

## **Equalizing Educational Opportunities for the Nigerian-Ghanaian Blind Girl-Child**

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### **Abstract**

Gender studies carried out in Nigeria and Ghana generally by non-Governmental Organisations particularly women groups and government data on education show that there is gender inequality in the provision of educational services Uchem (2001; Obi, 2004). These figures and records show that the girl-child is more disadvantaged and discriminated against in terms of access to education. Studies have also shown that there is under representation of girls at all levels of the educational system (Abang-Wushishi, 2004; Uchem,2001; Chizea & Njoku, 1991). Interestingly, despite these revelations and agitations by women groups for gender equity in both countries little or nothing is mentioned about the blind-girl child. Both Ghana and Nigeria have in place constitutional protections and policies that prohibit discrimination in educational opportunities based on circumstance of birth or sex, very little is being done to make education more accessible to the blind girl-child. Informal visits to some special schools for blind children suggest that there is an imbalance in the number of boys and girls receiving education.

This paper investigates the current state of gender inequality in educational provisions between boys and girls child that are blind. Some of the factors that give rise to these marginalization and inequality are discussed and suggestions on how to bridge the gap and achieve educational equity for blind children within the two countries are advanced.

### **Introduction**

Education is recognised as a major catalyst for change and development. In recognising this, the Federal Republic of Nigeria Policy on Education aptly adopted education as an instrument par excellence for effecting national development. Education according to the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) is a fundamental human right and the key ingredient in reducing poverty and child labour, as well as promoting sustainable development. It is in the light of this that Nigeria and Ghana have well documented policies on the education of

children with special needs. However, despite these policies discrimination against special needs children is still pervasive in these countries.

Generally speaking, there is a chronic inability of girls to access education as compared to boys. Within these countries, by and large, girls' access to education is mostly influenced by traditional considerations and various forms of societal attitude that allows girls to be the first to be withdrawn from school when the family encounters some financial hiccups. This dismal picture is even gloomier when the girl is blind. Girls who are blind to a large extent experience more cases of discrimination despite the declarations passed and signed by the international community at the Beijing Conference in 1998.

When it comes to education of children who are blind boys are more likely to have more and better opportunities than girls (Bowel, 1984) writing further, he posits that even at the postsecondary level, about 16% of girls are likely to have college education compared to 28% of boys with the same disability.

### **The history of education for the blind in Nigeria and Ghana**

#### ***Nigeria***

Children who are blind did not start to benefit from formal education until the early 1950s. The first school for the blind in Nigeria was established in 1953 at Gender in Plateau State by the Sudan United Mission (SUM). The Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) is now managing the school. This was followed with the establishment of Pacelli School for the Blind at Lagos in 1962 by the Catholic Church and supported by the Federal Government. Oji River Rehabilitation Centre (now Oji River Special Education Centre) in Enugu State was the next.

Today there are a number of schools for the blind across the country. The following are those that have been established over the years;

- (a) St Joseph School for the blind, Obudu in Cross River State established in 1972
- (b) Ondo State school for the Blind Owo, School for the handicapped (blind unit) Sokoto.
- (c) School for the blind Umuahia in Abia State, School for the blind, Zuba, Abuja among others. (Olukotun, 2003; Skyes and Ozoji, 1992).

Interestingly enough, the schools for the blind still have the missionaries as their proprietors.

#### ***Ghana***

In Ghana, education of children who are blind was initiated by the missionaries and philanthropists (Special Education Division, (SED) 2004). The early attempt according to the SED was made in 1936, when two blind children were taught how to read and write Braille. The success of this experiment led to the establishment of a school for the school for the blind at Akropong-Akuapem in the Eastern Region of the country by the Basel Mission in 1946 (SED, 2004). This school became the first school for the blind in the whole of West Africa. In 1958, the Methodist Church established the second school for the blind

at Wa in the Upper West Region. These two schools till date remain the basic schools for blind children in the country although some children who are blind are also integrated in seven mainstreamed schools across the country.

### **Equal educational opportunities for all children**

The reasons for establishing schools for the blind across the Nigeria and Ghana were to provide educational opportunities to the children who were blind and to also allow them to integrate into their societies. This noble effort was to prepare them to be functional citizens who will be able to contribute to the development of their nations and their families and to help them live as near normal as possible. These objectives are in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1949, the United Nations General Assembly Charter of 1959, and the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child of 1989, which saw education as a human rights issue. Based on these Rights and Conventions all children including those who are blind are to access education by the year 2015. To make this realistic, UNICEF (2004) in the Millennium Development Goals resolved to:

“Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieve gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality; expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education for girls and boys especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children; promote innovative programmes that encourage schools and communities to search actively for children who have dropped out of schools especially girls .....children with special needs and children with disabilities and help them enrol, attend and successfully complete their education.....and ensure that basic education programmes are accessible, inclusive and responsive to children with special learning needs and for children with various forms of disabilities”

Pg. 34 & 35.

