

Full Length Research Paper

Access and attrition of female students in secondary schools in Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria

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The study investigated access of female students to secondary education and the completion rate of those that were enrolled in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). It also determined the factors responsible for the attrition of female students with a view to promoting the education of the girl child in the FCT. Twenty two public secondary schools were randomly selected from three area councils of the FCT. Documentary information on enrolment and attrition of female students was obtained, and oral interviews were conducted with 44 school principals, 20 school counselors and 50 teachers. The results showed that 70 percent of the principals and teachers interviewed opined that poverty and culture of early marriage were the two major factors that were responsible for female students' attrition.

Key words: Access to education, female students' attrition, girl-child education, nation building.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the Federal Government Universal Basic Education programme launched in 2004, the number of girls attending schools in some Northern States of Nigeria remains abysmally low due to age-long religious and cultural beliefs (Hamina, 2004). The 2005 National School Census (NSC) revealed that there are large geographical and gender disparities between southern and northern Nigeria partly due to underlying socio-cultural factors. Girls' Net Enrolment Ratios (NER) in some States in the South are as high as 70% while some in the North are as low as 10% (UNESCO, 1993; Hamina, 2004). The underlying causes include the low value accorded by parents to girls' education, early marriages, poverty, the low quality learning environment

and the low value accorded to girls' education, harmful practices, local beliefs and norms that impact negatively on girls' education.

In fact, in some of the schools in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), school enrolment for girls is generally lower than that of boys. It has also been discovered that more girls drop out from school due to poverty and the early marriage culture. This has resulted in an increase in illiteracy among women with concomitant negative effects on environment and their socio-economic status. One case is a village, Gamji, in Zamfara State, where in its history, no female pupil had gone beyond the fifth year in the elementary school before being withdrawn for marriage (This Day, 2005).

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Rationale for the study

In most parts of northern Nigeria, education is more of a privilege than a right especially for girls. If they are lucky enough to be enrolled, many are withdrawn prematurely because of the culture of early marriage. This and other socio-economic and cultural problems such as poverty and ignorance account for the imbalance in school enrolment and education with boys generally outnumbering girls. The United Nations (1995) observed that:

Generally, of the World's nearly one billion illiterates, two thirds are women; of the 130 million children without access to primary education, more than 80 million are girls. On average by the age of 18 years girls have received 4.4 of years less education than boys. The low level of education blocks off opportunities for economic, social, cultural and political advancement, trapping millions of women in a cycle of poverty and ignorance.

Effort to stem this tide motivated this study. It is believed that when the appropriate environment is created for girl child education, the nation will benefit from it in the long run. If a boy is educated, only an individual benefits, but when a girl is educated a mother and a nation builder is in the offing.

Research questions

Two research questions were raised in this study.

What are the school enrolment and the completion rate of girls in Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria like?

What are the factors responsible for girl students' low completion rate and how can these be forestalled?

METHODOLOGY

Subject: The Study was carried out in three local government areas of the Federal Capital Territory. The subjects used for the study were 44 school principals, 20 School counsellors and 50 class teachers drawn randomly from 22 secondary schools across the three area councils of FCT. Classified as principals in the study were 22 secondary schools principals and 22 vice -principals.

Design and data collection

Causal-comparative design was employed in the study. Information relating to pupils' enrolment was collected from the selected schools. The researchers first went to the schools to inform the principals and the selected teachers of the intention of the researchers to carry out the study and to ask for their permission. Appointments were fixed with the principals on the days to visit their respective schools. A survey of the teachers' opinion about the factors responsible for attrition among the pupils was also conducted. This was done through the use of unstructured interview which was meant to give the respondents enough latitude to fully and freely express their opinions. All the information was documented. On the strengths of the previous visits, the researchers

were given the documents/information containing the data for the enrolment of female students covering three academic sessions (2006-2009) together with the number of drop-outs. The interview was conducted on the second visit. For data analysis, simple percentages were used to find the attrition rate of the female students in the selected secondary schools

RESULTS

Information in respect of students' attrition rate in the three area councils was presented in Tables 1-3

The results from the selected three area councils in FCT indicated that there was attrition in almost all the schools but higher in rural schools than urban ones.

