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Gender Stereotypes and Girl-Child Education in Nigeria

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Introduction

Education remains a potent and dynamic instrument for national development and social transformation, and now internationally accepted as a key development index. It is in recognition of this importance that governments all over the world have made commitments for its citizens to have access to education. Over the years, Nigeria has expressed commitment to education with special emphasis on female education.

The girl-child educational attainment is low, as records have shown that fewer girls go to school than boys. The gender gap is said to widen as girls move up the formal education ladder (Obanya 2007). An estimated fifty percent of the population of Nigeria (i.e. 70 million) is made up of women and girls (Obanya 2004). Thus, for Nigeria to experience meaningful sustainable development, the female population cannot be ignored. For this reason, government, aware of the benefits of female education, has made concerted effort to promote girls' education.

Section 18 of the Nigerian Constitution, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act 2004, the Child Rights Act 2003, and Article 17 of the African Charter guarantee the right of every Nigerian child to education. The UBE Act and the Child Rights Act further made provision for free and compulsory basic education up to junior secondary level for every child. Despite all these efforts, the girl-child education attainment is low as majority of girls drop out for various reasons before completion of junior secondary education.

Why has the situation persisted despite efforts by governments, international organizations and NGOs to boost female education over the years? It appears the real issues have not been appropriately addressed. One area that seems to have not been well explored is the issue of gender stereotypes. In Nigerian society, gender stereotyping is pronounced in every aspect of human activity and several authors have pointed to this and other range of issues that interplay to affect female access to education.

Gender stereotypes are roles or a pattern of behaviour placed on a particular sex by the society, mostly beliefs, illogical ideas and false phrases. It is referred as collection of commonly held beliefs or opinions about behaviours and activities considered by society as appropriate for males and females. It is an overgeneralization, a category concept that is learned, factually incorrect, rigid and persistent (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). According to (Perry and Pauletti, 2011), gender stereotypes are people's beliefs about how the sexes differ (descriptive stereotypes) or should differ (prescriptive stereotypes). For the purpose of the present study, gender stereotypes refer to socio-cultural beliefs and practices, which tend to limit the girl-child's rights to education.

This study has been inspired by concern on the possible effects of gender stereotypes on the overall development of the girl-child. In most homes, girls are exposed to the experiences of traditional norms, stereotype beliefs and practices. However, most of these beliefs and practices are designed to sustain patriarchy gender inequality in the society. Invariably, it is the fundamental rights of women and girls that are mostly violated by these beliefs most of which are not suitable for social and healthy growth of the girl-child. Rather they increase the burden of the developmental tasks for the girl-child causing a setback in her developmental process. A nation that endangers the development of a critical segment of its own population puts itself at risk. Again, attention is drawn to the fact that most Nigerian gender research efforts seem to focus on issues around gender differentials amongst students in science subjects (e.g. Oluwatayo, 2011). However, there appears to be lack of research which explores how

stereotypic beliefs against female gender affect the girls-child's attitude toward education which in turn hinders regular participation of the girl-child in education.

It is against this backdrop that the issue of gender stereotypes and their impacts on educational attitude of Nigerian girls are being examined. It considers attitude as significant because attitudes determine behaviour, which in turn combine to affect girls' access to education. The paper starts with a review of gender role development in African society. It discusses the patriarchal nature of African society and the Nigerian perceptions regarding the girl-child. It reviews some examples of commonly held stereotypic beliefs that pose threat to female gender, and presents concern on the plight of the African girl-child who is caught in the struggle for self-determination and the patriarchal system, which seems to limit her rights and expectations of herself. The paper argues that such a system increases the burden of the developmental tasks for the girl-child causing a setback to her development. The paper further argues that until we address the challenge of gender stereotyping and the impact it imposes on the girl-child, the mere provision of laws, conventions, charters, as the panacea, though laudable, remains futile. To this end, the paper considers how ODL can be used as a strategy to counteract the impact of gender stereotypes and socio-cultural beliefs that pose threat to female gender thereby increasing girls' access to education.

