

1995 Beijing Platform for Action on the Education of the Girl – Child: Towards a Sustainable Development of Nigerian Women

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Introduction

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) agenda for women's empowerment in order to redress the long years of neglect in all spheres of human endeavor. It is enshrined in the principle of equality, development and peace for all human and that is why a number of critical areas where progress has been uneven between men and women, boys and girls were identified for intensive and extensive implementation of affirmative action. Women and the girl-child education are among them.

The girl-child of today is the woman of tomorrow. Therefore, if there must be a people-centered sustainable development so that women and men can work together for themselves, their children and society to meet the challenges of this century and those ahead, the girl-child education cannot be compromised. The full diversity of the girl-child situations and conditions, particularly the barriers to their empowerment deserve re-appraisal and elimination.

This study seeks to examine the various actions taken to actualize equal rights, equal responsibilities, equal opportunities and equal participation of men and women in the nation's development and on a long term basis through the elimination of unequal access to education and training, persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl-child. Various gender stereotypes, customary attitudes and other constraints to the education of the girl-child would be appraised with the aim of proffering alternative actions in relation to the diverse socio-cultural milieu that exist in the country, Nigeria.

The Girl-Child

The children and young person's law bears a reasonable definition of who a child is. According to Ikenga Metuh (1995 p5), the children and young person's law (Cap. 19) Laws of Eastern Nigeria, 1963, regards a child as any person who has not attained the age of fourteen (14) years. Young persons on the other hand, refer to persons who have attained the age of fourteen (14) years, but are less than seventeen (17) years. To corroborate this fact, section 4aof Article 28, chapter 3 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999 p.16) recognizes a person of eighteen years and above as having attained 'full age' or adulthood. It implies that the girl-child refers to a female child who is below the age of eighteen years. It is no wonder that Ikenga Metuh (1995 p.5) also pointed out that section 31 of the children and young person's Laws of Nigeria considers the giving out of a child (male or female) for any purpose to any other person than the grandparents of the child as criminal. Having not attained adulthood or 'full age', the child cannot be said to be able to take rational decisions that demand his/her full consent.

The Platform for Action and the Education of the Girl-Child

The PFA (1996 p145-155) outlined nine strategic objectives for the development of the girl-child. They are the elimination of all forms of discrimination against the girl-child; elimination of negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls; promotion and protection of the rights of the girl-child, and increasing awareness of her needs and potential; elimination of discrimination against girls in education, skills development and training; elimination of discrimination against girls in health and nutrition; elimination of the economic exploitation of child labor and protection of young girls at work; eradication of violence against the girl-child; promotion of the girl-child's awareness of and participation in social, economic and political life; and strengthening the role of the family in improving the status of the girl-child. While the fourth strategic objective has its thrust on the education of the girl-child, the other eight yet have implications for her education as would be reflected in the discussion that follows.

In relation to the education of the girl-child, the PFA (p151-152) suggested number of affirmative actions be taken by governments, international and non-governmental organizations, which should guide each country that participated and adopted the PFA. Nigeria, being one of such countries has both in principle and by manifest activities worked toward a realization of some of these affirmative actions. For example, the 3rd edition of the National policy on Education (NPE 1998) and which was revised three years after the 1995 Beijing declaration and PFA, clearly states in sub-section 4c of section 1(NPE p 7) that there is need for equality of educational opportunities to all Nigerian children irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities each according to his or her ability. Again, sub-section 5c (NPE p8) notes that government would provide equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside the formal school system. These policy statements show that in principle, there is provision to ensure the affirmative action of equal access to and completion of primary education by all children and the elimination of the existing gap between boys and girls, and equal access to secondary education by the year 2005 as well as access to higher education, including vocational and technical education, for all boys and girls, including the disadvantaged and gifted. Article 18, numbers 1 and 3, chapter 2 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (p 13) states that government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels and to eradicate illiteracy. Government shall as and when practicable, provide-

- (a) free, compulsory and universal primary education;
- (b) free secondary education;
- (c) free university education; and
- (d) Free adult literacy programs.

