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Benin Journal of Social Work and Community Development is a peer-reviewed journal published bi-annually by the Department of Social Work, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria. BJSWCD welcomes research papers from all areas of social work, with emphasis on theory building and innovative methods. The journal is a scholarly refereed intended to extend knowledge on social work, social issues and interventions. BJSWCD strives to speak to the general social care professionals and is opened to promote general discourses in the fields of social work, social welfare, community development, social administration, development and policies.

The journal also publishes articles that promote debate and analyze current themes and issues in social theory and research, social policy, law and health. Not only is it read by social work educators and researchers, but also practitioners, administrators, managers, counsellors and other seasoned scholars that are interested in social care, protection and community development.

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This journal publishes papers based on empirical research, theory and practice experience from Nigeria and globally, which follows double-blind peer review process. The journal aims to support practitioners and academics alike through deep and thoughtful exploration of matters relevant to contemporary practice. As the title suggests, social work is a prime focus. However, papers discussing allied fields of interpersonal help and the organisational and policy contexts that influence practice are also welcomed. It welcomes contributions from sociology, development studies, education, community health, the behavioural sciences and other helping professions. Contributions from practitioners are especially welcomed, either in the form of full-length articles or as shorter pieces, in the Voices from Practice section. The journal embraces social work values and seeks to represent diverse and intercultural perspectives.

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EDUCATING THE GIRL CHILD: A PANACEA FOR POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

For many decades now, there have been global clamors on improving the access to education for the girl child as a means of attaining the political equality of men and women. It is argued in certain quarters that if women are denied opportunities for education, not only are their lives shattered, but the future of the society is also stolen. This paper examined the educational opportunities of the girl child in Nigeria which forms the panacea for women political marginalization. Data were collected via secondary sources and analysed using content analysis to ensure that all information was current and related to the study. The study revealed that girl child education in Nigeria creates awareness and interest in politics, increase opportunities for appointments/representation of women in various public institutions and thus eliminate marginalization. It was also revealed that right from the era of colonialism the opportunities had been compromised by some debilitating socio-cultural factors; and religious beliefs, poverty, violence and lack of basic infrastructural facilities in schools amongst others. The study therefore recommended among other things the need for the government at all levels to come up with new policies that will strictly restrict political contest to be a battle of ideas and brain, not of brawns so that intelligent women can favourably engage their male counterparts.

Key Words: Girl Child; Education; Politics; Political Marginalization

INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the world especially in developing countries, women appear to have been denied equal access to education like their male counterparts. This on the other hand may have negatively affected all spheres of human existence. Dominic (2019) noted that out of the 50% of female population in Nigeria, only about 20% are educated. Amoo (2019) also reported that while enrolment figure of school children across states in Nigeria keep increasing, many girls of school age are still being left out. Nigeria therefore seems to be among countries with the highest number of out- of – school children with girls occupying the greater percentage of the numbers (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO, 2014; Amoo, 2019; Nasiru, 2020). The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2019) in a similar vein noted that even though primary education in Nigeria remains free and compulsory, about 10.5 million of children aged 5-14 years are out of

school. This exposition also showed that states in the North east and North west have female primary net attendance rate of 47.7% and 47.3% respectively meaning that half of the girls are not in the school. It is likely that this educational deprivation especially in the northern parts of Nigeria is driven by many factors including poverty or economic barriers, insurgency and socio-cultural norms or practices which influence the values that parent attach to their daughters' education (British Council, 2014). This trend is however not peculiar to Nigeria alone.

According to UNICEF (2018), almost two-third of the world population that are made up of women is illiterates. In the Arab states and Sub-Saharan Africa, almost two in three out of schoolgirls are expected never to go to school. Similarly, in Europe and Central Asia, approximately 2 million children of primary and lower secondary school age and 2.4 million adolescents of upper secondary school age are not in the school (UNICEF, 2003). The author noted that in these places early marriage tends to put an end to the schooling of majority of the girls. Also in Mali, Chad, Niger and Central Africa Republic, more than one third of girls of primary school age are out of school while out of school rate for girls in South Sudan and Liberia were 72% and 64% respectively (Montoya, 2019). This implies that from time to time and across the globe, girls are confronted with barriers to educational opportunities caused by poverty, cultural norms and practices, poor infrastructures, and fragility (World Bank, 2017). Traditionally, in many African societies, parents prefer to send their male children to school leaving the females at home to learn household chores from their mothers (Nwokolo & Nwokolo, 2016).

