



Slow Increase in Girls' Demand for Primary School Education in Edo State, Nigeria: Causes and Planning Strategies for Overcoming the Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

Prior to 1960, when Nigeria obtained her political autonomy; free primary school education had been introduced by the Western and Eastern regional governments in 1955 and 1957 respectively; while the Northern regional government popularized Islamic education. The introduction of free primary education was perhaps, in consonance with Article 26 of the Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948; which was on the right to Education. In 1963, Nigeria became a Republic and Mid-Western region was carved out of the Old Western region; which in turn was later renamed Bendel State and divided into Edo and Delta States for rapid socio-economic and political development. Edo State commonly referred to as the "Heart Beat" of Nigeria, is notoriously known because of a number of anti-social vices and the most prominent ones are international prostitution, kidnapping, youth militancy and child labour amongst others. The incessant repatriation of girls and young women who perhaps, dropped out from primary schools from the European countries like Belgium, Italy and Spain amongst others, has given Edo State and indeed the country as a whole a bad social stigma. In 1976, the free Universal Primary Education (UPE) Scheme was popularized in all the nooks and crannies of the country. In 1999, the Compulsory, Free, Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme was launched. In spite of these various efforts directed by the national, state and local governments, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and some religious bodies in ensuring that girls and boys have equal access to educational opportunities proved abortive; as exemplified by the data presented in this paper. Consequently, this paper discusses the causes of girls' slow increase in the demand for primary school education in Edo State and indeed the country as a whole and proffers solutions.

INTRODUCTION

Education all over the world has been recognized as a veritable tool for socio-economic, political and technological development of any economy.

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The realization of this perhaps, led to the adoption of Article 26 of the Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948; which was on the Right to Education. It declared herein as follows:

Everyone has the right to education. This shall be free at least in the elementary and primary stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory... Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Consequently, this legal provision seems to have acted as an impetus to global commitment to formal education, which perhaps, subsequently led to the introduction of free primary school education by the Western and Eastern Regional Governments in 1955 and 1957 respectively; while the Northern Regional Government abhorred western education (i.e. formal education) and patronized Islamic education. In 1960, Nigeria obtained her political autonomy, while in 1963, Nigeria became a republic and the fourth region known as Mid-Western region was carved out of the Old Western region. As a result of public clamour for rapid socio-economic and political development of Mid-Western Region, it was later renamed Bendel State and divided into Edo and Delta States.

At this juncture it is worthy of note that over the years Edo State has been notoriously known for many anti social vices like human trafficking, child labour, international prostitution by school drop-outs, kidnapping and drug trafficking amongst others. Out of these anti-social vices, international prostitution has given a bad social stigma to Edo State in particular and Nigeria in general; as a result of the frequent repatriation of young girls and women who were perhaps, forced out of primary and secondary schools by their parents/guardians due to their inability to bear the domestic or private costs of educating them. In a deliberate attempt to stem this unwholesome phenomenon, various efforts over the years have been directed by the National, Edo State and Local governments, as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and some religious bodies in ensuring that all the children of school going age have unrestricted access to at least primary and junior secondary schools. Among these efforts can be identified, the popularization of the free Universal Primary Education (UPE) Scheme in all parts of the country in 1976, and the launching of the Compulsory, Free, Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme in 1999.

To ensure compliance, Section 18 paragraphs (1) and (3) within chapter two of the 1979 and 1999 constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) enjoined the three tiers of government (i.e. Federal, State and Local Governments) to provide free and compulsory basic education amongst others. In a deliberate attempt to eradicate distortions and inconsistencies in basic education delivery and reinforce the implementation of the National Policy on Education (NPE), as well as to provide greater access to, and ensure quality of basic education throughout Nigeria, the UBE Act, 2004; was enacted and it declared herein as follows:

Every Government in Nigeria shall provide free, Compulsory and Universal basic education for every child of primary and junior secondary school age. Every parent shall ensure that his/her child or ward attends and completes:

- (a) Primary school education, and
- (b) Junior secondary school education

A parent who does not enroll or who withdraws his/her child/ward from school contravenes Section 2 (2) of the Ube Act, and therefore, commits an offence and be liable (FRN, 2004).