In all these, there is no discrimination of access or of opportunities against the girl-child. The onus of acquisition of education by the girl-child therefore depends on the girl-child and her parent(s).

The introduction of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program which was launched in Sokoto by the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, General Olusegun Obasanjo (Rtd.) on 30th September, 1999, concretizes the policy statements of the NPE and the 1999 Constitution. The UBE

provides free, universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school-going age. It caters for the child's education at the primary level, and through the junior secondary school level. At present, this provision is free, but not yet compulsory. As the implementation guidelines (2000 p2) notes that UBE has a wide scope for the following:

- a. Educational programs for the acquisition of functional literacy, numeracy and life skills, especially for persons aged 15 and above. The girl-child fits into this classification as provided by law. Similarly, the affirmative action that steps be taken by the government, to integrate functional literacy and numeracy programs, particularly for out-of-school girls in development programs is ensured.
- b. Out-of-school, non-formal programs for updating the knowledge and skills for persons who left school before acquiring the basics needed for life-long learning.
- c. Special programs for nomadic populations such as pastoral nomads, migrant farmers and fishing groups, mountain dwellers, and so on (elaboration is the author's).
- d. Non-formal skills and apprenticeship training for adolescents and youths who have not had the benefit of formal education.
- e. Programs/Initiatives for early child care and socialization.

UBE therefore is not restricted to formal education. It is rather an articulation of the formal, non-formal and informal approaches for all-round development of the human potential. With its commencement in the 2000/2001 session, the first batch through the primary school level will graduate in the 2005/2006 session. By this time, the PFA target for access into secondary school would have been attained as simultaneous provision would be made for a smooth transition into the junior secondary level. The junior secondary school session for the first batch would run from 2006/2007 to 2008/2009. In spite of the UBE impressive and lofty ideals, complete mainstreaming of non-formal and adult literacy programs into the UBE is yet to be achieved.

The rights of the girl-child are a part of human rights which the PFA noted, should be promoted through human rights education in educational programs. This aspect is subtly provided in the social studies curriculum. The right to the education of the girl-child needs to be emphasized so that some parents do not prevent their daughters from benefiting. In fact, the suggestion in Nigeria's Report (1989, p6) that each child be legally mandated to remain in school until a minimum age of 15/16 is attained would ensure that the girl-child's right to education is achieved. By this age too, the child would have gone through the junior secondary school (JSS). However, it must be pointed out that oftentimes, the socio-economic status of the parent(s) largely affects the child's education. This is because even when tuition is free, uniforms, books, sandals, and transport fare have to be provided. With the high level of poverty and unemployment, the traditional discrimination as to which of the sexes benefits from education becomes a determining variable that can be employed negatively. The right to study any course, particularly those branded as exclusively male disciplines need emphasis. The usual indoctrination in this regard can be eliminated through effective career guidance and counseling so that the girl-child achieves her self-

esteem, and fulfillment in both formal and non-formal vocational education. Self actualization and fulfillment are important in an individual's development.

The PFA intends that increased enrolment and improved retention of girls in educational institutions can be achieved by the allocation of appropriate budgetary resources, and by enlisting the support of the community and parents through campaigns and flexible school schedules, incentives, scholarships, access programs for out-of-school girls and other measures (p. 151). Flexible school schedules have not been introduced in the primary and secondary school levels. It only operates in the education programs for the nomadic groups such as pastoralists and migrant fishing groups. UBE is tuition free; as such, it does not attract scholarships, and so is the senior secondary school education. In recent times, government involves community leaders, interest groups, corporate organizations and government at all levels in academic programs as is typical of the UBE. This in recognition of the fact that government cannot cope alone in the education enterprise. Indeed, education for all is the responsibility of all.

