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GIRL'S EDUCATION AS AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR PROMOTING PEACE IN NIGERIA

C. O. Madu

Abstract

This paper explores the potential of girls' education as a powerful tool for promoting peace in Nigeria. It highlights the current challenges of gender inequality and how educational access empowers girls in various aspects of life. The paper emphasizes the connection between increased education of the girl-child and positive societal changes, including fostering critical thinking, promoting peace, tolerance and understanding, and strengthening economic opportunities. Ultimately, it argues that investing in girls' education can serve as a cornerstone for building a more peaceful and prosperous future for Nigeria. Recommendations as a way forward were proffered that government at all levels should address the barriers to girls education such as tackling poverty and cultural norms that discourage girls' education and to make education affordable and accessible for all girls by providing scholarships, among others.

Keywords: Girls education, Girl-Child, Peace, Peace Promotion

Introduction

Nigeria is a nation teeming with potential but harbours deep-seated challenges. Conflict, poverty, and gender inequality have cast long shadows, impeding progress and stability. In Nigeria, conflict is ubiquitous, ranging from Boko Haram's insurgency to communal clashes and abduction, among others. These conflicts disrupt lives and hinder development. The impact is particularly brutal on girls, who face abduction, exploitation, and lost educational opportunities. Gender inequality has worsened the problem where there are deep-rooted patriarchal norms limiting girls' access to education, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and disempowerment. UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) stressed that early marriage, child labour, and cultural barriers exacerbate the issue of girls not having access to education.

To address this inequality issue in educational opportunities, the United Nations General Assembly launched the International Day of the Girl-Child on 11th October 2012 to recognize girls' rights and the unique challenges they face in the world. More so, successive governments in Nigeria have made significant efforts in bridging this inequality for the girl-child by establishing different programmes to promote girls' education, such programmes like, Universal Primary Education (UPE), National Mass Literacy Campaign (NMLC) and Universal Basic Education (UBE)) to ensure that every Nigerian child is educated. Despite these programmes, girl-child education is still marred by numerous hindrances, such as a lack of political will to implement such programmes, socioeconomic barriers and traditional patterns. These ills have continued to undermine the education of the girl-child, where millions of them, particularly in rural areas, remain out of school, hindering their individual and societal development.

However, in recent times, the tide is slowly turning, and the importance of educating girls is being increasingly recognized. Studies in Nigeria have proven that girls' education

has been taken seriously by most governments. In a study by Modupe, Abalaku and Abalaku (2023), it is discovered that, in 2018, the Governor of Kaduna State declared free education for girls in public secondary schools. This created an enabling environment to improve girls' enrolment in school, especially in vulnerable situations. Similarly, in Anambra state, the Governor declared free and compulsory education in the state for citizens in all public schools. This will increase the access of children to basic education irrespective of gender and to ensure the fullest development of personality and talents of the children. It becomes pertinent that every state governor in Nigeria should emulate the same to encourage education, particularly of the girl-child.

The relevance of girls' education in promoting peace cannot be overemphasized. When girls are equipped with knowledge, they contribute towards dismantling the foundations of misunderstanding, prejudice, and conflict, thereby paving the way for living together in peace. Educated girls are also more likely to marry later, have fewer children, and provide better healthcare and education for their children, thus, contributing to the nation's overall development. Modupe, Abalaku and Abalaku (2023) opined that educated girls advocate for peaceful conflict resolution, participate in community-building initiatives, and promote tolerance and understanding. Hence, this paper advocates for the education of the girl-child as an effective tool for promoting peace in Nigeria, for a girl-child today is a mother tomorrow.

Girl-Child Education

A girl-child is a biological female offspring from birth to eighteen years of age. A girl-child is referred to as a female child between infancy and early adulthood. Girl-child education is a catch-all term for a complex set of issues and debates surrounding primary, secondary, tertiary and health education, in particular for girls and women (Omede & Agahiu, 2016 as cited in Madu & Obi, 2021).

Girl-child education refers to the aspect of education that aims at developing the skills and knowledge of girls and women from all castes, races, and backgrounds (UNICEF, 2022). The importance of girl-child. Girl-child education helps a girl become economically independent while she knows her rights and women empowerment which helps her to fight against the problem of gender inequality.

It broadens the thought of the woman, and helps in the good upbringing of her children. It also gives her the freedom of thought to decide what is best for her and the family.

Education helps women to be more productive in their work. A knowledgeable woman has the skills, information, talent, and self-confidence that she requires to be a superior mother, employee, and resident.

Education as a Catalyst for Change

Education plays a pivotal role in shaping societies and influencing the trajectories of one's future. It is crucial for human and national development. According to FGN (2004), education is seen as 'an instrument par excellence' that equips an individual with the right skills, knowledge, ability, competence, attitude, behaviour, and values to function effectively in society. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) averred that education brings about economic development, meaning that an educated population can contribute more effectively to the workforce, fostering innovation and productivity. More so, UNESCO

(2022) noted that education fosters tolerance, understanding, and peaceful conflict resolution. UNESCO further added that educated individuals are less likely to engage in violence or support extremist ideologies. In another dimension, Micheal (2011) described education as a key to successful living, especially girl-child education. To buttress further, the World Bank (2012) stated that education equips girls with critical thinking skills, self-confidence, and agency, enabling them to challenge harmful stereotypes and advocate for their rights. In addition, Madu and Obi (2021) are of the view that educating the girl-child produces mothers who are educated and will, in turn, educate their children, for women are agents of change and instruments of peace. The above studies point to the fact that girls with education are more likely to promote peaceful conflict resolution, tolerance, and understanding, fostering stronger communities and reducing violence.

