

Girl-Child Rights, Development And The Home Environment

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Abstract

A lot of attention is being paid to the girl-child in national and global discourse. This has become so because the girl-child is vulnerable. Sexual abuse, discrimination, and labour exploitation are some of the ills that befall the girl-child. The fundamental right of the girl-child must be guaranteed at all times, especially right to education. The paper therefore, discusses the girl-child and rights, the home environment of the girl-child, investment in the girl-child, and the need for synergy between the school and the home. Hunger and poverty have led many girls to drop out of school, some for street hawking while others for early marriage. Government, school heads and religious leaders must do more to address these issues so the girl-child can attend school and acquire functional education. In view of the myriad of challenges confronting the girl-child, the paper recommends, among others, that Government and all stakeholders in education need to discourage cultural practices such as child marriage; school heads must work hard to ensure parents do not withdraw their children from schools in their localities; and parents need to get the awareness and understanding that allowing their children to attend school so as to acquire useful education is the best legacy they can give their children.

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I. Introduction

Children, it is said, are an asset to a nation, and are leaders of tomorrow as well. Any nation that throws the future of its children to the dogs is depleting that nation's essential workforce and leaders. It is therefore, incumbent upon parents, religious organizations, and political leaders to ensure that the health and safety of children are guaranteed. This invariably means providing functional education to the children, in addition to providing health, security and other useful social services. Children need to be catered for all the time. This is because this segment of humanity is vulnerable. In other words, this segment of humanity is easily exposed to sexual violence, domestic abuse, forced labour, and human trafficking. Consequently, the home environment where a child grows up matters a lot. This home background contributes greatly to the future of the child. A hostile home environment is likely to produce future children who are not only strong headed and lawless but unproductive as well. This paper therefore, looks at the girl-child and rights, the girl-child and development, and the home environment. It also looks at investment in the girl-child, and the need for synergy between the school and the home.

The Girl-child and Rights

Since the Beijing Declaration of 1995, girls' rights codified within the U.N. Convention include basic rights such as the right to survival and development of potentials, indiscriminate, protection from harmful influences, abuses and exploitation, and full participation in family, cultural and social life, along with those violations unique to the girl child such as discrimination based upon sex, prenatal sex selection, female genital mutilation and early marriage. The UN Convention stresses on an equal right to education for all children, emphasizing on the need for primary education to be free, secondary and higher education to be available to every child, and children should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level possible. The UN Convention recognizes that discipline in schools should respect children's rights and never use violence, children's education should help them fully develop their personalities, talents and abilities, and it should teach children to understand their own rights, and to respect other people's rights, cultures and differences. It should help them to live peacefully and protect the environment as well. The UN Convention also recognizes that in addition to rights of

the girl-child, social protection, adequate health care, nutrition, full access to clean and safe water, sanitation and hygiene and skills development are also important for the full empowerment of the girl-child (Graduate Women International, GWI, 2022).

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for Equality, Development and Peace (BPfA) 1995, outlined the following strategic objectives:

1. Eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child.
2. Eliminate negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls.
3. Promote and protect the rights of the girl-child and increase awareness of her needs and potential.
4. Eliminate discrimination against girls in education, skills development and training.
5. Eliminate discrimination against girls in health and nutrition.
6. Eliminate the economic exploitation of child labour and protect young girls at work.
7. Eradicate violence against the girl child.
8. Promote the girl child's awareness of and participation in social, economic and political life.
9. Strengthen the role of the family in improving the status of the girl-child (The Girl-child, n.d.).

The Girl-child and Development

The term "growth" refers to "an increase in the size of the body as a whole or the size attained by specific parts of the body" (Bose, n.d.) The author holds that growth is not only a form of motion but is a vital and dominant biological activity that occurs in the first two decades or so of human life as well. Therefore, growth means an increase in a child's body size which tends towards physical maturity. Growth is a dynamic process of a child's life. It does appear abnormal if a child from birth maintains the same size at time of birth even one or two years on. It is a disturbing situation for parents to discover that their child born one or two years ago has not increased in body size and weight. Therefore, growth is a fundamental phenomenon for human development.

Children's development must begin early. If this does not happen, the children will be exposed to various life threatening circumstances and issues. Early childhood development, beginning from the age of 8 years, is viewed as an outcome. It is a crucial window of opportunity during which period interactions take place between young children and their environments which ultimately influence the children's physical, cognitive, emotional and social development (UNICEF, 2023).

The Home Environment

One of the factors affecting a child's growth and development is the home. Khan, Begum and Imad (2019) asserted that the home is "the first institution of a child that have significant relationships with students' overall life." It is "the basic institution for providing the child's primary socialization and laying the educational foundation for the child upon which the other agents of socialization are built" (Muema, Mwanza, & Mulwa, 2020). Consequently, the home environment deals with the aspects of individuals' domestic lives which contribute to their wellbeing, including all the "human and material resources present at the home that affects the student's education and living, such as the parent's level of education, their occupation, socio-economic status and socializing facilities available in the house" (Akinsanya, Ajayi & Salomi, 2011). Buttressing this, Khan and others (2019) argued that the home environment is not an abstract concept. It is made up of psychological and physical environment which include basic facilities such as clothes, water, shelter, food and other physical needs of the child, even as the psychological environment includes the mutual interactions of family members, and respect among family members.

