

Child Education in My Country

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Nigeria is one of the many countries of the African continent and is situated in the West African sub-region; it lies between longitudes 300 and 140 and latitudes 40 and 140. Nigeria has a landmass of 923,768 sq km, 800 km of its coastline. It is Africa's most populous nation with a population of about 164 million people made up of 51% male and 49% female (80.2 million being girls and women).

Child Education

The 1948 universal declaration of Human Rights provides the first international recognition of the right to education where it is stated that, "everyone has a right to education", while chapter 4 of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria frowns at discrimination of any kind.

The implications of these provisions to Nigeria, is that the girl child's right to education encompasses rights to economic, social, and cultural rights without compromise as people cannot generally or fully realize their freedoms without education.

There is an educational gap between girls and boys in Nigeria. This is occurring even as the Government has taken bold steps to be able to achieve the provisions earlier stated above through the formation of various educational programs and agencies. Among these agencies, the commission on Universal Basic Education is leading in the implementation of deliberate educational programs established to ensure equity in educational opportunities for both boys and girls and to meet the burden on education which has become overwhelming for its population.

The gap in education between girls and boys is experienced mostly in the Northern region of Nigeria made up of three geo-political zones—the North-West, North-East and North Central. The North-West is includes a large chunk of the age group (6-11 years) not attending school.

The Southern Region, made up of South-West, South-East and South-South geo-political zones, has a very high rate of enrolment for both girls and boys except for the South-East and South-South. Alternatively, these latter two areas have a huge gap between boys and girls enrolment as there are more girls in schools than boys.

In the Northern region where I come from, gaps in girls' education are huge. And it is an important issue. Here, the gender gap remains particularly wide and the proportion of girls to boys ratio in school from the primary, secondary and even in

tertiary schools will range from 1-2 to 1-3 girls to boys or even higher in some states in the region.

Parents are aware of this disparity and the existing gaps, while some are concerned and try to do something on their own to complement governments' efforts. Most parents feel helpless as there is not much that they can do. Poverty just will not let them!

Causes of Gaps in Girls Education

There are so many reasons why many children do not go to or are not in school. It is said that Nigeria has the largest number of out-of-school children in the world. Human development outcomes for girls and women are the worst in the North as poverty levels are sometimes twice as high as in the South. The result of inequality on the lives of girls and women is mirrored clearly in health and education outcomes. Yes, there are gaps!

Of the many reasons, why girls are not in school in the North, poverty remains a major cause. A lot of children are out-of-school because their inputs are needed at home to put food on the family's table and to essentially help the family earn badly needed income. Children, especially girls from poor homes, are mostly out of school. And the reason for this, the parents confess is that the cost is too much for them to bear, a major reason why girls are being withdrawn from education. Education is said to be free but in actual fact, it is not! Parents pay fees and various levies that burden the poor. These include costs such as those of uniforms, textbooks, distance to nearest schools (transport costs) and toilet facilities. And it goes on and on.

Other causes apart from poverty or economic hardships that impact on cost of education are school environment (which include toilet facilities). It is reported on average, that there is only one toilet for 600 pupils in the primary school system. The religious and cultural beliefs and practices of the people, especially in the North, are other factors that ensure gaps exist in children's education. Poor parents or large families with limited resources elect to enroll boys in school instead of girls or have their daughters out of school because of a poor interpretation or complete ignorance of Islamic practices, and an unexplainable morbid cultural practice. Existing data shows that about 30% of pupils drop out of primary school and only about 54% transit to Junior Secondary School (UNICEF, Nigeria). As a result of this, parents rush to marry off teenage daughters when they pull them out of school. They have these girls begin child bearing in early age in assumed compliance to a religious tenet that is wholly misinterpreted and misunderstood.

Way Forward

It is not alright to lament about these ever increasing gaps in child education and the apparent disparity especially in girl's education. Deliberate viable policies need to be formulated to cater for gender related issues. And the government would need to humanely implement a the free and compulsory education policy in order to allow for an effective and dynamic response to pupils needs irrespective of their cultural setting or poor background.

The government of Sani Yarima Bakura, then Governor of Zamfara State, (1999-2007), in the North-West, was able to raise girls enrolment in schools, including girls who had dropped out of school. This government kept them in school by responding to both the cultural, religious and economic needs of his people. He made girls education truly free and provided for every need—uniforms, textbooks, writing materials, teaching aids, improved infra-structure; water; good sanitary conditions—improved number and quality of toilets; and paid allowances to parents who kept their children in school. These actions raised girls' enrolment in that state (Zamfara State) to 60%.

Government at all levels in the Northern Region, albeit in Nigeria, need to rise up to regulate and supervise schools in order to ensure minimal standards and respect for diversity amongst the people. It should ensure that none is discriminated against, so as to bridge all existing gaps. Government must also as a matter of urgency re-orientate the people especially parents; and to work with community, opinion and religious leaders to help improve enrolment of girls.