It must be stated that in developing the Millennium Development Goals, cognizance was taken of the fact that all children (blind and sighted) were born free and had access to equality, dignity and freedom rights. In essence, no child was supposed to experience any form of discrimination

### **Research Questions**

The study seeks to answer two research questions.

- Is there gender equity in the educational opportunities for children who are blind in Nigeria and Ghana?
- Are girls who are blind negatively affected in the provisions of educational opportunities than boys who are blind?

### **Subjects and Method**

The study involved only blind children in Nigeria and Ghana. Two schools for the blind in Ghana were involved in addition to the schools that enrolled mainstreamed children that were blind. In Nigeria, three schools were used for the study. This was to make for

easy data collection due to the size and population of the country. Three schools were visited and data collected from the heads of participating schools. These schools also happened to be among the earliest blind schools in both countries and were all established by Christian missionaries.

## Results

### *Nigeria*

**Table 1: Population of Blind Children in three selected schools in Nigeria**

Schools	2003/2004		2004/2005		2005/2006		Total	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Gindiri School for the Blind	49	20	58	29	54	27	161	76
St. Joseph Obudu	26	17	25	12	21	18	72	57
Oji River Centre	32	28	28	23	35	27	95	78

Table 1 indicates that for the three years under study, 161 boys representing 67.9% and 76 girls representing 32.1% in Gindiri School for the Blind had access to school. The school records also showed a yearly breakdown of new intakes in primary one in the 2003/2004, academic session to be 9 boys and 8 females; the 2004/2005 had 8 boys and 4 girls while 8 boys and 3 girls were admitted in the 2005/2006 session.

St Joseph's School for the Visually Impaired results also show that for the three years under study 72 blind boys as against 57 blind girls had access to school representing 55.8% and 44.2% respectively. The population of Oji River Centre shows that more boys are equally having access to education than girls.

### *Ghana*

**Table 2: Population of Blind Children in Special Schools in Ghana**

Schools	2003/2004		2004/2005		2005/2006		Total	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
School for the blind-Akropong	162	111	164	101	175	104	501	316
Wa School for the Blind	114	67	108	65	116	69	338	201

The above table indicates that 501 boys and 316 girls representing 61% and 39% respectively have access to education in the last three years under study in the School for the Blind, Akropong. Data from Wa School for the Blind reveals that 338 boys representing 63% and

201 girls representing 37% have had access to education in Special settings since 2003/2004 academic sessions. These figures show that more boys have access to education than girls in the country. In the three years under study, 839 and 517 blind boys and girls were in schools respectively. The figures also revealed that girls are more disadvantaged than boys and that there is gender inequity in the provisions of educational services to blind children in Ghana.

**Table 3: Population of blind children mainstreamed in the 2003/2004 academic years**

Institution	Students Enrolment		
	Male	Female	Total
Three Kings-Blind Unit	10	5	15
Wa Secondary School	4	2	6
Presbyterian Training College	9	6	15
Bechem Blind-Unit	4	2	6
Wenchi Secondary School	14	8	22
Cape Coast School for the Deaf-Unit	9	2	11
Wa Training College	5	2	7
Total	55	27	82

The above table shows that in the 2003/2004 academic years, 55 males and 27 females who are blind were in mainstreamed schools in Ghana. This represents 67% and 33% boys and girls respectively.

**Discussion**

In Nigeria, results in table 1 shows that more boys have access to education than girls. Data gathered show that 161, 72, and 95 boys who are blind had access to education in Gindiri, Obudu and Oji River respectively. For the girls 76, 57, and 78 had access to Gindiri, Obudu and Oji River respectively. Of the total number of 529 children who are blind in the study schools, 328 are boys while 201 are girls thus representing 62 and 38 percent respectively.

The result in Ghana is not different either. In tables two and three the data show that more blind boys have access to educational opportunities than the girls. The figures computed show that 839 boys and 517 girls have access to education in segregated special schools. These figures represent 61% for boys and 39% for girls. The results in table three show that they were more boys who are blind in mainstreamed regular schools than girls as at the 2003/2004 academic years. This lopsidedness goes to confirm that there is no gender equity in the provision of educational opportunities to children who are blind in Ghana.