Gender role development in African society

Most African countries are patriarchal in structure – structure that is based on inequality and injustice. Patriarchal attitudes lead to gender stereotyping. It pervades all areas of life in African society. It is a well-known fact that many parents in Africa give preferential treatment to the boy-child, especially in matters concerning education. Women are given fewer educational opportunities than men as reflected in the lower literacy rates for the adult female population compared to men. The social norms, which supported these gender relations, were culturally transmitted from one generation to another through the process of socialization. As children move through childhood into adolescence, they are exposed to many factors, which influence their attitudes and behaviors regarding gender roles. These attitudes and behaviors are generally learned first in the home and are then reinforced by the child's peers, school experience, and the media. However, the strongest influence on gender role development seems to occur within the family setting, with parents passing on, both overtly and covertly, to their children their own beliefs about gender (Witt, 1997).

The influence of the mother and the father is particularly significant in shaping and perpetuating patriarchy. The mother provides the role model for daughters, while the father demonstrates to sons what it means to 'be a man' (World Bank Report 2005). One study found that children at two and a half years of age use gender stereotypes in negotiating their world and are likely to generalize gender stereotypes to a variety of activities, objects, and occupations (Fagot, Leinbach and O'Boyle, 1992). Psychologists and sociologists have documented differences in the parenting of sons and daughters. Akaneme and Ngwoke (2010) have noted that the pattern of child rearing and socialization obtainable in Africa seems to allow boys more privileges than the girls.

Gender stereotypes and Nigerian perceptions regarding the girl-child

Nigeria is a society which is rife with gender stereotypes and biases, which places a high premium on the male gender (Para-Mallam, 2010). From the moment a child is born the gender role education process begins. Male child is perceived as an asset that is highly treasured in most Nigerian homes. In education, priority is usually given to men because of the cultural perception of their role as breadwinners. For females, the belief is that they will eventually marry and 'come under' their husbands hence they are treated as inferior. Furthermore, to perpetuate the superiority of the male child over the girl-child, the girl-child is trained to put herself below her male siblings. In some homes, in order to make up for the financial inadequacy of the family, the girl-child is sent out to hawk in order to raise money for the family needs. Some of the girls are married off at a tender age so that the bride price will be spent on the education of the boy-child and on other family needs. In some cases, the girl-child may be given off for domestic labour in urban area for a regular income to the family. These traditional beliefs and practices have successfully provided two different developmental grounds in the same home for the growth of the boy-child and the girl-child (Ezeliora and Ezeokana, 2011).

The psychological effect of gender stereotypes and socio-cultural beliefs on the girl-child is the internalization of the low value accorded them by society (Ezeliora and Ezeokana, 2011). These beliefs together with other socializing processes observed for boys and girls are designed to instill a feeling of superiority to boys while girls are groomed to accept subjugation and inferiority with apathy (Raswork, 2006). This established patriarchal system has long endured the passage of time cutting across geographical boundaries as well as class differences. Most of the common stereotypes that appear to threaten the female gender include:

- The belief that men are stronger than women
- The belief that education of women is a waste of resources
- The belief that men are the bread winners (even though it is known to be untrue in our economy)
- The belief that an educated girl will become morally lax
- The belief that a woman's place ends in the kitchen
- The belief that the male child will be a support for parents in the old age
- The belief and high value placed on marriage and motherhood and their accompanying gender specific roles

These traditional practices/beliefs impose a lot of restrictions on the female gender. It is regrettable that despite our progress as a society there is still an underestimation of the value of the girl-child. Women and girls who constitute over 50% of the nation's population have been discriminated against and effectively denied education which is one of the fundamental human rights and a veritable tool for development and empowerment. Okeke (1999) notes that although males and females can never be identical, gender differences and gender stereotyping tend to be exaggerated to a point that they constituted into myths and predicaments which tend to limit personal and professional growth and utilization of one's potentials.

