GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION: A SPRINGBOARD FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
The paper discussed how girl-child education can be a spring board for sustainable development in Nigeria. The concept of education, development and sustainable development were discussed. The paper also identified the girl-child and highlighted the government’s effort toward the education of the girl-child. The convention on the rights of a child was brought into perspective as well as the benefits of girl-child education. The paper recommended that concerted efforts must be made by government at all levels towards the domestication of the Child Right Act.

Keywords: Girl child, Education, Springboard, Sustainable development

INTRODUCTION
Development is important to every nation, and especially development that is sustainable. However, development does not occur by a mere wish, but sustainable development entails work by way of organized and consistent management of both human and material resources. This is in tandem with the observation of Danladi (2005), that for any nation to develop, a degree amount of ‘work’ must be carried out by the nation in question. Education of the girl child forms part of the work and strategic actions that need to be taken by any serious and well-meaning nation to attain sustainable development. When education of the citizenry is accorded its proper place in a nation, and that of the female folk is not totally relegated to the background, then it is evidence that such a nation is heading towards development. The education of the girl child will be a springboard for sustainable development because of the important roles and contributions that the female gender can make towards national development. The World Declaration on Education for all, since 1990, has recognized the urgent need to give priority to the provision of access to quality education by women and girls. For instance, article 1 states that “Every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs” (WCEFA,1990). This, no doubt, will facilitate the removal of obstacles that stand as impediments to the active participation of the female gender in the exercise of their roles in all sectors of national
development. However, in Nigeria, girl education has not been given the priority attention that it deserves, in order to measure up with the opportunity given to the male folk.

This paper therefore examined the benefits that can be derived from the education of the girl child and ultimately facilitate sustainable development in Nigeria.

THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATION

Several definitions of Education have been proffered by various professionals, researchers and educationists. However, this study will examine those that relate to the context of this paper. There is no gainsaying the fact that education is vital to the development and survival of any society. In fact, in the words of Musaazi (1986: p.11), “Education is both an end in itself and a means to attaining other ends”. He looked at education in its broad form as including all those activities outside the family that are consciously planned and organised to achieve specific educational objectives. In education, knowledge and skills are imparted and taught, values and morals. This process of learning is referred to as education. Through education, one generation is able to transmit to the next the wealth of wisdom, knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and societal knowledge, and prepare the younger generation for membership and active participation in the society and its development. It is therefore evident that education is in itself an aspect of development. Similarly, Good (1973) defined education as the aggregate of all processes by means of which a person develops abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour of positive value to the society in which he lives. This definition makes it clear that education is a means of empowerment. It empowers men and women to be useful to themselves and the society.

Considering this in relation to the girl child, it is clear that the education of the girl child is sacrosanct to the development of any society. The girl child has to be empowered to be useful to herself first and then to the larger society. It was in this light that a declaration concerning the education of girls and women in general was made at the World Conference on Education, stating that “the most urgent priority is to ensure access to, and improve the quality of education for girls and women, and to remove every obstacle that hampers their active participation. All gender Stereotyping in education should be eliminated” (WCEA,1990). Indeed, formal Education in Nigeria, like in many other societies of the world, is not only a symbol of social status but an access to other good things of life. The sophistication of modern societies requires highly educated people to man the various infrastructural facilities (Ndan & Mohammed, 2011). Owing to this, therefore, the education of the girl child has to be given the required attention for them to be able to take their place, and play their roles efficiently in the development of the society, the Nigerian nation, and indeed globally. Education, in a nutshell
therefore, offers knowledge and skills that enlighten, and especially the female gender in society. Through education, girls are accorded the opportunity to acquire knowledge in the areas of vocational, technical, professional and health education. It is therefore important for girls to be granted the right to access education for enhancement of developmental sustainability.

THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT

Within the scope of this paper, the definition proffered by Okoli and Onah (2002) will be examined. They opined that development connotes movement forward, advancement and progress. It is the enhancement on the physical, which is material as well as the non-material facets of life. It involves actions, motions and reactions. Further to this, Eme and Emeh (2012) asserted that development includes increase in health care delivery, good motorable roads, good education and justice. They believe that the dignity of individuals, as well as their happiness, values, patriotism, and quality of life increase when the above attributes are obtainable. This means that development can be viewed as the process that creates growth, progress and positive change. It must be understood that development is not just for the sake of it. It has a purpose which is to ensure a rise in the level and quality of life of all the population, and the creation and expansion of local regional income and employment opportunities, without damaging the resources of the environment.

Looking at development in conjunction with the girl child, the paper agrees with the view expressed by the ‘capability approach’ to the concept (Wikipedia), which defined development as a tool that enables people to reach the highest level of their ability, through granting freedom of action. The action includes freedom of economic, social and family actions.

On the other hand, some professionals and researchers have viewed development in the light of factors that hinder it. These researchers view the concept by focusing on mechanisms that prevent or oppress development, and cause people or nations to linger in abject poverty for years. Such poverty traps include civil wars, natural disasters and poverty itself. When these traps are identified and avoided, then development can take place.

Indeed, the above-mentioned traps form some of the factors militating against the education of the girl child. If a country, for instance, is fighting civil wars, there is no how education can thrive in that country, as a whole; not to talk of paying attention to that of the female folk.

Development is always a positive word used to describe anything that has improved, whether pertaining to peoples’ achievement, personality, business, results, etc. There will be
no development if there is no movement. Development takes time and effort, but with consistent effort comes growth, expansion and improvement. Similarly, Rogers (1990) stated that, development is a long participatory process of social change in the society whose objective is the material and social progress for the majority of a population through a better understanding of their environment Daly (1989), just like Rodney (2009) opined that development involves both qualitative and quantitative growth. Qualitative growth, which means increase in quality of life; and quantitative growth represents economic growth. Talking about sustainability, Daly (1989) opined that qualitative growth is sustainable, but quantitative, which is economic growth, cannot be sustained once it passes its limit. Indeed, development is a multi-dimensional process involving qualitative and quantitative changes in social, political and economic domains of society. It is undertaken essentially to lead to a better state of life. Development is one aspect, and sustaining it is another aspect altogether.

CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The concept of sustainable development has been defined variously depending on the origin and standpoint of the user. It is no wonder then that Purvis et al (2017) opined that sustainability remains an open concept with myriad of interpretations and concept-specific understanding. Sustainable development or sustainability has been described in terms of three domains or pillars, which are the environment, the economy and society. This description is in tandem with the assertion of Ezeah, Iyanda and Nwangwu (2013) that sustainable development embraces environmental, economic and social sustainability, which generally can be attained by proper management of physical, natural and human capital. Thus, the desired result is a society in which living conditions and utilization of resources continue to meet the needs of humanity and at the same time not undermining the integrity and stability of the natural systems. According to White, Stallones and Last (2013), fundamental human needs such as the availability and quality of air, water, food and shelter are also the ecological foundations for sustainable development. On the other hand, environmental sustainability has to do with being able to maintain rates of renewable resource harvest, pollution creation, and non-renewable resource depletion that can be continued indefinitely. Economic sustainability is the ability to support a defined level of economic production indefinitely. Social sustainability has to do with being able to function at a defined level of societal well-being indefinitely. However, the Brundtland report (1987) defined sustainability as being linked with development and defined it simply as sustainable development. Sustainable development therefore has been defined as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations to meet their own needs (Wikipedia).
Education for sustainable development is therefore seen as a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the all-round development and well-being of the community. The relevance of education to sustainable development comes to the fore here, as it is responsible for building capacity to actualize the decisions taken. Similarly, report from the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002), stated that sustainable development requires us to acknowledge the interdependent relationship between people and their natural environment. According to the report, this interdependence means that no single social, economic, political or environmental objective should be pursued at the detriment of others. When half of humanity is in abject poverty, the environment cannot be said to be under protection, and there cannot be any long-term development on an environment that is depleted. This also brings to the fore the importance of girl child education, for speedy propagation of the ideals and strategies for sustainable development.

