

## **ENHANCING GIRL CHILD EDUCATION FOR SECURITY MEASURES AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE COVID-19 ERA**

**<sup>1</sup>Okoli, Ijeoma A.,<sup>2</sup>Bosah I.P. (PhD),<sup>3</sup>Okeke, Purity C.**

Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Faculty of Education,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.

### **ABSTRACT**

Security challenges abound in the country. The girl child, the path to the next generation, is particularly vulnerable and girl child education is needed for her protection. In this paper, the concept of girl-child education, security challenge, COVID-19 pandemic and National developments were clarified. The paper also identified the types of security challenges experienced during the pandemic in Nigeria which include rape, unhealthy cultural practices, sexual abuse and harassment, physical threats, kidnap and killings. The consequences of insecurity were examined. The researchers posited that a lot of the cases of insecurity are derived from ignorance and so agreed that girl child education both formal and non-formal types would solve the problem in the long run. The paper also identified strategies for enhancing girl-child education to promote national development as ensuring the rights of the girl child, sustaining gender equity, empowering girls/women with various life skills, proper security and health education, taking serious legal action against girl-child abuse related cases among others. The paper recommended that primary school girl be given hygiene education, training on elements of self defense, safety precautions and incorporate coded language training. Also curriculum designers are called upon to include these content areas into existing school subjects among others.

**KEYWORDS:** Girl-child education, Insecurity, Pandemic, National development

### **Introduction**

Education is a potent weapon for the emancipation of the human mind. It is one of the most important tools that are employed in measuring the development of any nation because through it, one can acquire relevant skills, knowledge and values needed to maximize one's potential. Education is concerned with the process of building, training and developing the inborn potentials and capabilities of the individual learner so as to make him a useful member of the society. As a systematic process that influences people's knowledge, skills and attitudes and transmits and develops the cherished cultures, values, skills and attitudes of the community, education helps citizens to grow and develop, provides them with desired skills and professional abilities, assists them in acquiring the understandings, concepts, values and attitudes needed to manage future tasks, and shows them how to be productive members of the society.

Education is very essential to the realization of national growth, and development and also the achievement of national security. According to Benavot in Iyamu and Edozie (2020)

education has become a universal cure all, an elixir that, if taken in regular doses, according to standardized prescription is hoped to solve a multitude of national woes and societal challenges. The right to education is a fundamental human right especially for girls. The education of the girl child is of paramount importance to overall national development. According to Abubakar and Kwashabawa (2021) the place of the girl-child in the development of any society is fundamental such that any deliberate neglect of their education could pose danger for the entire provision of education for the citizenry. As it is often said that to teach a man is to teach an individual but to teach a woman is to teach a family and the whole nation (Abbagana, 2013).

### **Girl Child Education**

Every child has the right to a safe, formal, and quality education including the girl child. The girl child is referred to as the female human being, a child under 18 years of age (The Nigerian Constitution, 1999). This is the age before one becomes young adult. This period covers the crèche, nursery or early childhood (0 – 5 years), primary (6 – 12 years) and secondary school (12 – 18 years). During this period, the young child is totally under the care of the adult who may be her parents or guardians and older siblings. At this critical period, the girl-child is impressionable, builds and develops her personality and character. She is very reliant on the significant others, those on whom she models her behaviour, through observation, repetition and imitation. Her physical, social and emotional developments start and progress to get to the climax at the young adult stage. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), together with their Optional Protocols, as well as other conventions and treaties, provided the legal framework for the protection and promotion of the human rights of girls. The first of the United Nations World Conferences on Women to include a specific focus on the girl-child was 1995 Beijing Conference. Some of these frameworks have been ratified in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, the girl child starts her formal education in the primary school. Primary education in Nigeria is embedded in the basic education level which includes 1 year of pre-school, 6 years of primary education and 3 years of junior secondary school education as planned in the present 9-3-4 system of education in Nigeria (FGN, 2014). The primary school is charged with the responsibility of developing the potentials of all learners no matter their gender, class or socio-cultural background, in order to equip them with the knowledge and skills essential for self and national development. Therefore, to achieve desired objectives, it is imperative that girl child education starts at this level of education.