What can be gleaned from the foregoing is that everyone of primary and or junior secondary schools going age irrespective of sex, socio-economic background and political affiliations; must have unrestricted access to primary and junior secondary schools. It is also worthy of note that the UBE programme is Nigeria's strategy for the achievement of Education For All (EFA) and the education related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As a result of this laudable programme, coupled with the liberalization of its access and aggravated by the population growth rate of Nigeria that has increased from 2.83 percent to 3.2 percent per annum; primary school enrolment in most states of the federation (Edo state inclusive) increased; and the National Population Commission (NPC) puts the percentage of girls at approximately 49 percent. Table 1 below shows the primary school total enrolment of girls and boys in Nigeria (2000 – 2005).

Table 1: Total Primary School Enrolment for Girls and Boys in Nigeria (2000 – 2005).

Year	Girls	Boys	Total
2000	8,413,413	10,745,128	19,158,541
2001	8,457,812	10,805,722	19,263,534
2003	11,338,280	14,433,764	25,772,044
2004	8,895,336	11,141,614	20,036,950
2005	9,239,339	11,712,479	20,951,818

Source: Federal Ministry of Education/EDB

Table 1 shows that the proportions of both girls and boys in total primary school enrolment rose. Although the proportions of girls in total primary school enrolment rose marginally from 43.9 percent in 2000 to 44.1 percent in 2005; but when compared to their male counterpart, there was significant imbalance in primary school enrolment of girls, since estimates from the National Population Commission put the percentage of girls at approximately 49 percent. Table 2 below, shows primary school total enrolment of girls and boys in Edo State, Nigeria (1999 – 2007).

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Table 2: Total Primary School Enrolment for Girls and Boys in Edo State, Nigeria (1999 – 2007).

Year	Girls	Boys	Total
1999	173,604	181,868	355,472
2000	175,802	184,172	359,974
2001	178,027	186,502	364,529
2002	180,277	188,860	369,137
2003	182,554	191,244	373,798
2004	184,868	195,280	380,148
2005	187,674	196,611	384,285
2006	190,533	202,789	393,322
2007	193,431	202,638	396,069

Sources: Edo State UBE Board, Benin City; and Edo state UBE Planning Commission.

Table 2 shows that, although primary school total enrolment of both girls and boys increased in Edo State, girls enrolment from 1999 – 2007 was consistently lower than the enrolment of boys during the same period. For example, in 1999 when the UBE programme was launched, 173,604 girls and 181,868 boys were enrolled in primary schools in Edo State, Nigeria. In 2007, 193,431 girls and 202,638 boys were enrolled. In other words, girls' demand for primary school education was significantly lower than boys demand for primary school education during the same period. This situation over the years has perhaps, remain the same. In support of this, Njoku (2007: 44) emphasized that, ...female access to education at the basic level is low and varies from state to state and from region to region. From the foregoing, one can conveniently say that, although both girls and boys enrolments increased in Edo state and indeed the country as a whole, but girls enrolment in primary school education was consistently lower than boys enrolment. In spite of the various efforts geared towards ensuring that there is parity in girls and boys access to primary school education by the Federal, State and Local Governments as well as, Non-Governmental Organizations amongst others, gender imbalance in favour of boys has being consistent in Edo State and indeed the country as a whole. The big question that comes to mind is: what are the factors militating against girls access to primary school education in Edo State, Nigeria?

Consequently, the paper discusses the causes of slow increase in girls' demand for primary school education in Edo State, Nigeria; and suggests solutions.

Causes of Slow Increase in Girls' Demand for Primary School Education in Edo State, Nigeria

In Edo State in particular and Nigeria in general a number of reasons have been ascribed to slow increase in girls' demand for primary school education

and they include economic, cultural, social, religious, educational and political factors.