The physical environment is a vital factor for the development of children. The physical environment encompassing things like housing and neighbourhood quality, noise level, and overcrowding, go as far as to affect children's study habits and their academic achievement. Chronic noise affects children's blood pressure and cognitive development. Teachers' classroom performance is also affected by noise as they become distracted from their instructional delivery efforts. Overcrowding, especially in the classroom, endangers children's mental health, biological measures, interpersonal behaviours, motivation, and cognitive development. Excessive overcrowding affects children's achievement ((Kobko, n.d.). The study by Khan, Begum and Imad (2019) buttressed how significant physical facilities are in the home. The study found that physical facilities in the home were a significant variable in students' achievement, proving the correlation between the variables. On the whole, the home environment was found to be satisfactory for students; however, academic achievement was not outstanding. Most of the students lacked study rooms; they were denied participation in domestic issues. They were however, satisfied with the physical facilities, and family interactions.

Singh (2023) posited that from the "moment of conception, through infancy, childhood, and adolescence, these environmental factors leave their indelible marks on cognitive, social, and emotional development". What this indicates is that environmental factors shape the future life of a child. The child lives with those childhood environmental experiences. If the child grows up in a hostile environment, he is likely to exhibit traits of hostility in adult life. This then means that parents, and the society as a whole need to pay attention to children's

upbringing. Again, Chaudhary (2015) saw the social environment as “an individual’s physical surroundings, community resources and social relationships” which include healthcare, housing, employment, education facilities, and open space for recreation.

Factors that Influence the Home Environment

Certain factors influence the home environment. These are authority of the head of the family, nature of the family, attitude of parents towards their children, the educational status of parents, and financial position of the family (Mukama, 2010; Muola, 2010). If the head of the family is so busy as not to have time for his family, where the children grow up rarely knowing who their father is, and where home discipline is absent, the children will grow up exhibiting traits of lawlessness. Nowadays, parents are so busy with their wage employment that they hardly have time with their children. In such a case, the children grow up without an authority being exercised over them. Similarly, the nature of the family matters a lot in children’s upbringing in such an environment. If the family is one that there is always a fight between the father and mother, their children will grow up not knowing what love and care mean. Furthermore, the income of parents and how they are able to use for their children’s education and the children’s other basic needs can shape the background and future of their children. In fact, studies have shown that the economic and social status of parents affect their children’s achievement in school (Egunsola, 2014; Kamuti, 2015; Parveen (2017). Thus, “Children born to parents with high levels of education or income can expect to do better than children born into less favorable conditions” (Duncan, Kalil, Mogstad, & Rege, 2022).

On the other hand, parents putting up at home with their children, playing, having breakfast, lunch and dinner together, provide exciting moments for children. Children feel safe and sound whenever their parents are at home with them. The father, especially, by being at home with his family, provides the leadership the family desperately needs. The family as a whole feel secure with the head of the family being there. That shows how valuable children consider their parents, especially their father. The sense of security children and their mother feel with their father at home comes about when the father is not a child bully. Where a father is constantly a child-beater, children get back into their skin as soon as they hear their father’s footstep entering the house. Therefore, as the head of the family, the father needs to show love and care for his family. This builds trust between him and the children, and between him and his wife.

Culture has a very high potential to shape a child’s values, beliefs, identity, and values. A study by Ishaku (2020) found that even with good government policies and programmes on girl-child education in Damaturu, Yobe State, parents believed in the tradition of early marriage of the girl-child. The study discovered that ignorance, poverty and non-challant attitude of parents towards the education of the girl-child have further dampened the girl-child’s future life prospects. Consequently, many parents believed that the place of the girl-child and women generally was in the kitchen and for other household chores. Another challenge the study discovered was the poverty level of parents. The study also found that because of the poverty level of parents, girls preferred to hawk either before or after school hours so as to support their families financially. In extreme cases, the girls abandoned their education, becoming full time hawkers.

In another study by Offor, Anadi, Ego and Chukwuemeka (2021), undertaken in Anambra State, it was discovered that inadequacy of basic facilities in the school, insecurity and violence, were some of the factors preventing parents from sending their girl-children to school. The study also found that some parents thought that educating their girls would bring about immoral behaviour. The study further found that some parents saw girl-child education as a wasted investment. Consequently, girl-children were asked to stay back and look after their sick relations and young siblings. The study concluded that early marriage constituted a serious barrier to girl-child education in Anambra State. To deal with the barriers, the study found the following strategies, among others, useful: Promulgation of laws by Government which should include imprisonment of any person found guilty of not sending their girl-children to school; establishment of centres where girls rescued from early marriage are accommodated, taken care of and counselled before sending them back to school; nongovernmental organizations operating in areas where early marriage is prevalent; and policy makers creating the enabling environment for increasing gender participation in the political, business, financial, and agricultural sectors.

