the National Policy on Gender in Education, 2021 (this aims to ensure equitable access for girls and promotes quality and inclusive education for all))(UNICEF NIGERIA, 2022).



In addition to various interventions by International organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF has remained committed to improving the educational standard and equality in education in Nigeria. Among the responses by UNICEF are: support to FME to develop a National Enrolments Drive Framework and reached over 820,000 through enrolment campaigns in 2017; mapping of OOCs and provision of cash transfers to enable access to and retention in school; supported the enrolment of an additional 1.3 million girls through the Girls Education Project Phase 3(GEP3)(2012-2021), implementation of minimum standards on safe school in 12 states, engagement with traditional and religious leaders in 19 Northern states and FCT to commit to girls education, development of a policy on gender in education, costed states gender plans and re-entry guidelines for girls; improvement of infrastructure through micro-grants to CBMCS; establishment of high-level women's groups in 12 states to advocate girls education; training of facilitators, provision of teaching and learning materials, and establishing clubs for girls and for boys and engagement of mother's association to support retention, transition, and achievement(UNICEF NIGERIA,2022).

Research findings and reports from groups and individuals working in Nigeria have revealed that, despite the Nigerian Government and non-governmental agencies' interventions to improve girl-child education and ensure gender equality in education, the challenges remain widespread. For example, the project analyses collected in Nigeria between 2007 and 2009 in 72 schools (36 primary and 36 junior secondary) in eight states in Northern Nigeria by Actionaid (2011) identified critical obstacles and barriers to girl-child education in Nigeria, including: "early marriage (45%), child pregnancy (32%) and poverty (70%) and others are parents withdraw from school (38%), Old for class (9%), lack of facilities (34%), distance from school (21%), ill health (44%)"(p. 10).

Other barriers across various research studies in Nigeria include: poor retention/ learning and skills development outcomes, gender-based violence, lack of skills for meaningful employment, and high unemployment rates, especially for girls with lowest educational attainment, insecurity, peer pressure, negligence, rape, ignorance, child-labor/ being family's' burden bearers, lack of parental care, lack of WASH facilities, insufficient recruitment and supply of trained female teachers especially for junior secondary school level, poor implementation of government policies, high complex system of managing and funding education between the Federal Government, States, LGAs and LGEAs with an absence of transparency and accountability and finally, top up of Government funding through school fees and levies.

Nevertheless, prominent among the barriers towards girl-child education, as can be revealed by past studies, are pervasive poverty, cultural norms, and the practice of early marriages:

Pervasive Poverty

Poverty has been identified as among the most significant barriers to girl-child education in Nigeria, as school fees are prohibitive and contribute to families' decisions to keep girls home from school. Nigeria was recently ranked as the poverty capital. The concomitant effect is that most families under financial pressure are sometimes susceptible to yielding to non-prioritization of the girl child's education (National Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF, 2017). 9% of the poorest



girls attended secondary school compared to 81% from the richest quintile (Nigeria Development Update, 2022). Illustrating how poverty and economic disparity intersect with other factors such as gender, ethnicity, and location, poverty and child education in Nigeria, data from 2003 suggested that:

while children from the richest quintile achieved 10 years of schooling with little gaps between girls and boys or urban and rural areas, children from the poorest quintile on average completed just under 4 years of schooling, with variations that urban boys and girls from this quintile completed just over 6 years, while rural boys completed 4 years, and rural girls completed just over 2. Certain ethnic groups are particularly marginalised: poor rural Hausa boys complete on average 1 year of schooling, while poor rural Hausa girls do not even complete 1 month (UNESCO, 2010, p. 145).

Cultural Norms

Deep-seated cultural norms were identified as another significant barrier to girl-child education in Nigeria. Social and gender norms, according to the National Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF, place a low value on education, especially for girls, and promote boy-child preference. At least 1 in 4 girls are forced into early marriage, and even more in the Northwest (39%).

Practice of early marriages

Reports from research studies have indicated that early or child marriage continues to hamper efforts to advance girl-child education in Nigeria. In communities where early marriages are practiced and accepted as a social norm, girls are usually the victims. Many girls do not have access to adequate education past a certain age. Those girls who have access drop out of school as a result of early marriage compared to the male child (The African Centre For Leadership, Strategy & Development, n.d). Early marriage was often seen as a way to escape poverty, 'passing the burden of the girls onto the husband', and protecting girls from unmarried teenage pregnancy (Actionaid, 2011).