This emphasis is also derived from the Jomtien vision, which stressed the importance of the state working in partnership with civil society, to ensure access to quality education for all, as the state need not be the only providers of education. In Nigeria, religious groups, private individuals, non-governmental organizations and corporate bodies, provide educational opportunities, from which girls can benefit, even though they are not free. Panel 14 Report (1999, p77) of the UNICEF document on the state of the World's Children Education noted that, whether government is the principal provider of basic education, or just one in a broad range of different organizations providing basic education, it retains the important role of providing leadership, developing policy and standards, and articulating the national vision. And in every case, the state is accountable for ensuring the right of every child to a high quality basic education.

Funding is critical for the realization of any programs objective. However, its provision is different from judicious management of whatever is provided. In Nigeria, the provision of other social needs, debt servicing, and recurrent expenditure, all compete for the available resources which also suffer the shock of fluctuating oil and other commodity prices. But human resource development occupies a prime position. Consequently, whether appropriate budgetary resources are allocated or not by the Federal, state and local governments, part of the revenue from the Education Tax Fund (ETF), Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF) if it is reinstated, and contributions from non-governmental organizations (NGO's), bilateral partners, multilateral agencies, the private sector and the civil society will cushion expenses envisaged in educational development. These groups other than government, can intervene directly by broadening educational opportunities for the disadvantaged and other marginalized groups; the ably challenged and migrant populations, for example, support career-long professional development of teachers, equip libraries, laboratories for science, information technology and workshops for wood and metal work, and so on. Availability of high quality and self reliant education is sufficient to encourage increased enrolment and retention of girls in schools (formal) and out-of-school programs for their education.

This cliché that no educational system can raise above the level of its teachers is also critical in educational provision and development. A variety of programs and institutions abound in Nigeria for the

training of teachers. These are faculties and institutes of education in the universities, colleges of education, National Teachers Institute (NTI) National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) for training educational administrators, and so on. The problem with teacher quality and provision in Nigeria has been with teachers' morale and recognition in the society. Teachers are usually owed basic salaries and allowances for several months in the face of huge expenses accommodated for elections, political campaigns, and so on. Apart from irregular salary payments, they work in teacher unfriendly environments without adequate instructional materials and other facilities. For these reasons and more, many join the Police and Armed Forces, or Banks and other organizations where they are often retrained to suit the profession. In the North, there is the need for an increase in the number of female teachers, so that the needs of the girl-child can be well catered for. Here, there is still restriction in co-educating boys and girls in the same school. So where many female teachers are available, more girls would go to school and not be hindered by their parents. Nigeria satisfies PTF's requirement for the development of training programs for teachers. But the development of materials for teachers and educators, raising awareness about their own role in the educational process, with a view to providing them with effective strategies for gender-sensitive teaching is yet to be attained. Inadequate provision of instructional materials at all levels of education and for virtually all programs, is a recurrent feature that does not need much emphasis; yet all those involved try to function with whatever that is available. How can teachers' awareness about their role be raised for effectiveness without high morale, regular payment, improved recognition within the society where a counselor at the local government level with a minimum of First school leaving certificate (FSLC) earns more than a university professor? How can strategies for gender-sensitive teaching be achieved, when books still reflect gender stereotypes, and traditional ideas about boys and girls are still held by even the highly educated? Changes might be attained in the future, but they definitely will come gradually.

Nigeria has always been assisted by international organizations in various facets of human development. Developmental assistance to the education sector has also rubbed off on the education of the girl-child. For example, UNICEF supports the Girl-Child Education School in Soro village, Ganjuwa local government area (LGA) in Bauchi state (UN, 1998, p22). Due to the success of the program whereby adolescent girls benefit from a non-formal education, the constraint of cultural practices, such as hawking, against the girl-child education is highly reduced. Thirty-two girls between the ages of 8 and 14, who graduated from the program/school, can either attend secondary schools or set up businesses in tertiary trade such as sewing, knitting, embroidery, craft-making, as well as soap and cream production. It is estimated that about 60 per cent of the Koranic school enrolment are girls (UN, 1998, p22) and by tradition, it is only spiritual knowledge of the Koran that is provided. In order to ensure that they acquire basic education, UNICEF is assisting to extend basic education to Koranic schools by integrating literacy, numeric, and life-saving skills into Koranic education. Similarly, relevant non-formal education curricula are also being introduced into Koranic education. UNICEF donated some recommended textbooks to nomadic schools in Kebbi state (NCNE 2000, p17). This is important because, girls also benefit from the