Economic Factor: This is a major impediment in the education of girls in Edo State and indeed Nigeria as a whole. There is no gainsaying the fact that most parents/guardians living in the rural areas are very poor and their economic main stay is purely agrarian. In other words, they are mostly subsistent farmers with little or no money at all to send all their children/wards to school. In spite of the Free, Compulsory and Universal Basic Education that is on course, most parents and guardians cannot send all their children/wards to primary schools because of domestic or private costs of education (i.e. the costs of school uniform, textual materials and transport fare among others).

It is also sad to note that most parents/guardians in urban areas that were gainfully employed, have been pre-maturely retired and their meagre fringe benefits perhaps, not paid as at when due. The resultant effect of this is that, most of them have to deploy mostly their female children to income generating activities like the selling of wares in public places like busy streets and religious centres etc. In support of this, Nwadiani (2000: 20) asserted that "... most families in Less Developed Countries (LDC) are very poor that they have little or no income to dispose towards the education of their children". In the same vein, Obadina (1993: 16) pointed out that, "primary school enrolment dropped from 92 percent to 75 percent when fees were introduced in Nigeria between 1982 and 1986". In the same vein, Njoku (2007: 49) pointed out that "The cost of education goes beyond the direct costs such as school fees, uniform, books, paper, pen and pencil, but also the opportunity costs in losing the services and support of the children in the business of the parents. Parents consider the contributions of children towards increasing the income of the family critically important for the survival of the family." In situations like this, girls are mostly withdrawn from school in preference for boys. According to UNICEF (2004) "... during school hours, it is common to see more girls than boys hawking in the streets or in markets selling wares." In the process of hawking, many girls are exposed to many problems like sexual abuse, kidnapping and accidents among others. These in no small measure perhaps, slow down girls' access to primary school education in Edo State and indeed Nigeria as a whole.

Cultural Factor: This acts as a great barrier to the education of girls. Edo state is made up of many ethnic groups like the Bini, Esan, Owan, Etsako and Izon etc. They have their respective traditional and cultural practices; but they all have the erroneous belief that girls are inferior to boys. Consequently, girls must be controlled and prepared for their main role to be wives and mothers. The resultant effect of this is that most parents/guardians prefer to send their male children/wards to school instead of giving both male and female children equal access to educational opportunities. According to Debrun (1994) "when girls are married, they tend to forget their parents – at that time, she would want the husband to become king rather than even the

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closest relative. So if you have to make a choice, send boys to school (Men in a Gambian Village”. This quotation aptly summarized the belief of most parents/guardians in Edo State in particular and Nigeria in general. Similarly, Ayo-Sobowale (2005: 115) emphasized that, some Nigerian societies believe that it is an abomination to train a female. Their beliefs are that girls are supposed to be good cooks and mothers. Hence, cultural factor is inimical to girls’ education.

Social Factor: This seems to play a significant role in slowing down girls’ access to primary school education in Edo State and indeed the country as a whole. According to Njoku (2007: 50) “... it is considered as a shameful thing for a girl to get pregnant when unmarried and still in the parents’ house and custody. To avoid such a situation parents encourage their females to get married as early as puberty”. The resultant effect of this is that, very young girls are perhaps, withdrawn from school to get married at puberty and consequently, girls’ access to primary school education is therefore compromised.

Religious Factor: In Edo state, Muslims are in majority in Edo North Senatorial district, while in minority in Edo Central and South Senatorial districts. Consequently, Muslim parents seem to have preference for religious education of their daughters in Q’uranic and Islamiyya Schools to Western type of education in primary schools (Njoku, 2007: 53). Similarly, Ayo-Shobowale (2005: 115) opined that, “The fear that western education promotes values and behaviours which are contrary to religious beliefs and in order to arrest the tendency of girls indulging in immoral conduct or negative western values are married early not mindful of their education.” The consequence of this is that, Muslim families seem to forego western education for Islamic education and at the end of the day, primary schools in Muslim dominated communities are depopulated.