Given that education is considered as a formidable tool for the attainment of the sustainable development goals of any nation, emphasis on girl child education should not be downplayed (Hunt, 2013). Nwokolo and Nwokolo (2016) observed that as a result of the developmental potentials of training the girl child in the formal school, various governments and non-governmental organizations have committed enormous resources to promote the education of the girl child. The author noted that our negative attitude to girl child education in Nigeria is evident in the number of representation of women in all sectors of the society. It therefore implies that denying women access to education amounts to both denial of basic human rights and perpetuation of underdevelopment as the experiences, values and insights of women could be a key to fashioning out robust political and economic models that will bring prosperity in the humanitarian endeavours of the sustainable development goals. In other words, women have the intellectual capacity to improve substantively the human conditions in all aspects of life. Many studies have shown that there is a link between women's literacy rate and political participation especially in the developed economies, the case is a little bit different in most of the third World countries despite government's efforts to address this situation (Olawepo & Jekayinfa, 1999; Shetty & Hans, 2015; Santas, 2020). It appears that most people in developing countries still go with the traditional biased view that women are second class citizens and men's property meant to produce children. Olusegun Obasanjo (the former Nigerian president) once stated that a developing society like Nigeria cannot make progress if

the girl child is not encouraged to actualize her potentials making reference to the achievements of some educated women in Nigeria such as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Late Dora Akunyili, Patricia Etteh, Obiageli Ezekwesili and others (Ero, 2013).

Sondheimer and Green (2010) noted that education increases people's turnout during election and other forms of political engagements. In other words, educating the girl child may increase their interest in politics including registration to vote and voting for the rightful candidate during election. According to Larreguy and Marshal (2013), the greater awareness and willingness to exercise political rights evolved from educational experiences could breed greater tolerance, fairness, nationalism, and democratic consolidation as well as brings the individuals closer to decision making power.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Girl Child: The phrase 'girl child' refers to a young, immature female offspring within 18 years of age (Offorma, 2009). This is the age before one reaches the late adolescent stage of development. According to Jibrin (2019), this period in the child's life covers the Creche and Nursery (0-5 years), Primary (6-12 years), and Secondary or post primary (6-18 years). The author remarks that during the period, the young child is expected to be under the care of an adult who may be the parent or guardian. In other words, the girl child depends on significant others for care and provision of necessities of life. In the same vein, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2018) defines the girl child as a female below the age of 18 years and the broad age group includes non-school age children, pre-primary and primary school children, secondary school children and first year female students enrolled in tertiary educational institutions. However, with the passage of time, the young girl grows up to become a woman, raise children and manage the home. The girl child undertakes multiple roles in the household, society and the economy which assisted to bring increased support and global adoption of the United Nations convention on the rights of the girl child. This also formed part of the Beijing Declaration and platform for Action in 1995 that advocated for freedom from all forms of discrimination against the girl child including education (Adefemi & Agunbiade, 2019).

Girl Child Education: Education is an important vehicle to the progress of an individual and a nation in general. According to Agi (1995), it is the process which provides the individual with knowledge, skills, and values which society believes is necessary. It is also defined as a process through which individuals are made functional members of the society (Ocho, 2005). In other words, education help to satisfy different needs and it is geared towards achieving the aspiration of individuals, a society, or a nation (El-Yakub, 2003). Girl child education therefore embodies the educational processes that involve training in literacy and vocational skills that would make a girl or a woman become aware of herself and her capacity to exploit her environment so as to become a functional member of the society (Ugwu, 2001). In other words, to educate a girl child means to train her mind, character, and abilities.

Shetty and Hans (2015) also noted that educating the girl child is the most powerful tool that can bring changes in the position of women in society and equally bring reduction in inequalities and functions as well as improving the status of women within the family. This process apart from gaining knowledge also helps in transforming or applying the knowledge through vocational training and skill development. Generally, girl child education covers all the knowledge obtained in the primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions geared towards the alleviation of poverty, gender equality and good governance. Apart from providing women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence, education is an important tool for social justice and equity. This indispensable role made the Feminist theorists to see it as an empowerment strategy for challenging male domination and transformation of the structures or institutions that perpetuate gender discrimination (Suara, 1996).

