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Neglect of Girl Child Education: bridging the gap. A case study of a Nigerian agrarian northern community

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Girl child education, the panacea of poverty, family disorganization and societal true development has suffered several sets backs over the years due to socio-cultural and economic factors. Till date, girls constitute the largest population of illiterate children worldwide. Using a cross sectional study design in November 2005, three different populations – parents, children of school age (5 – 18) and educational facilities in Katcha community were surveyed and information on bio-data, school enrolment and vocation collected. Data were analyzed using simple standard statistical techniques. More than 60 percent of all adults in Katcha community were illiterates, with females making up more than 64 percent of the group. Less than half of children of school age were in school at the time of study and there was a wide gap between the number of boys and girls as well as male and female teachers in Katcha institutions of learning. If the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are to be realized, then much more efforts must be invested in Girl Child Education (GCE). It is the sine qua non to a sustainable development worldwide.

Key words: Girl child education, poverty, culture, Katcha, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Although the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child (CRC) stipulates in Article 18 that every child has a right to education, and that the State's duty is to ensure that primary education is free and compulsory, to encourage different forms of secondary education accessible to every child, and to make higher education available to all on the basis of capacity, 140 million children in the world still do not attend schools and two-third of them are girls (Howley et al 2000). More than ten years down the Beijing commitment to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, millions of children especially girls are still not making it into school, despite a concerted international effort to push the cause forward and in some Africa countries, the gender gap is even widening and discrimination continues to permeate the educational systems. In Africa, only 46% of women are literate; 60% in Asian countries and 85% in Latin America (Fishel 1998). Even though educating girls has been repeatedly shown to increase their self-esteem, to increase their influence over their own lives and family and community decisions, to lower fertility, to improve maternal and child health, and to help in decreasing

environmental degradation, considerable resistance still exists in developing countries to educating girls (Fishel 1998, Joshi 2005).

Extreme poverty, mass illiteracy, large scale ignorance, high maternal mortality and fertility rates, child wastages and lack of access to health, education and social services may sound far and fictional, but to many indigenes and visitors to Katcha, they are part and parcel of everyday life. The world, realizing that these problems are not unique to Katcha Nigeria, met in September 2000, in a United Nations organized assembly and came up with Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which had an eight point agenda including eradication of worse kinds of poverty, universal basic education and gender equality. The realization of the objectives of these MDGs is hinged just on one thing.

Girl Child Education.

Over the years, the girl-child has been grossly neglected (Oleribe 2002). She is left out in decision making, utilized

at homes without due remunerations, kept as home keeper and never allowed to earn a living for herself, used by men as wife, by children as mother, by other women as house girl and by men as bed mate (Fishel 1998, Oleribe 2002a, Oleribe 2002b, Sarwar and Sheikh 1995). She has never ever being given a chance to make her own choices. In our good land of Katcha, majority are given out in marriages long before they become women, forced to marry men they love not who sometimes are old enough to be their fathers, denied education in favour of their brothers, given out to foster parents in *Egikpa*, denied a chance to maximize their potentials and lately, made to enter into an unholy competition of childbirth with their husband's other wives (Erinosho 1998, Oleribe 2005).

Girl child education is a sine qua none to the realization of total women empowerment and emancipation across the globe, and involves the formal (and sometimes informal) training of a girl child in knowledge and skills of daily living (Oleribe 2002a). Denial of GCE is the commonest manifestation of neglect of child education – the most retrogressive of all forms of child neglect (Oleribe 2002a, 2002b). It refers to the inability or refusal of a system to provide the girl child opportunity for a qualitative and timely education, and is perpetrated by government, parents/guardians, teachers and the society.

METHOD

Katcha town is the headquarters of Katcha Local Government Area, one of the 25 local government areas in Niger state, a north central state of Nigeria. She is located about 170km from Minna, the State capital and is the home of farmers, traders and pastoralists of Nupe extraction. Ibos, Hausas and other tribes are found widely dispersed in the community.

Using cross sectional survey data collection technique, three different groups of populations were surveyed in November 2005 – parents, nursery, primary and secondary schools, and children of school age in Katcha community. Through simple random sampling technique, 608 parents and 164 children of school age (5 – 18) were selected, informed of the study and assisted to complete a researcher administered questionnaire. However, a total population study of all nursery, primary and secondary schools located in Katcha town was done. All collated data were analyzed using standard statistical methods.