Investment in the Girl-child

Governments across the globe have taken time to invest in child development (Engel, 2015). As a global individual, particularly, the girl-child, Nigeria has made concerted effort to deal with gender disparity. These efforts include the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); the Nigerian Child Rights Act of 2003, the establishment of Universal Basic Education Act in 2004, the establishment of Education for All goals (EFA), and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Right Act of 1948. These declarations have over the years assisted in providing better and more opportunities for children’s education, especially the girl-child. In spite of these efforts however, the Nigerian child is among the world’s least educated. Faced with hunger and poverty crises, the future of the Nigerian child, in terms of education, appears to be bleak.

One way of dealing with illiteracy, especially for the girl-child is reducing education costs and providing incentives in the form of scholarships and educational learning materials like textbooks and school uniforms (Madu & Obi, 2021). This is aside the fact that government and education stakeholders must increase their awareness campaigns so parents can send their children to school, especially the girl-child. Religious and cultural practices that block the girl-child's education prospects must be discouraged by well-meaning individuals like community leaders, religious leaders and educationists.

Educating children, especially the girl-child is educating an entire society or nation. With available employment opportunities, the girl-child is equipped with useful knowledge and skills to face the challenges of life. In like manner, educating the girl-child means dealing squarely with ignorance. Illiteracy levels increase in a society or nation when the girl-child is not sent to school to receive education but is rather sent by being married off to end up just undertaking some domestic duties.

Literature indicates that there are several factors that contribute to a child's development. One of those factors is nutrition. This factor is essential before and during pregnancy, and during the child's growth after birth. Poor or inadequate intake of good nutrition, coupled with a mother's poor nutritional status during pregnancy are signs of intrauterine growth restriction. This has the tendency to affect a child's brain development. The second factor that can affect a child's development is parental behaviour. Some mothers smoke even during pregnancy, or expose their unborn children to tobacco smoke. This can lead unborn children to develop some abnormalities which affect their development after the children are born (Pem, 2015)

Speaking on the girl-child, UNICEF (2013) gave three strong messages, namely, Sustainable development starts with safe, healthy and well-educated children; safe and sustainable societies are, in turn, essential for children; and children's voices, choices and participation are critical for the sustainable future we want. The Lancet (2016) buttressed these points by delivering the following key messages: The burden and cost of inaction (by stakeholders) is high; young children need nurturing care from the start; development begins at conception; we must deliver multi-sector interventions, with health as starting point for reaching the youngest children; and we must strengthen government leadership to scale up what works

The Home Environment and School: Need for a Synergy

Parents (the home) cannot work independently of the school, neither can the school work independently of parents. Over the years, there has been a strong bond between parents and the school. This bond will continue for ages to come. In this connection, Epstein in UCLA (2011) described five types of parent-school involvements, as follows:

1. *Basic obligations of parents to children and school* (e.g., providing food, clothing, shelter; assuring health and safety; providing child rearing and home training; providing school supplies and a place for doing school work; building positive home conditions for learning).
2. *Basic obligations of school to children and family* (e.g., using a variety of communication methods to inform parents about school schedules, events, policies and about children's, test scores, and grades).
3. *Parent involvement at school* (e.g., assisting teachers and students with lessons, class trips; assisting administrators, teachers, and staff in cafeteria, library, computer laboratories; assisting organized parent groups in fund-raising, community relations, political awareness; attending student assemblies, sports events; attending workshops, discussion groups, training sessions).
4. *Parent involvement in student learning at home* (e.g., contributing to development of child's social and personal skills, basic academic skills, and advanced skills by aiding with schoolwork, providing enrichment opportunities, and monitoring progress and problems).
5. *Parent involvement in governance and advocacy* (e.g., participating in decision making groups; advocating for improved schooling).

II. Conclusion And Recommendations

The girl-child is a global individual who deserves proper handling. One way to do this is accord her the fundamental rights she deserves, especially the right to education, for educating a woman means educating an entire society. The girl-child must at all times be protected from sexual exploitation, discrimination and all forms of assault. The home environment must be made conducive in order to appropriately shape the character and life of the girl-child. After all, it is said that charity begins at home. What this means is that parents need to find time to stay at home with their children so as to provide the discipline, love and care that children so desperately need. To shape the character and life of the girl-child, all hands must be on deck. Therefore, the paper makes the following recommendations

1. The girl-child must be given all the fundamental rights that she needs, especially right to education
2. Parents need to allow their children, especially, girls, to attend school so as to acquire fundamental education that is able to support them in adult life.

3. Government and all stakeholders in education need to discourage cultural practices such as child marriage. A legislation on this may be required.
4. Government must do more to address issues of hunger and unemployment
5. Religious leaders need to mount serious enlightenment programmes in the worship centres on the education of the girl-child.
6. School heads must work hard to ensure parents do not withdraw their children from schools in their localities, especially for the purposes of hawking and early marriage
7. Parents need to get the awareness and understanding that allowing their children to attend school and acquire education is the only enduring legacy they can give their children.

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