Educated girls raise healthier families, participate in the workforce, and contribute to economic development, and create a domino effect of positive change.

According to the UNICEF report (2020), girls who are educated are less likely to marry young and more likely to live healthy and productive lives. They earn higher incomes, participate in the decisions that most affect them, and build better futures for themselves and their families.

Girls' Education as a Tool for Peace Building in Nigeria

Education is a key factor for peace in families and societies. The term “peace” means absence of war or conflict. According to Collins Dictionary (2016), peace is a state of harmony between people or groups. A stress-free state of security and calmness comes when there is no fighting or war, everything is coexisting in perfect harmony and freedom. Girls' education is an instrument for peacebuilding. When girls and women are educated, they teach and raise the future generation in a better environment without suffering violence. Furthermore, Graduate Women International (2020), opined that educating girls who are future mothers will give them the opportunity to raise their children as peaceful citizens and build a new society far from war.

Education of girls and women is important for peace in a nation because it brings about poverty reduction. It is worthy of note that most conflicts in families and society today is as a result of poverty and unequal distribution of resources. When girls or women are provided with equal rights and access to education, they go on to participate in business and economic activities. By so doing, they combat current and future poverty through feeding, clothing and providing for the families. This will help to reduce conflict in the home.

Unequal distribution of resources in the country can erupt into conflict. When women are given the opportunity to lead due to the education acquired, they make sure that the country's resources are equitably distributed to avoid disharmony, for women are peacebuilders. In addition, UN Women (2023) stipulates that educated girls become informed citizens who critically analyze information, fostering tolerance and understanding across cultural and religious divides, economic contributors, agents of change and mothers who break the circle. Some of the girls' education initiatives that promote peace in Nigeria include:

1. Education as a Vaccine against Extremism (EAVE): This UNICEF supported programme operates in northern Nigeria, aiming to counter violent extremism by providing access to quality education for girls and boys. EAVE has demonstrably reduced recruitment

into extremist groups by fostering tolerance, critical thinking, and peaceful conflict resolution skills among the youth (UNICEF, 2023).

2. The School of Peace: This is founded by Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee. This initiative empowers young women in conflict-affected communities through peace education, leadership training, and entrepreneurship support. Graduates have become active peacebuilders, mediating conflicts, promoting interfaith dialogue, and advocating for girls' education.

3. Girls Education Initiative Nigeria (GEIN): This NGO works in northern Nigeria, providing scholarships, mentorship, and psycho-social support to girls facing barriers to education. GEIN graduates have become teachers, community leaders, and peace advocates, contributing to social cohesion and peaceful dialogue within their communities.

4. Educate Girls Initiative (EGI): This programme was launched by former Nigerian first lady Amina J. Mohammed. EGI focuses on increasing girls' enrollment and retention in secondary education through community engagement, advocacy, and scholarship programs. EGI has contributed to a significant rise in girls' enrollment, empowering them to become agents of change and peacebuilders within their communities.

5. Safe Schools Declaration: This intergovernmental initiative aims to protect education from attack during armed conflict. By implementing measures like conflict-sensitive school architecture and teacher training in psycho-social support, the initiative contributes to creating safe learning environments and fostering peace in conflict-affected regions.

6. Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment (AGILE) Project: This is a World Bank-assisted project of the Federal Ministry of Education geared towards improving secondary education opportunities for adolescent girls aged 10-20.

The above initiatives go beyond anecdotal evidence. EAVE, for example, has shown a 30% reduction in youths joining extremist groups in target communities, while GEIN graduates have a 98% literacy rate and demonstrate increased leadership skills in peace-building activities, according to the UNICEF Report (2020). These concrete outcomes highlight the tangible impact of girls' education on promoting peace in Nigeria. By investing in and amplifying such initiatives, Nigeria can harness the transformative power of girls' education to build a more peaceful and prosperous future for all.

Conclusion

It can be deduced that investing in girls' education in Nigeria is not just a moral imperative; it is a strategic investment in peace. Numerous studies and real-world examples demonstrate the powerful link between empowered girls and peaceful societies. When girls are educated, they become informed citizens, economic contributors, agents of change that advocate for themselves and their communities as well as promoting peaceful conflict resolution and social justice. Educated girls are more likely to educate their own children thereby creating a ripple effect of peace for generations to come. While challenges abound, including cultural barriers and resource limitations, the evidence is clear that education of the girls is not a luxury; it is a peace dividend. By prioritizing girls' education, Nigeria can unlock its full

potential and build a brighter, more peaceful future for all. It is therefore, our collective responsibility, particularly for all lovers of education and women activists, to create more awareness of the need to invest more in girls' education and to make it widely recognized as one of the most effective tools for promoting peace and development in Nigeria and around the world.

Recommendations

In view of the above discourse, the following recommendations are proffered for the nation to embrace:

1. Stakeholders, from policymakers to community leaders, should invest in girls' education as a cornerstone for peace building in Nigeria.
2. The barriers to girls' education should be addressed. This includes tackling poverty, cultural norms that discourage girls' education, and lack of safe transportation to and from school.
3. The federal and state governments in Nigeria should make education affordable and accessible for all girls by providing scholarships, financial aid, and flexible learning options for girls who face economic challenges.
4. There is need for the integration of peace education into the school curriculum at all levels to catch them young as regards learning about conflict resolution, critical thinking, tolerance, and empathy.
5. There is also need for attitudinal change, a re-orientation of societal and parental values towards the education of girls would be necessary as there is a negative conception of perceiving girls' education as worthless or valueless.
6. The declaration of the girl-child right by the UN Assembly should be enforced strictly and the violators be severally punished.

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