Information/Report from the oral interviews revealed that majority of the respondents agreed that poverty and early marriage culture were the two major factors that were responsible for the attrition. The factors are discussed fully in the following sections.

Poverty

Poverty was identified as one of the problems affecting girl-child education generally. According to FG/UNICEF (2001), poverty prevents many families from enrolling some or all of their children in school or forces them to withdraw the children prematurely from school because of the cost of education. And when it becomes a matter of choice, the girl-child is the one not enrolled or withdrawn to make way for the boy child. This is because in Africa as a whole greater priority is given to the enrolment of boys than that of girls. This may be due to the importance attached to the male child as a future bread winner and head of the family in the society.

In Northern Nigeria where girl-child education has not been considered important due to ignorance, poverty has even complicated the problem. Girl child education in such places is seen as a waste of time. Even where girl-child education is appreciated and valued, poverty has marginalized large families from educating the girl-child.

Culture of early marriage

Early marriage is a cultural aspect that affects girl-child education in FCT as identified in this paper. This is why the girl-child education is not appreciated. In Northern Nigeria, culture determines to a large extent the marriage age for girls. This has led to educational wastage in this region among girls, because many girls are withdrawn from school because of early marriage. Abok (2004) observed that.

Early or forced marriage is another method of alternating the girl-child in our society as an indirect result of total rejection based on preference of male child by giving her out in early marriage to friends, benefactors,

Table 1. Gwagwalada Area Council.

Name of Schools (s)	No of girls admitted between 2006/2007 session	No of girls that graduated in 2008/2009 session	No of drop-out	%
1. Junior Secondary School, Gwagwalada	390	325	65	16.6
2. Junior Secondary School, Sabongari	177	152	27	15.25
3. Government Secondary School Gwagwalada (Junior)	180	140	40	22.2
4. Government Secondary School Gwagwalada (Senior)	156	126	30	19.23
5. School for the Gifted Gwagwalada (Junior)	90	60	30	33.33
6. School for the Gifted Gwagwalada (Senior)	70	53	24	28
7. Government Day Gwagwalada (Senior)	60	50	10	16.6
8. Government Day Gwagwalada (Junior)	190	140	50	26.32
9. Junior Secondary School Phase 3, Gwagwalada (Junior)	220	180	40	18.18%
10. Junior Secondary School Phase3, Gwagwalada (Senior)	190	160	30	15.78

Table 2. Kwali Area Council.

Name of Schools (s)	No of girls admitted in 2006/2007	No of girls that graduated in 2008/2009	No of drop-out	%
1. Government Secondary School, Kwali (Junior)	480	437	57	11.87
2. Government Secondary School Kwali (Senior)	430	330	100	23.25
3. Government Secondary School Yangoji (Junior)	320	278	38	11.87
4. Government Secondary School Yangoji (Senior)	300	250	50	16.66
5. Dafa Junior Secondary School, Kwali	181	120	61	33.70
6. Dafa Senior Secondary School, Kwali	170	120	50	29.41

Table 3. Kuje Area Council.

Name of Schools (s)	No of girls admitted in 2006/2007	No of girls that graduated in 2008/2009	No of drop-out	%
1. Government Secondary School, Kuje (Junior)	380	300	80	21.05%
2. Government Secondary School Kuje (Senior)	350	280	70	20
3. Government Girls' Science School Kuje (Junior)	300	240	60	20
4. Government Girls' Science School Kuje (Senior)	320	260	60	18.75
5. Pasali Junior Secondary School, Kuje	280	200	80	28.57
6. Pasali Senior Secondary School, Kuje	270	220	50	18.52

visitors, strangers, or by pleading her to local heroes.