These studies have not failed to identify some solutions and a way forward towards addressing the barriers to girl-child education in Nigeria. UNICEF Nigeria (2022) recommends addressing gender-based violence and developing school safety implementation plans. The African Centre for Leadership, Strategy & Development (n.d) emphasized the need for the Federal Government to work in synergy with the State and Local Governments by adopting an integrated and holistic strategic and visionary leadership that would leave a lasting impact on the narrative of girl-child education in Nigeria. In addition, Actionaid (2011) recommends measures towards such as: sponsorship, provision of facilities, stopping early marriage, abolishing fees and levies, family life education, engagement of parents, working with girls club to develop girls confidence and, where possible, provide support to turn ideas for change into action, and lastly, advocacy to key decision-makers, such as, religious leaders, traditional leaders, fathers, and mothers to effect change that will help overcome the obstacles girls face in progressing their education(pp.11 & 19).



From the above studies and review, the importance of engaging religious organizations in meaningful efforts to address the problems and challenges of girl-child education in Nigeria has become obvious. The next section explores the various significance of religion and religion-based organizations in the advancement of girl-child education in Nigeria.

Advancing Girl-Child Education through Religious Advocacy and Engagement

Religion is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life. Religion is defined as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, uniting into a single moral community all those who adhere to those beliefs and practices (Durkheim, 1912, cited in Madu, 1986). The three major elements of religion are beliefs, worship (cult), and morals. Understanding the concept of religion lies in its two related dimensions: the vertical and the horizontal. While the vertical dimension appreciates the Being that gives life, the horizontal dimension appreciates the life given to others (Obiefuna, 2018, p 19). Religion is one of the social institutions and an important part of culture.

The purpose of religion, Durkheim further observes, is to maintain and foster social stability and cohesion by removing tension that can disrupt social order. He believes that a cohesive society is fundamental and that religion is just one mechanism for achieving it. Religion affects all aspects of human existence. Religion is a major source of inspiration, meaning, and controversy in human culture, informing history. Around the globe, human history has been shaped by religious ideas, institutions, arts, laws, and commitments. Also, the ethical elements of a dominant religion are always very influential in shaping the moral attitudes of the society it dominates. A dominant religion provides its society with a code of ethics meant to order society in terms of sustainability and value.

In the context of the present study, however, the potential of Religion in advancing girl-child education in Nigeria is great. Aside from poverty, one of the major challenges to girl-child education in Nigeria is the deep-seated cultural norms that value the male child over the female child. This preference results in gender inequality in education, with more out-of-school girls than boys. Incidentally, some religious worldviews and practices promote certain forms of gender inequality between the genders. As such, Religious leaders, bodies, and groups are important assets in advancing girl-child education in Nigeria if effectively engaged. Already, religious leaders exert significant influence on the lives of the people, communities, societies, and cultures. They provide moral guidance on issues that concern society daily- political, social, economic, and cultural, and, nonetheless, religious. Their voices have left a greater impact on society. They not only help mould individuals but also influence the socio-cultural lives and ideologies of the people.

Thus, religious leaders, peaceful or violent, act as knowledge producers. The preaching and teachings of religious leaders and the communities around these teachings constitute “islands of epistemic communities. The audience for these teachings takes this knowledge seriously, and its members regulate their public and private lives accordingly (Audu, 2025). Existing religious bodies and groups in Nigeria could therefore serve as veritable platforms and avenues for disseminating and sensitizing the public on the importance of girl-child education. Some of these



religious bodies include: The Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), and Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, The Traditional Religious Practitioners Association (TRPA), and The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), among others. Engaging these religious bodies and their leaders is very important as their members constitute a significant percentage of the population. Obviously, if the religious communities are properly informed and oriented, the larger society will definitely undergo a positive change. In the context of girl-child education, such informed minds and awareness would help in dismantling the socio-cultural barriers confronting girl-child education in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The study has successfully examined the significance of Religious advocacy and stakeholders' engagement in addressing girl-child education in Nigeria. The review, among other things, showed that despite all the efforts by the Nigerian Government and Non-Governmental agencies to enhance girl-child education and ensure gender parity in education, barriers to girl-child education are still prevalent in the country. The study recommends, in addition to other measures towards advancing girl-child education, religious advocacy and engagement. The impact of stakeholders' engagement in any development project remains paramount. Incidentally, religion, in all its dimensions, has always remained an indispensable social institution and a vital stakeholder in every known human society. not only informs but also regulates the morality and behaviour of people, extending the same to the public and private spheres. If religion, especially through various religious organizations and bodies in Nigeria, is effectively engaged, the mission of advancing girl-child education and ensuring gender parity in education would definitely improve.

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