Girl child education is any type of formal or informal education provided in the society that is aimed at promoting the participation of girls and women in national development. It refers to the aspect of education that aims at developing the skill and knowledge of girls

from all castes, races, and backgrounds. Okebukola (2014) described girl education as the pathway to getting women and girls to contribute maximally to national development. In affirmation, Nwokolo and Nwokolo (2016) stated that girl-child education empowers an individual, her potential for personal, collective and national benefits. In this context, girl child education refers to the sum total of experiences that a girl child acquires to take part in all that will adequately equip her to cope with the challenges of meeting basic needs, maintaining good health, manage her affairs and also play her role as a citizen of the country. The education of the girl child will enable her to think, question and judge independently and realize her full potentials, this lays credence to its essence as a powerful instrument for the enhancement of growth, development and sustainability of any nation. Girl child education, especially in the primary schools, should be designed to equip them with different skills, knowledge and attitudes because at this level there is a high attendance of girls.

Education has a crucial role to play in breaking the cycle of female disadvantage. Kofi Annan, Former UN Secretary General (2005) noted that there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women, by implication the education of girls which is a fundamental step. It provides skills to enhance capabilities and serves as catalyst for emancipation struggles. An educated woman has the skills, information and self-confidence that she needs to be a better parent, worker and citizen. Gubio in Abbagana (2013) was particular about female education because he argues that an educated mind can hardly be misled but the uneducated and uninformed can be bent at any moment of emotional expression. The content of education should therefore be made more relevant to the girl-child so that she will be motivated to learn and make contribution to the nation especially at this turbulent time.

The educated girl child, who grows to be an educated woman, will make useful contributions that might lead to a healthier nation since she will bring up her family in a healthy environment. This would also lead to savings both on the part of the family and the nation as less money will be spent on treatment of diseases. The healthy family can result in a nation's healthy manpower, which will lead to higher productivity and a wealthier nation. Furthermore, she is able to read, write and then specialize in various fields of endeavors as well as being able to take care of her immediate family, thereby contributing to the building of a disciplined society. The woman is able to take care of herself financially and otherwise instead of being a liability to others. Hence, the education of woman/girl-child should be given adequate attention in Nigeria to enhance and foster national development.

Girl- child education at this point in time should be emphasized to help them think critically, as well as develop an open mind set. In the primary schools, girl-child education

can be integrated into any subject or topic by the teacher who would serve as an agent of change. It is important at this level of education to give correct and vital values necessary to evoke confidence in the girl-child to participate in societal changes and develop positive self concept. Security measures should be inculcated at this early stage to help develop in the girl-child the consciousness of being an active and bona fide member of the society capable of contributing her quota to national development.

Unfortunately, girl child education in recent times has suffered adversely because of insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic. The girl child, the path for the next generation, is particularly vulnerable to insecurity. Insecurity is a pandemic that not only inflicts pain, suffering and ultimate destruction to humanity but threatens the very existence of nations. One common identity of insecurity is violence. Violence is expressed in arm robbery, rape, social unrest, attacks, killings and the use of force by any means to hurt. Adegoke and Oladeji in Akpan (2021) noted that in Nigeria violence has been domestic, communal and gender related where the most vulnerable are the women and children. According to Akpan (2021) security education (by implication security measures) is better given as a prophylaxis and not as a remediation. It is important to catch the pupils young, expose them to security education early, build in them security consciousness and watch them take serious interest in their own security as they grow and sojourn through life. It is therefore imperative to use the weapon of education beginning from its very early stage to fight insecurity. Given our present situation, there is urgent need to inculcate security consciousness into the girl child so that when they become adults it would be part of them.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Girl Child**

On 31st December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was formally notified about a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan City, home to 11 million people and the cultural and economic hub of central China. By January 5<sup>th</sup>, there were 59 known cases and none had been fatal. Ten days later, there were 282 confirmed cases, of which four were in Japan, South Korea and Thailand and there had been six deaths in Wuhan. The virus responsible was isolated on 7<sup>th</sup> January and its genome shared on 12 January 2020. The cause of the severe acute respiratory syndrome that became known as COVID-19 was a novel coronavirus. On 30th January 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a worldwide public health emergency. As cases continue to spread worldwide it is become very clear that the outbreak of this virus has implications that reach far beyond the direct impact on people's physical health. What started as a health emergency caused fundamental shifts in society as governments struggled to try and contain the crisis. Responses included lockdowns, which range from self-isolation to mandatory quarantine with regulated exceptions; closure of international and internal travel; bans on social gatherings; closure of bars and restaurants; suspension of religious gatherings and shut down of schools.

On 19th of March 2020, the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria approved the closure of all learning institutions (Nlebem, 2020). This abrupt closure led to significant disruptions in the education system in Nigeria; including learning modes, access to school related services, parenting routines, and crisis management capacities of the federal and state ministries of education. According to UNESCO (2020), the closure of schools has affected 36,400,000 primary and secondary school learners across Nigeria.