**THE CONCEPT OF THE GIRL CHILD**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as a person below the age of 18, therefore the girl-child is any female human being between zero to eighteen years or simply put it, any female below the age of eighteen; unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger. Orakwe, (2019). The girl child was described as a powerful being that possesses unique traits and characteristics that make her not only a woman but a force to be reckoned with in a world where strength and virtue is on a constant decline. There is more to the girl child than meets the ordinary eye; she is more than a wife, a mother or a sister. She is the channel through which the balance of human existence is built upon. She is a life guardian and the sole connection between the idea of life itself. (Wikipedia, 2016).

A girl-child is also described as a female child between infancy and early adulthood. She is a person, not a sub-person over whom the parent has an absolute possessory interest (Orakwe, 2019). At this stage, she is easily influenced by her developmental experiences, forming her behaviour through observations and imitations. Those she observes and imitate include her parents, guardians, trusted adults, friends and peers (Wikipedia, www.grossachive.com)

Indeed, the girl child plays multiple roles in the home and the society at large, and even in the economic sphere, they are not lagging behind. They go to school, cope with house chores, care for both older and younger members of the family and are groomed to assume the responsibilities of adulthood. These definitions and descriptions of the girl child reveal why she should not be denied access to quality education, as doing so spells doom for any country that does so.
Government Efforts

Efforts are being made to encourage and press for the education of the girl child, and as such governments and societies have made moves towards the realization of the laudable goal. The Nigerian Constitution (2011) clearly states in Section 18 that every child whether boy or girl, has the right to education, that is, “equal and adequate education opportunities at all levels”. Similarly, the National Policy on Education (2016) advocates the education of every child right from early childhood, including crèche, nursery and kindergarten.

In addition, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act (2004) advocates the education of every Nigerian child. The Child Rights Act (2003) and the African Charter (Article 17) also guarantee the right of every Nigerian to education. There are over ten million children that are neither in school nor receiving any form of training to help them better their lots in life. Sadly, of this large figure, the girl child constitutes the highest percentage.

The foregoing are evidences of efforts made by successive governments toward the education of children without discrimination. One then wonders why the gender gap between the girl child and the male counterpart in educational attainment, especially in Nigeria continues to persist. Amongst the efforts for girls’ education are the recommendation that more schools should be created for girls in science and technology and to also encourage Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s) to stimulate interest in scientific courses for women.

THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The United Nations convention on the rights of the child is a human rights treaty which sets out the rights of children; be they civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights. The convention deals with the specific needs and rights of the child and any nation that ratifies the convention is bound to it by international law. The guiding principles of the convention include non-discrimination, adherence to the best interest of the child. These right include the right to life, survival and development, and the right to participate. All other rights are hinged on these major rights. For instance, the rights to survival and development include the rights to the resources, to skills and contributions necessary for the survival and full development of the child. These are rights to adequate food, shelter, clean water, formal education, primary health care, leisure and recreation, cultural activities and information about their rights. The right to access these rights is also inclusive. Similarly, the rights of protection include protection from all forms of child abuse, neglect, exploitation and cruelty, including the right to special protection in times of war and protection from abuse in the criminal justice system (UNICEF; Orakwe, 2019). At this juncture, it is important to note that the convention on the rights of the child is the most widely ratified out of all the human rights treaty. Human
rights are universal and are applicable to all, including adults, youth and children. A critical look at them shows clearly that the girl child is still vulnerable to the violations of certain human rights. This therefore reveals why it is necessary to have special consideration for the girl child.

The human rights of the girl-child include:

1. The right to freedom from discrimination based on gender, age, race, colour, language, religion, ethnicity, or any other status, or on the status of the child’s parents’
2. The right to a standard of living adequate for a child’s intellectual, physical, moral and spiritual development.
3. The right to a healthy and safe environment.
4. The right to the highest possible standard of health and to equal access to health care.
5. The right to equal access to food and nutrition.
6. The right to life and to freedom from prenatal sex selection.
7. The right to freedom from cultural practices, customs and traditions harmful to the child, including female genital mutilation.
8. The right to education – this includes free and compulsory basic education, equal access to available forms of post basic education and higher education, and to freedom from all types of discrimination at all levels of education.
9. The right to information about health, sexuality and reproduction.
10. The right to protection from all physical or mental abuse.
11. The right to protection from economic and sexual exploitation, prostitution, and trafficking.
12. The right to freedom from forced or early marriage.
13. The right to equal rights to inheritance.
14. The right to express an opinion about plans or decisions affecting the child’s life