education provided to this migrant group. Similarly, the Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank has assisted Adamawa State in training some nomadic students at the Federal College of Education (FCE), Yola, construction of classrooms and provision of instructional materials (NCNE 2002, p5) from which girls have benefited. More specifically, the World Bank provided an engine boat to assist Adamawa State in the monitoring of activities in two of her migrant fishermen schools (MFCS).

The International Foundation for Education and Self-help (IFESH) in conjunction with Shell Petroleum development Company (SPDC) of Nigeria Ltd., embarked on teacher education in the Niger Delta. This teacher re-training program is run through in-service capacity-building workshops. 219 teachers benefited with 11,000 students in Bayelsa and Rivers States also benefiting (SPDC 2001 p23). Definitely, girls benefit from improved teacher quality and pedagogy in the schools where these teachers teach.

The girl-child must be encouraged through counseling, parental supervision and monitoring of school work, to utilize the various skills training opportunities for employment and access to decision-making processes. In this way, they can actively participate in development and with an understanding of the functioning of economic, financial and political systems; the issue of marginalization will gradually be eliminated. However, girls with disabilities do not enjoy concerted efforts towards their development for full participation in life. Much about their education is undertaken by non-governmental organizations rather than government. In Rivers State for example, there is only one small government school that caters for both their primary and secondary education. Three other centers are run by non-governmental organizations. Bayelsa state has none. The picture is the same for Nassarawa, Taraba, Jigawa, Ogun, Abia, Akwa- Ibom and some other states. There is a re-thinking in this direction, so that their right to education can be fulfilled. The needs of the girl-child in extra-curricular activities such as sports, drama and cultural activities need to be well articulated so that schools recognize them. At present, most of them attend day schools where both teachers and students hurry back home immediately after school. As such, these activities are often recognized on ad-hoc basis for competition or specific periods of entertainment. Whereas, the ideal situation is to inculcate into the children, the desire to develop their talents in these areas through regular exposure and practice in organized sports, drama and cultural activities.

It is interesting to note that Nigeria has, since 1990, been a signatory too many 'educational covenants' and that in a bid to implement them, the girl-child has invariably benefited, since there is no gender discriminator policy operational in both formal and informal educational institutions and programs in the country. Some of the 'educational covenants' are: Jomtien Declaration and Framework for Action on Education for All (1990); New Delhi (1991) Declaration on E-9 countries; Ouagadougou (1992) Declaration on the Education of Women and Girls; Amman (1996) Affirmation on the pursuit of the Goals of Jomtien; Durban (1998) State of Commitment on Inter-African Collaboration for the Development of Education; OAU Decade of Education in Africa (1997-2006); Recife (Brazil) Declaration on the Pursuit of the New Delhi Goals on the massive Reduction of Illiteracy; the Dakar (2000) Recommendation on the Pursuit of

the Jomtien Goals, the Beijing Conference on Women Development (1995). A survey of enrolment figures in both primary and secondary schools in the country in the nineties show an improvement in the girl-child education (see tables 1 and 2) irrespective of some years of fluctuation. Again, although female enrolment has been low, it is difficult to actually state that it is low because there is no data to determine the population of girls and those that are of school age so that a definite conclusion in this regard can be made.