The findings are in conformity with the general trend where girls are denied educational opportunities in favour of boys. The reasons for this inequality are not far fetched. Girls are associated with some stereotyped roles that make them feel subservient to men in the society.

For instance, there is the inculcation of the beliefs in both boys and girls in their formative years that there are definite and separate roles for both sexes (Chizea & Njoku, 1991). Additionally, the traditional African society believes and teaches that men are the bread-winners as such, they should engage and participate in ventures that will allow them to fulfil their roles of becoming the heads of households and taking care of, and financially providing for their wives and children. It is also believed that boys need to further their education, whereas girls are thought to better off being taught domestic skills and thus to be well prepared to domestically look after their husbands and children.

Indeed, it must be noted that the population of girls as compared to boys in both countries is higher than boys in both the normal population and the blind population. However, in looking at the data presented above, it clearly shows that boys have better access to the schools for the blind than girls. These results are not surprising. In fact, it confirms validates the data in the normal school population for those children without disabilities.

The socio-cultural environment of the both countries is very discriminatory in terms of gender. The Nigerian report under the United Nations Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women states that women are relegated to the background and stereotyped roles of women drummed into and accepted by them from childhood (Chizea & Njoku, 1991).

Abang-Wushishi (2004), pointed out that the different economies and socio-cultural factors affect sex roles and the different socialisation culture of boys and girls and their resulting personality formation. Citing Barry (1959) Abang-Wushishi states that boys were more pressured towards assertiveness, responsibility, achievement and self-reliance. The reasons for this trend of events is the inherent belief that women would sooner or later marry and their contribution to the national development will be in the a areas of child-bearing, home-making and farming.

Obi (2004), states that the gender stereotyped and socialization process in Nigeria prepared women for domestic roles as housewives even with the introduction of western system of education. Western education was not considered relevant for girls but it was for boys. The situation is even worse when the girl in question is blind.

Most parents have very poor concept of children who are blind especially the blind girl-child. These parents do not think that girls who are blind have bright opportunities in the society. Such parents will rather prefer to spend their money on the boys who have better chances of getting employment, marrying and raising a family. This is because it is not a common occurrence to see women who are blind happily married with children and having paid jobs unlike the case with most men who are blind.

Davies (1996) attributed this to the fact that women in the society are still the nurturing gender, and they may be less hesitant to accept date from men who are blind than sighted

men will do for girls who are blind. The fact that men find it very difficult to marry a girl who is blind affects the acceptability of such women in the society. This obviously extends to the provision of educational services to them. Some informal interactions with some women who are blind revealed that some parents view investments in their education as a double waste of resources and energy for both the girl and the family at large.

Many blind child-girls also contend that their parents would rather use such monies to cater for their daily needs than to send them to school or meet their school needs. The preference for boys has also to do with the fact that they are seen as those to continue with the family name hence much premium is placed on the birth and education of the boy child even when he is blind.

### **Conclusion**

Education is seen in the society as the process of developing the whole being, physically, mentally, morally, politically and socially. However, despite the benefit and functions of education in the personal development of an individual and society at large cultural and social norms have been used over the years to deny girls the opportunity of developing themselves and contributing to the development of their society.

The constitutions of Ghana and Nigeria guarantee equal rights to all citizens in spite of their handicapping condition. The two countries have in place educational policies that equally advocate for non-discriminatory educational opportunities for all children. Most importantly, the United Nations in its different conventions on human rights has repeatedly emphasized the need for equal educational opportunities and access by all children irrespective of gender or disability. The governments of Ghana and Nigeria must as a matter of urgency put in place measures to ensure that the blind girl-child has unhindered access to good quality education.

Parents need to be educated and sensitized on the need for the education of the blind girl-child. Women organizations and civil right activists should integrate the issues of education of the blind girl-child into their programmes and begin to advocate for the implementation of both countries educational policies that emphasize the equality of educational opportunities for children. Defaulters (Heads of Schools, Parents, Guidance Counsellors, etc) should be prosecuted to serve as deterrents to others.

Both governments must as a matter of urgency embark on a national public campaign initiative to highlight the prevailing inequities between girls and boys that are blind. Children that are blind or those with other disabilities must be granted access to a free public sponsored education. In educating girls, the society will benefit tremendously. Both governments have to take the bull by the horn and demonstrate in action all the international and constitutional frameworks that they have religiously signed and developed to grant equal education access to girls.



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