FINDINGS

All 608 adults selected for the study participated willingly and gladly supplied the information needed in the questionnaire. Of this number, 306 (50.32%) were males, with a M: F ratio of approximately 1:1. Age was not computed as more than 98% of respondents were not sure of their true age. A total of 365 (60.03%) had no formal education, of which 237 (64.93%) were females. Similarly, only 44 (7.24%) had any form of tertiary education of which only 6 (13.64%) were females. Furthermore, 483 (79.44%) were either jobless, subsistent farmers or petty traders, with females making up 100% of the jobless

group.

The study also revealed that ignorant women had more children (5.05 vs 4.40), suffered more infant and childhood deaths (1.07 vs 0.52), had more pregnancy wastages or miscarriages (0.44 vs 0.43), had more sick children, were less likely to use contraceptives (0.03 vs 0.17) and were most unlikely to immunize their children.

The survey of the seven (7) primary and three (3) nursery schools in Katcha town revealed that of the three nursery schools, only one had students in both nursery one and two. The other two had students only in nursery one. Out of 147 teachers in both nursery and primary schools, 121 (82.31%) were males while only 26 (17.69%) were females. The student distribution in the eight classes from nursery 1 through primary 6 is as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Nursery and Primary school pupils from 8 schools in Katcha town

Class of pupil	Male	(%)	Female	(%)
Nursery 1 ⁿ⁼¹⁶⁴	86	(52.44)	78	(47.56)
Nursery 2 ⁿ⁼⁴⁰	26	(65.00)	14	(35.00)
Primary 1 ⁿ⁼²⁹⁸	190	(63.76)	108	(36.24)
Primary 2 ⁿ⁼³⁸⁴	217	(56.51)	167	(43.49)
Primary 3 ⁿ⁼³⁰¹	173	(57.48)	128	(42.52)
Primary 4 ⁿ⁼³⁶⁴	222	(60.99)	142	(39.01)
Primary 5 ⁿ⁼³⁵⁰	222	(63.43)	128	(36.57)
Primary 6 ⁿ⁼²⁴⁴	166	(68.03)	78	(31.97)
Totalⁿ⁼¹⁹⁴¹	1190	(61.31)	751	(31.97)

There were only 67 students in the only girls' vocational training college with a staff population of 47. The school however has a capacity of more than 500 students. In the current year, while 38 students were posted to the school for JSS 1, only two (5.26%) had reported in the school. Similarly, while 74 were posted for SS1, none had reported at the time of this study.

In the only public secondary co-educational school in the area, there were 447 students from JSS1 to SS3, with no single female student in JSS 1 to 3. The co-educational school had only 18 girls in all – while 8 were in SS2, the rest were in SS3. The SSI students were yet to arrive.

The random sampling of 164 school aged children showed that only 70 (42.68%) were in school at the time of the study and their age distribution pattern is shown in Figure 3.

DISCUSSION

Majority of indigenes and residents of Katcha are grossly illiterate, with more than 60 percent lacking formal

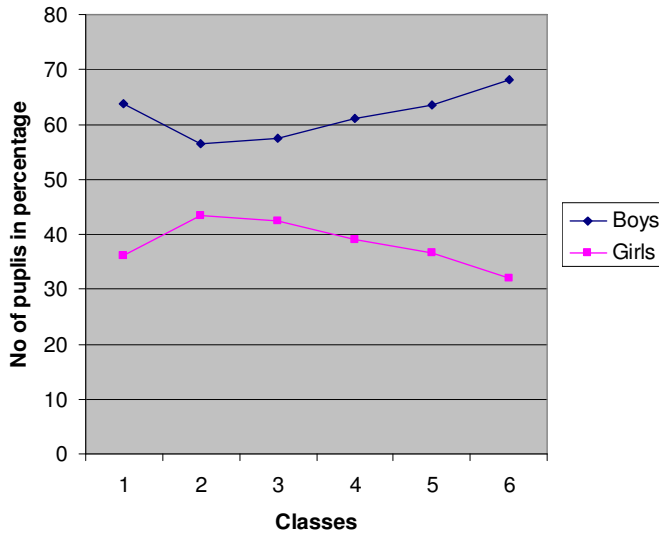


Figure 1. Proportion of pupils enrolled and retained through primary 6 in katcha primary schools.