(The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The above represent part of the efforts to raise awareness for the rights of the girl child with a view to increasing their access to quality education. However, in spite of the global awareness for girl child education over the years, the girl child continues to lag behind their male counterparts in education. More disturbing is the finding of some recent studies by UNESCO, which revealed that the global number of children and young adolescents that are not enrolled in school has been on the rise; instead of reducing (Wikipedia).

For instance, it was revealed that in the school year ending in 2013, about 124 Million children between the ages of six (6) and fifteen (15) either dropped out of school or did not
enrol in the first place. Majority of those children who have never enrolled are girls. What this means is that about sixty-two million girls are out of school worldwide (Wikipedia).

Another study by UNESCO (1993) revealed that girls’ primary school completion rates are below 50% in most poor countries. Furthermore, Obanya (2007) observed that the gender gap widens as girls move up the ladder of formal education. Hence the need to reiterate the benefits and advantages of investing in, and enforcing the education of the girl child.

**BENEFITS OF GIRL CHILD EDUCATION**

There are a lot of benefits that are derivable from the education of the girl child, and a number of these benefits are compelling. However, statistics give disturbing revelation of this situation in the developing countries, of which Nigeria is an integral part. Two-thirds of the uneducated in the world are girls, and two-thirds of the world’s illiterate adults are women. (Wikipedia). All these are clear evidences of lack of opportunities that are being experienced by the female gender even in this century, where opportunities that abound are mostly accruable only to the educated. This alludes to the importance of educating the girl child. Around the world, the female gender suffers from inadequate healthcare, inadequate education, early marriage, sexual discrimination and even violence. Checkmating the above listed challenges brings to the front burner the necessity of girl-child education. According to the Global Fund for Women, the World Bank, and the Clinton Global Initiative report (Wikipedia), the compelling benefits associated with girls’ education include: reduction in child and maternal mortality, improvement of child nutrition and health, lower birth rates, enhancement of women’s domestic role, political participation, improvement of the economic productivity and growth, protection of girls from HIV/AIDS, abuse and exploitation (Wikipedia). Similarly, the Borgen project report (Wikipedia, 2016) identified top ten reasons why female education is important. These include increased literacy, undermining of human trafficking, political representation, surviving and thriving babies from educated mothers, safe sex/ avoidance of HIV, smaller families, income potential, thriving GDP, and poverty reduction.

Indeed, all over the world, there is a clarion call for girls’ education owing to its importance especially in these modern times. It has been stressed that exposing young girls to education promotes progress for the society as a whole. No wonder, Koppell (2016) referred to female education as a “silver bullet” for empowerment and progress.

In the words of Tharoor (2012), no action has been proven to do more for humanity than the education of female children. Studies and various research works have confirmed the general saying that “if you educate a boy, you educate a person: but you educate a girl, you educate a family and benefit an entire community. This attests to the fact that the importance
of girls’ education cannot be over emphasized. In fact, they are no longer being debated but need to be emphasized for encouragement and appropriate actions. One of the benefits is survival. The talk about education cannot arise over a fellow who is non-existent. A child must survive the infancy stage and grow up to school age before the talk of educating him/her. Therefore, the grave reduction on infant mortality rate tops the list of benefits that are accruable to the education of the girl child. In one of the studies by the World Health Organization (WHO), it was established that “In Africa, children of mothers who have received five years of education are 40% more likely to live beyond the age of five”. Furthermore, it was also revealed through a study by UNESCO and UNICEF (1993) that “each additional year of a mother’s schooling reduces the probability of the infant mortality rate by 5% to 10%”.