Nigeria is faced with the task of eliminating all barriers to girl child education by giving all females of school age to be educated to the peak of their abilities for a healthier society (Ajufo, 2019). As a result of the sensitive nature of the equality of opportunities to education, the National Policy on Education (1981) stated that Nigeria's philosophy of education is based on the integration of the individual into a sound and effective citizens, and equal educational opportunities for all citizens of the nations at all levels of education, both inside and outside of the formal school system. It therefore implies that girl child education is a pivotal move towards securing gender equality in Nigeria. According to Dominic (2019), a country that represses the intellectual rights of women is bent to remain perpetually on the back seat. Research evidence has shown that majority of women in Nigeria and other nations are derailed politically, not because they do not have political potentials but because of education (Anumna, 1996, Dominic, 2019). In other words, the high illiteracy rate of women in Nigeria may have contributed to our inability to make substantial impact on the political and socio-economic development of the nation. According to UNICEF (2018), when women are denied opportunities for education, not only are their lives shattered, but the future of the nation is also stolen. Obinaju (2014) argues that education is an inalienable right of all citizens irrespective of the person's circumstances. Shetty and Hans (2015) also stated that when women are educated, they will be able to contribute meaningfully to the nation building. The author noted that in India, education has enabled many women to occupy powerful positions in the government which had equally improved the socio-political situation in India. It therefore implies that lack of education seems to have been the root cause of women's exploitation/marginalization and negligence in many nations.

Results of various studies have also linked their impediments and low response to issues related to girl child education in Nigeria to horrific socio-cultural/religious practices and Institutional factors bordering on son preference, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, poverty, peer pressure, child's unfriendly school environment, insurgency, sexual harassment, low teacher's commitment amongst others (Nwokolo & Nwokolo, 2016; Omede & Agahiu, 2016; Jibrin, 2019). The narrative traditional philosophy that a woman's place is in her kitchen and the

husband's bedroom are still being observed by many parents and has denied many girls the chances of going to school.

Women's Political Marginalization: The term marginalization is the process of denying an individual or groups from participating fully in the social, economic and political life of the people. It derives from exclusionary relationships based on power (Niyara, Diallo, Del-Campo & Tallarico, 2015). In other words, it implies those processes of being ignored or relegated to the fringe of society. As a multi-dimensional and dynamic process, it channels the social relations and organizational barriers that block attainment of equal citizenship and human development. Marginalization of women in the Nigerian political space has become a norm despite the United Nation's convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in 1985 and the enactment of the National Gender Policy of 2006 (Bako & Syed, 2018). It seems Nigeria has been classified as a male dominated chauvinistic society with various myths portraying women's image and abilities negatively. Wachania and Ndegwah (2017) noted that through socialization process, the widely held beliefs that women are inferior before men are transmitted to the younger generation. This also seems to have stripped women of many opportunities in the political representation of their communities. Apart from that, marginalization has also robbed women opportunities to learn leadership skills.

In Nigeria for instances, right from the era of colonialism there have been large scale exclusion of women both in voting for candidates during election or contesting for political offices. According to Ake, Rasak, Olowojolu, Oye and Ake (2019), in most situations, men constitute a larger percentage of party membership and this tend to affect women when it comes to selecting candidates for election. Since men are at the top and constitute the majority, they are likely to influence the party's internal politics and the entire exercise to their own advantage. This may be the major reasons why Nigeria right from independence has never produced a woman president, a vice president or a state governor. Olusegun Obasanjo; the former Nigerian president also noted that the absence of women in the political and decision making processes tend to distort the appreciation of women's interest in national development. According to him, democracy requires that men and women have unrestricted access to spaces of power to realize their political values and manifestation of their preferences (Oke, 2015). This also corroborates with the view of Hillary Clinton of the United States who stated that true democracy is impossible unless women's voices are heard and taken into consideration in a nation's political process. The study is anchored on the Strength Perspective as its theoretical viewpoint. The theory owes its origin to the works of a group of researchers at the Kansas University of School of Social Welfare in the 1980s (Saleebey, 1992; Cohen, 1999). It is committed to empowerment and creates corrective and transformative challenges that encourage people to discover enabling niches for themselves (Sullivan & Rapp, 1994). In other words, the strength perspective enables the individual to remove all predominant practices and policies

that reduce people and their potentials to deficits. Thus, there is the capacity and ingenuity to thrive and achieve the goals and aspirations on the life of every individual.

This therefore implies that educating the girl child is the only means of creating political awareness and participation as well as eliminating marginalization of women in the Nigeria political space. Apart from socializing the girl child into political culture, education serves as her important tool for the achievement of social justice and equity (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1987; Suara, 1996, Olawepo & Jekayinfa, 1999). It also removes all forms of socio-cultural barriers that tend to classify women as secondary and mere property of men. Education therefore helps the girl child to recognize that they have the strength and capacities to change their own political status and that of the communities or the country in which they live (Yousafzai, 2015). This paper therefore examined the educational opportunities of the girl child in Nigeria taken as a panacea for women's political marginalization.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Improving our understanding of the implications of education on the political participation of Nigerian women is necessary for our democratic stability and national development. From the above broad objective, the following specific objectives were captured;