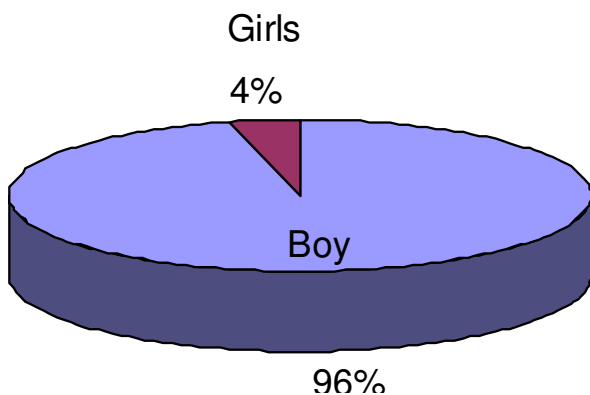


Figure 2. Sex distribution of students in government day secondary school katcha.

education, a finding that is similar to previous studies in other parts of Africa (Fishel 1998). However, more women were found in this group, thus their physical and economic dependence on men. The study, apart from revealing that there are more males in all the classes from nursery through primary six, also showed that the proportion of males increased progressively from primary two (2) through primary six (6). This highlight the fact that less percentage of girl children stays long enough to acquire literacy before dropping out either by getting married or due to other reasons. Moreover, insignificant percentage of both males and females were able to continue to tertiary education.

Thus it is not surprising that more females were seen to be jobless or involved in less productive and economically enhancing jobs than males. Nor that more health problems were associated with illiterate females than their educated counterparts. In addition, other studies

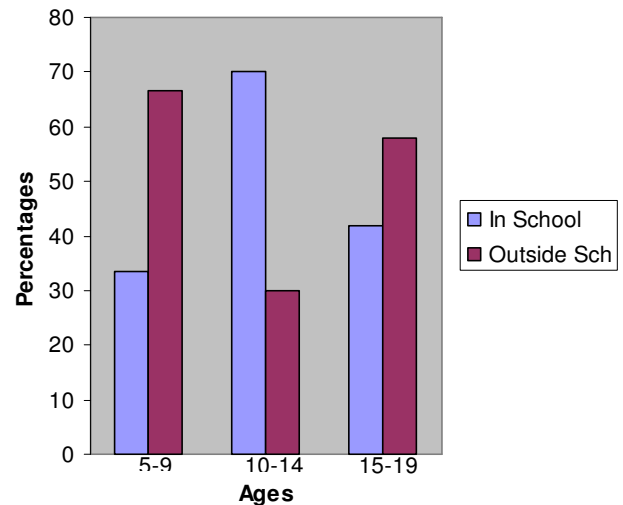


Figure 3. Vocation of school aged children in katcha community

have shown that illiterate women are more likely to have risky pregnancies – marrying too early and thus have too early pregnancy which may lead to obstructed labour, cephalo-pelvic disproportion (CPD), intrauterine foetal deaths, cesarean operations, etc; have too close pregnancies, too many pregnancies and too late pregnancies (Fishel 1998, Joshi 2005, Oleribe 2002). Thus they are more likely to have more children than the learned group. This present study supports these findings. Thus looking at facts, education is a cure to *too* many children, *too* many medical problems and complications, and *too* many deaths and disabilities!

Furthermore, Figure 3 highlights the fact that majority of Katcha children are either on the streets selling wares, in farms with parents or in their husbands’ homes as housewives making children instead of in schools where they actually belong. The figure also shows that most pupils enroll late (10 – 14 years) and leave early. Could the fact that there are more male teachers than female teachers which make the school environment hostile to female students contribute to this occurrence? A similar finding was reported by Howley et al (2000).

Girl child education has been recognized as a major factor in the eradication of worse forms of poverty. Common causes of this malady include:

- ✚ **Culture:** Although Katcha community (like most other communities) has several wonderful and enviable cultures like Tamako for patients on admission and food assist to women that just delivered, there are some cultural practices that mitigate against girl child education. These include girl child marriages, which over the years have denied several girl children the opportunity to acquire formal education or to drop out half way, culture of *Egikpa* whereby a girl child is given to another family for upkeeps and training, *Sadakiar* where girls (usually under-aged) are freely

given to people as wives (Oleribe 2005), etc. Previous reports has shown that early marriages, teenage pregnancies, gender inequalities in society contribute to poor scholastic performance and force girls to drop out of school (Howley et al 2000). Similarly, there is a belief that girls do not need formal education and are deprived of the opportunity for skilled work.

✚ **Poverty:** Parental economic poverty is blamed as a major cause of girl child non-education. Today, poverty and HIV pandemic – the greatest crisis in the world – and its inadequate global response have their greatest impact on children, especially girls. However, although poverty has a role to play, one can comfortably say that non-girl child education is also a cause of poverty. So they are intertwined in an unholy circle causing and perpetuating each other.