The corona virus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had devastating social and economic consequences worldwide. Measures to curb the disease like the lockdown worsened existing inequalities in education, forcing girls out of school and placing them at heightened risk of violence in their home. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected the lives of the female gender worldwide. According to the PLAN International (2021) girls face an unequal burden of unpaid care and domestic work which will increase as they are kept at home. In Nigeria in particular, the girl-child was placed at the receiving end. This situation became very glaring in the Nigerian society as the pandemic kept girls at home away from school, these girls were transformed to house helps and hawkers, some abused and others dehumanized. This scenario expresses the urgency of enhancing the vehicle of the girl-child education by integrating security measures at the primary level of education. The female gender naturally has greater exposure to infection and lower access of life saving information. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020), 433 million women do not own mobile phones and 165 million fewer women than men own a mobile phone. The implication is that female gender may have less access to health information than her male counterpart. Again, the report had it that boys are 1.5 times likely to own a phone than girls in the low and middle income countries and are 1.8 times more likely to own a smart phone that can access the internet. Girl-child education in this pandemic era should be enhanced to meet up with the demands of the times.

Increase in domestic violence was also reported during the COVID 19 shut down. Overall school closure has left children especially the girl child at higher risk of neglect, abuse, exploitation and gender based violence. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020) also stated that women and girls are more affected by the secondary impacts of infectious disease outbreak including the effect of reduced access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services which is a significant public health issue. Another gender related effect of the pandemic as predicted by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020) is that over the next decade, the secondary impacts of the COVID 19 could result in 31 million new cases of gender violence, 2 million more cases of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and an estimated 13 million more child marriages. Hence the need for security measures to

enhance girl child education for the future. According to Chaplin (2020) cases of abuse and pregnancies among girls could increase because the quarantine restrictions will mean their abusers are not able to leave their homes and could concentrate their energies on abusing their victims. In addition, poverty can push girls into transactional sex which can lead to further violence, sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy. Poverty and food insecurity in families will lead to early marriages because parents may likely use them as coping mechanisms to get money. For girls and young women in all aspects of their daily lives, their safety, well being education, economic security, health, nutrition and access to technology overall, school closures due to pandemic left children at higher risk of neglect, abuse, exploitation and gender based violence.

### **National Development and Girl Child Education: The Nexus**

Development can be viewed as a noticeable movement out of a perceived stagnation. It is also a concept used to measure human comfort and satisfaction. According to the World Bank (2004), development can mean the actualization of an implicit potentiality. It is a progressive unfolding of the potentialities of a given reality. As it applies to humans, it is the integration of the various natural, physical, acquired and human of a people towards the full working out, permanently and cumulatively of their being, as persons of their nation and their real productivity (Uwadia, 2010). It is a multi-dimensional process that can involve the reorganization and reorientation of the entire economic and social system. In addition to improvement in incomes and output, it can also involve radical changes in institutional, social and administrative structures as well as in popular attitudes. In terms of national development, it can be realized through the transformation or transfer of technological ideas, institutions, attitudes, values and cultures of the underdeveloped nations. Development thus pertains to any form of improvement in the living conditions of humans, be they social, economic, political, cultural or educational. Through the process of education, in this case girl child education, humans continue to mold and remold their own lives and the lives of others in their society. The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) captured this by stating that education shall continue to be highly prioritized in national development plans because education is the most important instrument of change; any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society must be preceded by an educational revolution. No society can effectively transmit its values and aspiration without institutions of education. It is in recognition of this fact that individuals who are properly educated are expected to function to address the challenges of the society. This is more crucial for women and girls in a developing country such as Nigeria. By sending the girl-child to school, she is empowered more and is also placed in a better position of ensuring that her children also receive qualitative education, thus enhancing the chance for national development.

### **Enhancing Girl Child Education in the COVID-19 Era**



There is an immediate need to enhance girl education in Nigeria because of insecurity and the effect of the pandemic on learners especially girls. Even under what may have been normal conditions, girls in Nigeria face distinctive set of barriers in their education. Prior to the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic; violence, child abuse, early and forced marriage, unsafe environment, limitations in teacher training and gender biases impeded girls participation and learning in formal schooling across Nigeria. Ossai (2021) stated that with the outbreak of the pandemic and subsequent closure of schools, the country has not only suffered direct losses from its impact but also an ever worsening spate of insecurity and violence across the country, including attacks on school children especially girls. This calls for improved responses for education during emergencies in Nigeria. For instance, at start of 2020, 935 schools in Northeast Nigeria were closed as a result of attacks and conflict (Ossai 2021).