- (i) To find out the extent to which girl child education has affected the political awareness of the Nigerian women in the present democratic dispensation.
- (ii) To find out whether girl child education has provided answers to the political disenchantment and marginalization of women in political appointments unlike their male counterparts and
- (iii) To ascertain the debilitating factors inherent in realizing the goals of girl child education in Nigeria's political process.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative research procedure and relied on secondary sources of data collection. Since the study was specifically targeted at all young girls of school age residing in both urban and rural areas of Nigeria, the security challenges in the country did not allow the researcher to have access to the respondents with the use of primary data collection method. The researcher therefore resorted to the use of such tools as internet, academic journals, conference/technical papers, published and unpublished articles, newspaper reports and commonly used reports from UNICEF, UNESCO, British Council and World Bank. These documents were reviewed based on their trust worthiness of the sources and the documentary data were analysed using content analysis. In all, efforts were expedited to avoid undue compilation of unwieldy amount of data. Specifically, the data were assembled and evaluated to ensure currency and interrelatedness with the study objectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The issue of girl child education as a panacea for political marginalization of women in Nigeria has remained fiercely contested in many quarters. This paper revealed among other findings that girl child education creates awareness and interest in politics. This corroborates the view of Bhat (2015) that girl child education in addition to reducing inequalities help in developing the concept of participation in political activities by women. Marshal (2013) observed that as early as the primary school age of a female in many developed countries, they try to have interest in basic forms of political participations which includes knowledge of registering and voting during election. The participation and political awareness of women is therefore essential so as to influence the incumbent to adopt policies that are not inimical to their wellbeing (Larreguy & Marshal, 2013).

The study also revealed that girl child education increase opportunities for appointment and political representation of women in all spheres of societal development. Yadav (2018) aligning with the above revelation noted that education enable women to develop their intellect and acquire skills or leadership qualities necessary to combat marginalization and fit into the political terrain of the society. The implication is that our erroneous view that only men can establish, managing, and controlling democracy can only be addressed by educating the girl child (MacLagan, 2003). It is the key that unlocks the door of modernization and progress. Study findings also revealed some of the underlying/debilitating factors accountable for women political marginalization, which has remained highly resilience such as socio-cultural norms where many parents even in the present age still live with the wrong notion that the place of the girl child is the kitchen and child bearing. In the same vein, the study revealed that some religious doctrine as espoused by the Boko Haram Islamic Sect see formal education generally as evil while others still observe the 'Puda system' that restrict women from public appearance and further their marginalization. Apart from that, poverty was also noted as one of the inhibiting factors of girl child education and their consequent marginalization in the Nigeria political environment. As a result of this, choice has to be made on whom to send to school; the girl child or the boy. In most cases, it is the girl child that remains at home to assist the mother in carrying out domestic chores. In some other cases, the girl child is sent to the street to hawk or engage in some menial jobs as a way of contributing her own quota in sustaining the family.

More so, outcome of the study revealed that Since the beginning of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria in 2009, over 1.8 million people have been displaced from their homes especially in the North east (UNICEF, 2019). Equally, over 2,295 teachers were killed, and more than 1,400 schools destroyed in addition to the abduction of more than 270 secondary school girls of Federal Government Girls Secondary School, Chibok, Bornu state. This situation has instilled fear unto parents and ultimately made Nigeria to record almost the highest number of out of schoolgirls in the entire world. Finally, the environment and curriculum of the Nigerian school

system which seems to be gender biased both in design/contents was also pointed out in the study as a debilitating factor in girl child education.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing, it is evident that education of the girl child in Nigeria is a powerful instrument for women's political empowerment. Education helps in creating awareness and interest in political activities for the girl child which may also form the basis for contestation/competition. Many educated women in Nigeria are now occupying prominent positions in the democratic government. However, our conscious efforts to encourage and propagate the zeal for girl child education were seriously threatened by the long periods of internalization with some primordial socio-cultural practices and belief system, economic hardship or poverty, insecurity or insurgency, lack of basic facilities in the school that are truly women friendly amongst others.

The study therefore recommended that political representations should be a battle of ideas and of the brain, not of brawns or display of cash so that intelligent women will have the opportunity to compete favourably with their male counterparts in the pool. More so, different women groups and organizations should be re-sensitized the more through seminars, conferences, workshops, and social media on the need to realize that access to education is a fundamental right of every Nigerian child. Equally, our men should be drilled and given more orientation on the need to discard all the socio-cultural practices and belief system that speak against girl child education. It is likely that if we subscribe to these recommendations it will help us attain the right level of development aligned to the Vision 2030 sustainable development goals.

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