✚ **Deficiency of educational infrastructures:** Absence of standard learning centers, deficiency of qualified teachers and drought of study materials have over the years prevented the few lucky girl-children, allowed to acquire formal education from obtaining the best. Majority leave school worse than when they entered. Also the gender biased educational processes, including teachers' attitudes, curricula, educational materials, and practices reinforce gender inequalities (Howley et al 2000). Furthermore, the absence of female teachers as role models may inhibit the enrolment of girls.

✚ **Fear of sexual harassment and molestation:** Parents and guardians deny their girl children access to schools because of their fear of sexual molestations of all kinds. Also their lack of trust on these innocent child make them prevent them from attending such schools, since they are not sure what 'evils' they will get involved in. The fact that majority of teachers are males have not helped issues at all.

✚ **Child exploitation:** This is the commonest cause for denial of girl child education in this community. Child labour keeps girls out of school, whether in the home as house workers, caretakers of younger siblings, or in the workforce (Howley et al 2000). It is not uncommon to see girls, who ought to be in schools hawking several wares and consumables during school hours along the roads and streets of Katcha. On Fridays, they are found in large numbers in the market selling for their parents and guardians. They are also seen in farms during school hours helping their parents' plant, weed or harvest farm produce. At home they act as nurse maids for their mothers taking care of the little ones or preparing meals for the whole family. Over the few months that the researcher has been in

this town, he has seen very few boys hawking! What a travesty of justice.

✚ **Cultural indoctrination:** Many children are culturally indoctrinated and made to believe that education – western type – is not needed and thus advised to run their lives without it. Girls are made to believe that their place of fulfillment is in their husbands home and since education (to them) is not needed to marry nor make babies, they should focus just on getting the right man, accepting the parent's choice and making such a man happy. This level of indoctrination has made all girl children focus on marrying rather than studying. Thus, even the few that are privileged to go to school cannot wait for the right time, so whenever the man arrives, they drop out of school.

Benefits of girl child education: Apart from helping eradicate poverty, girl child education has seven major advantages. These are:

- **Mental empowerment:** Today's girls, who are our sisters and friends, are tomorrow's wives and mothers. When a woman is trained therefore, the whole family is positively imparted. Their mental empowerment by education destroys foolishness and positively augments parenting, helping them impart the right kind of virtues and skills on the family. Until a woman is fully mentally empowered, she will remain a burden on her family and friends. In a study by Wamani et al (2004) to examine the association of four socio-economic indicators namely: mothers' education, fathers' education, household asset index, and land ownership with growth stunting, simultaneously adjusting all socio-economic indicators in conditional regression analysis left mothers' education as the only independent predictor of stunting with children of non-educated mothers significantly more likely to be stunted compared to those of mothers educated above primary school (OR 2.1, 95% CI 1.1-3.9). What we therefore want in tomorrow's children should first be put the girls of today, since they are the teachers of tomorrow's children. Many families are having problem today just because the wife / mother in the home is not educated and so cannot meet the societal and family expectations. Empowering them mentally empowers the home for exploits, expansion and greatness. Nothing should be spared in doing this.
- **Physical empowerment:** When young girls are educated, and allowed to acquire good certificates, marriage is delayed and child birth is postponed allowing enough time for physical development. This ensures full development of the girl, proper pelvic bone maturity as well as mental maturity before the

onerous task of becoming a wife and mother. Thus, according to Howley et al (2000), better educated women have fewer and healthier children. Total and perfect physical development prevents challenges of childbirths and motherhood that has over the years led to several avoidable morbidity and mortalities. Education allows a girl become a woman before becoming a mother/wife, rather than the present practice where several children are given out in marriages before time, leading to children nursing children – an abomination!

- **Financial empowerment:** Poverty can be seen everywhere one turns in Katcha – it is seen within all age strata and in all social groups. To eradicate poverty girl-children must be properly empowered by education to financially contribute to family well being. According to World University services of Canada (WUSC) leaf sheet, girl education has the power to transform the world and remains one of the best ways to reduce poverty. Better educated women postpone marriage and childbirth, have better access to employment, and are less vulnerable to economic discrimination (Howley et al 2000). Promoting gender equality in education systems creates a healthy, educated and productive human resource base (WUSC). A wife that is working and earning an income is any day an asset to her home! Believing that boys who attend school will complete their education, secure employment, and earn wages to contribute to the well-being of the family, parents encourage boys to attend school and girls to remain at home to help with housework and raising younger siblings (Fishel 1998). But recent findings have faulted this erroneous believe (Sarwar and Sheikh 1995).