Educational Factor: Teachers seem to play a significant role in sustaining the persistent imbalance in access to education opportunities in favour of boys. This is perhaps, because the Nigerian educational policy and delivery process see the pupil or student as a boy. Kane (1995: 9) aptly described the Nigerian educational system, which is applicable in Edo State:

(The system) ...views the pupil or student as a person who has time to study because his work at home is not essential to the household, who is not physically, culturally or spiritually endangered in the school setting. Who is not expected to marry early or become pregnant... That pupil or student is a boy. And a lot of resources have gone into his education.

The implication of this, is that, the Nigerian educational system seems to have forgotten girls as potential school clientele.

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Political Factor: This has in no small measure adversely influenced girls' access to educational opportunities in Edo State and indeed the country as a whole. In line with this, Ayo-Shobowale (2005: 116) pointed out that, "The lack of political will in addressing immorality even among the highly placed and the pervasive social disposition of society to the detriment of education of the girl-child has led to withdrawal of girls from school; many as a result of teenage pregnancy". In other words, the politicization of girls' education which seems to be a direct reflection of government's lip service to the improvement of female access to educational opportunities, has done more harm than good to their education at all levels.

CONCLUSION

Primary School being the bedrock of other levels of education, has been recognized as an indispensable tool for every individual development; hence perhaps, the increasing momentum on the road to Education For All (EFA). But a number of factors seem to have formed road blocks to too many girls' access to primary school education in Edo State and indeed the country as a whole; until these barriers are eradicated the realization of the objectives of primary school education would be efforts in futility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consequent upon the foregoing, the following planning strategies have been recommended in order to overcome the factors militating against girls' access to primary school education in Edo State, Nigeria.

Public Enlightenment and Social Mobilization as regards the Benefits of Girls' Education: The benefits of girls' education have been stressed. According to Summers (1992), "...educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment in the development world. According to Abu-Ghaida and Klasen (2002) ...educating girls is one of the most worthwhile investments available to governments. What can quickly be gleaned from the foregoing is that, girls' education is of obvious social-economic, political and technological importance. This means that all the cultural barriers as regards girls' education should be removed by mounting aggressive public enlightenment campaign on the benefits of educating girls in all the nooks and crannies of Edo State in particular and the country as a whole.

There Should be Attitudinal Change by Parents and or Guardians: The erroneous beliefs that girls are meant to work at home, get married and take care of children only, should be discarded by parents and or guardian because

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of its bandwagon adverse socio-economic consequences. All children and or wards are equal before the law irrespective of sex. Consequently, parents and guardian should see it as such.

Proper Enforcement of the UBE Act, 2004: This education law has spelt out penalties for parents and or guardians who deprive their children and or wards irrespective of sex from accessing or completing basic education (i.e. primary and junior secondary schools) in Nigeria. Culprits should be prosecuted accordingly so that it serves as a deterrent to others.

Provision of Adequate Funding Plan for Girls' Education: It is an open secret, in Edo State in particular and the country as a whole, that most parents and or guardians are very poor that they cannot bear the domestic or private costs of education of their children and or wards respectively. Nwadiani (2000: 20) pointed out that, "... most families in less Developed Countries (LDCs) of Africa are very poor that they have little or no income to dispose towards the education of their children". This quotation aptly summarized the precarious financial situation of most parents/guardians in Edo State and indeed Nigeria as a whole. This situation makes parents/guardians to choose among their children/wards those that should be sent to school; and in most cases the male children/wards are favoured (Ackers, Migoli and Nzoma (2001). The provision of scholarship and other financial aids to poor parents/guardians would go a long in minimizing the incidence of forcing female children/wards to work at home or sell confectioneries in public places and along busy streets.

Federal, State and Local Governments Should Stop Paying Lip Service to Girls' Education: Vigorous efforts should be made by the governments to counter the constraints which are known to have hindered the education of girls, particularly in the achievement of the objectives of primary school education, and consequently curtail the problems of anti-social vices like local and international prostitution that has given a bad social stigma to Edo State in particular and the country in general.

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