Similarly, another study shows that AIDS spread twice as fast among uneducated girls than among those who have been to school. Educated girls marry later and are less susceptible to abuse by older men. All these are confirmation to the fact that education of the girl child facilitates higher level of care and therefore reduction in infant and maternal mortality rate (Jamison & Lau, 1982).

A study by World Bank, of twenty developing countries revealed that countries that allocated substantial resources to the education of women even at primary level experienced higher economic productivity, lower fatality rates, lower infant and maternal mortality and improved levels of life expectancy for both men and women, as compared to countries with lower levels of women’s educational attainment.

There is a multiplier effect to educating girls. Women who are educated tend to live healthier lives, earn more income and practice birth control and provide better health care and education of their own children, and all these can lift households out of poverty. Education enhances economic empowerment. According to Onanya (2005) an educated female is likely to be productive and better paid worker, an informed citizen, a self-confident individual and a skilled decision maker. This attests to the fact that education of the female folk is central to improvement of the quality of life, because education raises the economic status of families, and thereby improving life conditions.

**Improvement in Health**

Maintenance of proper hygiene through education, the knowledge of how to live a healthy lifestyle is acquired. ‘Prevention is better than cure’ is an adage that is practicable with enlightenment and knowledge. Added to this is noticeable improvement in family well-being. In addition, education will empower the female gender to rise up effectively against unhealthy cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (Aburate, 2001). Knowledge is power, so
knowledge acquired through education will empower the female gender to rise up and constructively fight for their rights. The right to health for everyone was promulgated as a core value of the constitution of the World Health Organisation (WHO). Also Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) advocates “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health” for everyone (Olomujobi, 2015). The knowledge of physical and mental health is all encompassing, covering even reproductive health. Reproductive health was defined as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions (ICPD, 1994). All these are pointers to the fact that the education of the girl child will facilitate drastic reduction in mortality rates, be it infant, maternal or child mortality.

**Peaceful Atmosphere and Coexistence**

One of the benefits of girl child education to development is the enhancement of peaceful coexistence in the communities and by extension the nation as a whole. Women play very significant roles in the management of the environment to ensure peace, and so this skill needs to be recognised and developed (Ndan & Jarimi, 2011). This development can be achieved through education, as illiteracy is synonymous with ignorance in the 21st century. Therefore, to achieve a thriving and sustainable development in the education of girls must be given serious attention. Education, indeed, is an effective instrument for development. Women organisations have been effective in creating conducive environment for developing Peace (Ndan & Jarimi 2011). This can only get better with the education of the girl child. Education also contributes directly to personal fulfilment and the growth of the individual (Musaazi, 1986).

Education is a key factor in the development of the individual and society. Education is primarily an agent of transformation towards sustainable development. This is so because education increases people’s capacities to transform their societies, and according Ndan and Jarimi (2011), the exposure required to be motivated into action is girl child education.

**Increase in Access to Education of Children**

A mother’s education will definitely improve the educational attainment of her children. This is so because educated mothers understand the value of educating both sexes, that is, their sons and daughters alike.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. The roles of the civil society, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) cannot be overemphasized in sensitizing the governments and citizens, alike, towards the need for
increased access to education by the female gender. Therefore, there is need to
galvanize the efforts and activities of these bodies towards advocacy campaigns and
consultations.

2. The government needs to put in place policies that create an environment where girls
can have access to schools and to quality education. Actions must be taken to
constructively challenge the existing structures and systems that keep girls from
realizing their right to basic education. The government needs to come up with
development strategies that can encourage international donors to contribute towards
the education system, especially considering the girl child.

3. Primary and secondary school enrolments must be monitored right from the onset to
ensure girls’ enrolment with a view to eliminating gender disparity at both levels of
education.

4. There must be concerted efforts to ensure that the Child Rights Act is domesticated in
all the states of the Federation. The implementation of it will help to curb child abuse
in the society.

CONCLUSION
The paper examined the relevance and benefits of girl child education for a sustainable societal
and national development. The female gender, comprising women and the girl child need to be
given the opportunity of equal partnership with the male gender in the development process.
For a sustainable development therefore, more concerted effort must be made to invest in girl
child education, and also improve on the access of the girl child to education.

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