Let us stop deceiving ourselves, no man can provide all that a woman needs. Women are there to help and can only make a maximum contribution when educated. Lets' allow them to maximize their potentials. They are our closest and best assets.

- **Spiritual empowerment:** Sometimes people wonder why today's children are far from GOD, but they tend to forget that a spiritually dry mother cannot positively enhance her children's spirituality. But how can they when they can neither read nor understand the holy book – The Bible. Education provides opportunity to understand God, the master of the universe. Uneducated minds cannot comprehend the mysteries of GOD. And a woman without GOD is a bad problem anywhere any day and anytime. She cannot give what she does not have, so will most likely raise children that do not understand who GOD is. Before now, it was easy to indoctrinate such children by making learning from religious scholars mandatory, but in this era of ICT and Internets, one wonders how effective these methods are. We must equip our wo-

men to positively impart on our children spiritually. And the best and only way is through girl-child education.

- **Social empowerment:** Education puts our ladies in the right position and form to associate with the right group of people, marry the right kind of men, make the right contributions and help men develop sustainable environment. With education, they are able to maintain good personal and environmental hygiene which prevents diseases and illnesses in and around the family, dress well and represent the families better, cook better and more balanced meals for the family, attract the right kind of friends to the family and generally make homes more enjoyable and entertaining. Better educated women are better able to manage life in a changing social, economic and cultural environment (Howley et al 2000).
- **Psychological empowerment:** Education psychologically empowers people, especially women, giving them a true and proper image of themselves, boosting their self respect and making them the mothers and wives that we love. Psychologically empowered mother is able to effectively and efficiently run her home, train her children, resist negative grandmother and cultural effects on child upbringing and help the community in several developmental projects. For instance, in a study by Bedri (1995), harmful advice from grandmothers included re-circumcision after delivery, short birth intervals, avoidance of contraception and child marriages at age 14. Only an educated woman can effectively say no to these advices. In a Ghanaian study to examines the impact of mothers' education on childhood mortality, it emphatically established that there is an inverse relationship between mothers' education and child survivorship and the use of basic health facilities that relate to childhood survival shows a direct relationship with mothers' education (Buor 2003). A psychologically empowered wife is the best thing that ever happened to any man and his family. She stands behind him always as a source of strength, a beckon of wisdom and a great companion; encouraging and strengthening her spouse at times of challenges and weakness, brings ideas that turn the tides of life, inspiring her spouse towards mental exploits and extraordinary performances and standing as a wall of might at all times. The worst thing that can happen to any home is to have a mother or wife who is not sure of herself, a common finding amongst illiterate women.
- **Intellectual empowerment:** Although intelligent is not truly a product of education, education however, illuminates and refines intelligence. It panel beats it

into useful forms and makes intelligence a resource of inestimable value. Education informs people thereby preventing deformation. And when a woman is informed, she informs her world. The destiny of nations and peoples lies in the hand of the intelligent few. Majority of exploits have over the years been wrought by educated and intelligent women. In Nigeria today, the list is inexhaustible.

CONCLUSION

Education is a human right and an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace. Non-discriminatory education benefits both boys and girls and thus ultimately contributes to more equal relationship between men and women, and promoting gender equity in education systems creates a healthy, educated and productive human resource base (WUSC). It is time therefore to begin to do the right thing – to train and educate our girls. It is time to stop the insult of poverty and dependence, and minimize the culture of begging by maximizing the great resource GOD gave us in women. It is time to train and re-train the girl child. If something is not done urgently, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will suffer a major set back

In the words of Kofi Annan of the United Nations, “No development strategy is better than one that involves women as central players. It has immediate benefits for nutrition, health and savings and reinvestments at the family, community and ultimately, country level. Educating the girl child is a social development policy that works and a long term investment that yields an exceptionally high return”.

Although the Federal Government has promulgated a number of edicts and legislations on Universal Basic Education, it is time to make these legislations effective by making our primary schools centers of learning, equipped with the right kind of resources and manpower for effective learning. All barriers must be eliminated to enable all girls to develop their full potential through equal access to education (Howley et al 2000). As was rightly articulated by the Fourth World Conference on Women, “Government should promote a policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policy programmes in order to generate awareness of the disadvantaged situation of girls” (Howley et al 2000).

Also parents must be made to understand the benefits of education through community based information dissemination techniques. The use of mass media like televisions and radios which most people do not have access to should be reduced and town criers, village based crusades and enlightenment programmes, use of religious centers and market awareness activities carried out on a regular basis.

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