Indeed, schools are the worst hit and among the worst institutional casualties of complex disasters as are evident in COVID-19 pandemic, the Boko Haram insurgency and herdsmen/gunmen attacks on communities in Nigeria. Reports from the UN policy brief (2020) has found gender disparities in schooling, with household duties preventing girls from having sufficient learning during the pandemic. Other insecurity related factor might prevent girls from returning to complete education after schools reopened. From the foregoing there is need to enhance girls child education to imbibe security measures, hygiene practices, in order to cope with complexities occasioned by the pandemic, this is the concern of this paper.

### **Strategies for Enhancing Girl Child Education in the COVID-19 Era**

**Media Education:** Girl child education can be enhanced by the electronic media and social media programs like online talk shows, radio and television programs, Parent education should be incorporated in daily broadcasts to empower girls and advance gender equality in education. Girls should be also trained to deliver health awareness programme using social media platforms with the participation of a large number of girls.

**Counseling in Primary Schools:** There is an urgent need to employ the services of counselors and psychologists in primary schools. Girls should be encouraged to report abuse, get counseling and share their stories to important and significant people in their lives. Counselors should also teach security measures to the girl child on how to identify predators and insecurity.

**Accelerated Digital Skills Acquisition:** As the world changes and we move to a post COVID era, digital skills are likely to become even more important for the future. Girls should be given more education to acquire these digital skills to cope and be relevant in the scheme of things.

**Enhanced Security Education:** The girl child is malleable and develops her character during this primary stage. Unfortunately, it is during this period the girl child is at the mercy of practically every male she comes into contact with, including her father, siblings, relatives, acquaintances and strangers. She can be defiled, molested or abused by any of them. (Adesina 2017). For a functional girl child education, security education should be enhanced. With the lock down due to the COVID-19, reports of incest, rape, kidnap, abduction heightened. Appropriate education should be given to girls to protect them from falling victims. They should be taught parts of the bodies that are private, what to do when touched and how to use coded language to leave unhealthy and threatening environments.

**Health and Hygienic Education:** In schools, teachers should embed such themes in regular subjects in schools. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the more need for sanitation. Hand washing practices, menstrual hygiene, a safe and clean environment these should be taught to the girl child to prepare her for the future. It is important the girl is healthy in order to achieve and maximize her innate and acquired potentials.

**Improved Teachers Education:**

Girl child issues should be integrated in the school curriculum of teacher training institutions. This will help to inculcate into the educators the need to remove gender stereotypes in teaching. The teachers should also use methods that are gender friendly, use gender neutral instructional materials and develop healthy girl-positive behavior. Girls should also be given leadership position in mixed gender classes to encourage such abilities. Female teachers should also be models to the girl child on appropriate behaviour.

**Parent Education:** Many harmful cultural practices are carried out by parents of girls out of ignorance. There is need to educate parents (non-formal education) on the dangers of cultural practices like Female Gender Mutilation (FGM). During the Covid-19 pandemic cases of incest were widely reported. Enhanced Parent education is needed to monitor children, family members and acquaintances in the home for traces of sexual abuse, molestation and incest. Women August meetings can also be viable settings for the enhancement of parent education. Parents especially in the rural areas should be informed about the dangers of sending their female children to hawk, the danger of sending female children out as domestic helps. Enhanced parent education enlightens them to invent secret language or codes to use with their girls in cases of emergency.

**Scholarship and Incentives:** Non-governmental organization and philanthropists should invest in the education of the girl child. Some girls are out of school because of poverty. If scholarships/incentives are given at the basic level of education, more girls will attend school. Incentives like school uniform, textbooks, educational materials can be added to the free education given by the Federal Government.

**Establishment of Girl Clubs /Self Defense Classes in Schools:** There is need to establish girl clubs in schools where enhanced security measures, safety education, menstrual sanitation, enhanced self concepts and esteem can be taught to girls. Such clubs will engender boldness, positive self image and worth to the girl child. These clubs can also be



fertile grounds for advocacy groups and Non-governmental organization to meet with girls on a non formal awareness campaigns. Elements of self defense techniques should also be taught in these clubs. Coded languages for security should also be imparted to girls. Child rights education should be brought into girl-child education. They should be taught to aware of their surroundings and insist on maintaining boundaries especially when one makes them uncomfortable.

## Conclusion

Girl child education is of utmost importance to national development. The girl child has been seriously affected by insecurities posed by the pandemic and other agents. With insecurity posed by the COVID -19 pandemic, there is need for enhancement of the education of the girl child. There is an urgent need for an understanding of the multiple and often inter setting vulnerabilities and risks that the girl child faces. Therefore various security strategies as explored by this paper are to be employed to re-engineer girl child education towards sustainable national development.

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