In spite of these efforts in the development of girl-child education, socioeconomic and cultural practices still impinge upon their education. For example, both Rivers and Cross River States passed edicts against early marriage that impedes girl-child education. If all other states particularly in Northern Nigeria where this practice is prevalent legislate against this practice, it is plausible that the girl-child completes basic education before marriage. The United Nations, PFA (1996, p47) noted that early marriages and pregnancies, heavy domestic work at a very age and management of both educational and domestic responsibilities often result in poor scholastic performance and early dropout from the educational system. In fact, hawking after school, fetching of fuel wood, water, caring for younger siblings are still regarded as the girl-child responsibilities and these negatively affect performance. With continuous awareness campaign, women and men, boys and girls working together, persistent gender stereotypes would definitely break down so that the well educated girl-child of today would not hesitate to educate the subsequent as she attains womanhood.

Conclusion

The girl-child of today is the woman of tomorrow who is faced with the challenges of ensuring that subsequent girl-children benefit from high quality education. It is in this way that the fundamental tool for a sustainable development of the women folk in Nigeria can be guaranteed. Every educated woman will ensure that her children enjoy a discrimination-free and good quality education albeit, the basic education level. The Beijing PFA on the girl-child education cannot be strictly enforced as other policy documents have also not been so implemented. There are financial, socio-cultural and human constraints that impede implementation of laudable policies such as the PFA. However, it is a guide that helps redress the long period of neglect girls and women have experienced over the years.

Nigeria has through its current UBE Scheme and policy statements in the NPE and the 1999 Constitutions re-affirmed the will to provide access to educational opportunities to its citizens. There are aids from international agencies and non-governmental organizations as well as private individuals in this regard. Parents, especially women, should insist that their female children complete basic education and aspire to the tertiary level so that they fit evenly participating in development of the nation.

**TABLE I: A SUMMARY OF PRIMARY SCHOOL STATISTICS IN NIGEIRA
FROM 1990-1999**

YEAR	TOTAL SCHOOLS	TOTAL ENROLMENT	TOTAL MALE ENROLMENT	TOTAL FEMALE ENROLMENT
1990	35,433	13,607,249	7,729,677	5,877,572
1991	35,446	13,776,854	7,741,897	6,034,957
1992	36,610	14,805,937	8,273,824	6,532,113
1993	38,234	15,870,280	8,930,650	6,939,680
1994	38,649	16,190,947	9,056,367	7,134,580
1995	41,531	15,741,078	8,729,421	7,011,657
1996	40,204	14,796,074	8,235,865	6,560,209
1997	41,342	17,397,553	9,837,394	7,560,159
1998	NA	NA	NA	NA
1999	NA	NA	NA	NA
2000	NA	NA	NA	NA
2001	NA	NA	NA	NA
2002	NA	NA	NA	NA

Source: Annual Abstract of Statistics, 1994, 1998 and 1999 Edition of the Federal Ministry of Statistics which were culled from Federal Ministry of Education

NA – Not available

**TABLE 2: A SUMMARY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STATISTICS IN NIGERIA
FROM 1990-1999**

YEAR	TOTAL SCHOOLS	TOTAL ENROLMENT	TOTAL MALE ENROLMENT	TOTAL FEMALE ENROLMENT
1990	6,002	2,901,993	1,661,468	1,240,525
1991	5,860	3,123,277	1,821,307	1,301,970
1992	6,009	3,600,620	1,979,045	1,621,575
1993	5,959	4,032,083	2,182,034	1,850,049
1994	6,074	4,451,329	2,419,782	2,031,547
1995	6,429	4,448,991	2,354,713	2,094,278
1996	6,387	4,201,331	2,229,527	1,971,804
1997	NA	NA	NA	NA
1998	NA	NA	NA	NA
1999	NA	NA	NA	NA
2000	NA	NA	NA	NA
2001	NA	NA	NA	NA
2002	NA	NA	NA	NA

SOURCE: Annual Abstract of Statistics, 1994, 1998 and 1999 Edition of the Federal Ministry of Statistics which were culled from Federal Ministry of Education.

NA: Not available.