Effects of gender stereotypes on the girl-child

In African society, a girl is conditioned to believe that women are inferior to men, that her place is in the home and that she is therefore there to be seen and not to be heard. These stereotypical beliefs against female gender have become entrenched in the minds of girls and women as they internalize these faulty messages from authority figures. As a result, the girl-child suffers emotional disorientation, which at times results to feeling of insecurity and poor self-esteem (Ezeliora and Ezeokana, 2011 citing Hiuzer, 2002). Several studies maintain that negative stereotypes often cause negative responses, which can manifest themselves in the stereotyped individual's reactions, performance on a task, motivation, and low self-esteem. Negative stereotypes hinder peoples' ability to fulfill their potential by limiting choices and opportunities (Santrock, 2001). A 1999 Survey of Harmful Traditional Practices against Women and Girls in Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development 1999) found that proverbs and local sayings act as psychological constraints against transforming societal attitudes and behaviour. This practice has further helped to undermine girls' self-esteem.

Study conducted by this author (forthcoming) has demonstrated that gender stereotypes tend to affect girls' self-image as well as attitude towards schooling as evidenced from the significant difference found between girls who were exposed to stereotypic beliefs against female gender and girls not so exposed to such influences with the latter group accounting for the difference. This finding is not contrary to those of several other researchers who found that gender-stereotyped beliefs and practices derived from African traditional society continue to affect the everyday lives, social aspirations and development prospects of girls and women (Para-Mallam, 2010).

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to the Rescue

In view of the apparent danger of gender-role stereotyping and socio-cultural beliefs that work against the female gender, there is great need to address the problem through adequate intervention programmes using ODL as a strategy. The need to educate the public to shed off negative attitude against female gender is imperative. There is need for Nigerian society to break down gender stereotypic beliefs, as well as those proverbs, myths and folklore that help to create and reinforce gender stereotypes and give way to a new mind-set and a change in attitude in both men and women. To this regard, massive enlightenment campaigns on the dangers of negative gender stereotypes

become necessary. This can be achieved through the use of phone, radio, voicemail and other modes of distance education. Because the family remains the basic institution from where gender biases emanate, strong campaigns should be launched to educate parents on the need to value the worth of a girl child, so as to eliminate such biases. ODL can be used as the vehicle for such campaigns. Owing to their broad acceptability among Nigerians, the Nigerian movie industry "Nollywood" should be employed as a tool to challenge gender stereotypes. It is only when this is adequately addressed that it would help in creating supportive environment for the growth of the girl-child thereby increasing girls' access to education.

Apart from using ODL as a strategy to counteract the impact of gender stereotypes, girls who have dropped out of school because of the challenge of gender stereotypes can find rescue under ODL. Open and distance learning (ODL) has been identified as the panacea to the perennial educational challenges of equitable access to learning, equality of basic educational opportunities as well as providing a second chance for women and girls who had never been or had once been in the system but had to dropout for one reason or another (Ofoegbu, 2009). The essence of ODL teaching and training is that girls can take advantage of learning opportunities anytime, anywhere to implement positive changes in their lives.

Though Nigeria has done a lot in distance education, which is mainly evident at the higher levels of education within the universities and colleges, however, ODL programme is non-existent at the basic level of education. This is why Alabi (2010) proposes the establishment of Open School system in Nigeria which will focus at pre-tertiary level (primary and secondary) to enable individuals whose learning needs are not being met by formal conventional schools to have access to education. The Open School, according to Alabi, will explore, develop and establish a wide range of educational courses at post-literacy and pre-tertiary level and will set up effective ODL structures and systems to make those courses available throughout Nigeria to reach out-of-school children and youths, illiterate adults, primary and secondary school drop-outs, marginalized groups such as migrant groups, as well as girls and women. Indeed, as Alabi (2006) stated, the open schooling is unusual strategy for reaching the unreached in classless informal settings.

It is pertinent to also add that the Open School when finally established should offer programmes that would assist both boys and girls to develop new orientations about the roles and capabilities of both men and women. To this end, gender awareness programmes should be made an integral part of teaching and learning. The lessons should, amongst others, aim at empowering girls with some of the tools they need for mitigating the effect of gender stereotypes that pose threat to their gender.

Conclusion

The study found evidence in support of the assumption that gender stereotypes pose great threat to the girl-child and that girls suffer the consequences of a patriarchal structure that is based on inequality and injustice. Children particularly girls are seen as very vulnerable and easily manipulated therefore they are more prone to the effects of gender stereotyping. The need to address this phenomenon and its attendant problems through open and distance learning and thus safeguard the future of the girl-child remains germane.

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