This practice is prevalent among the Hausas of Northern Nigeria and is a socio-cultural issue which is widely accepted. Not only are these girls withdrawn from school and married mostly by force at tender ages, they are also mostly married to older men of the parents' choice. Little consideration is given to the girls' physical, psychological and emotional preparations for such marriage. The consent of the girl is hardly sought in most cases, and they are not expected to see or like the

suitors before they agree to marry them as long as the father approves of the man.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is widely acknowledged that women are nation builders. They are "the hands that rock the cradle". Therefore, they need to be trained and prepared adequately for the future task through education. To solve this problem of attrition

amongst female students in secondary schools in FCT, the following measures should be put in place:

Action Aids This is a policy of ensuring that in each community parents come together to form committees that oversee the enrolment of female children in their communities in their various schools. This should be encouraged and emphasized. Government should also have a policy that prohibits the withdrawal of female children from primary or secondary school Any parent that withdraws his/her child from school with a view to giving her out in marriage is liable and should be sanctioned by the government.

Awareness Campaign: There should be awareness campaign on nation's television, radio and prints on the importance of western education and the fact that it can provide girls with the knowledge and confidence needed to help reduce maternal and child mortality, violence and HIV/AIDS transmission. Furthermore, they should be made to know that good quality education is an enabling factor for countries to achieve the level of economic growth required to tackle poverty and make sustainable development a reality.

Use of Social Workers: Female social workers and health officers should be encouraged to establish a system of home visitation especially in the rural parts of the Federal Capital Territory. This would afford these women ample opportunity to learn all the facts on education, which are relevant to their being able to live a fulfilled life in a modern society.

UNICEF: UNICEF Nigeria and other development partners have been working with the Government of Nigeria to promote girls' education and various initiatives have been undertaken. These include the current Girls' Education Project (GEP) geared towards promoting and enhancing girls' participation in education. The GEP was inspired by an earlier initiative, the African Girls' Education Initiative (AGE) delivered through UNICEF and the government with the aim to boosting girls' education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2003, 2005 and UNICEF, 2007). This project should be brought to the grass root level so that girls in the rural areas will benefit. This will help in reducing the attrition rate as it was observed to be higher in schools in the rural areas.

Special Funds for Girls' Education: There should be increased funding to support girls' education, development of policies like the National Policy on Gender in Basic Education (FRN, 2004) focusing on mainstreaming gender in educational planning and implementation.

Student Tutoring Mentoring and Counseling (STUMEC): The Student Tutoring, Mentoring and counseling (STUMEC) programme is an initiative aimed

at supporting children, especially girls, throughout their learning period to help improve learning achievement and retention in schools. The support is provided by peer tutors, teacher tutors, mentors and role models from the community. Dracher and Cov (1996), Herz et al. (1991) and Packard (2003) were of the opinion that mentoring is specifically for children who are at risk of failing or dropping out, particularly girls, who are prone to vulnerabilities due to many factors; among them is the socio-cultural influence. This agency needs to be strengthened and utilized to check girls' drop out.

Advocacy and Sensitization: Raising national awareness in girl-child education has increased political and financial commitment through advocacy and sensitization of policy makers at all levels, parents, school authorities, other leaders and girls themselves. High level advocacy to policy makers, traditional and religious leaders as well as continuous sensitization/mobilization of communities promote commitment to implementation, ownership and sustainability of girls' education interventions. The high level advocacy includes meetings with state governors and leaders in the society. Exploring and utilizing all these points will help to enhance girls' enrolment in schools which will in turn work positively for national development. An adage "train the girl child and build the nation" holds sway here.

Conclusion

The fact has been established in this paper that all children should have access to quality education within an equitable system. Schools should be places where children's rights especially those of girls are respected, injustices are challenged and lives transformed. By attending school, children can acquire the confidence and knowledge to better access and make use of information that can improve their lives. The dignity of self-confidence gained can help them to challenge discriminatory and biased gender roles and relations. Also, education can provide girls with the knowledge and confidence needed to help reduce maternal and child mortality, violence and HIV/AIDS transmission. Furthermore, good quality education is essential for enabling countries to achieve the level of economic growth required to tackle and make sustainable development a reality.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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