

GIRLS EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Girls have the right to education, skills acquisition and self-actualization. Girl-child education becomes an imperative for the attainment of national development.

Research demonstrates clearly that a strong focus on education is capable of transforming society in the long term. Education for the female, within the family unit, is key to the development of the whole, and by extension the community. The human capital of a nation is underscored by the potential of its people being healthier, more educated, empowered and educating half of the population most become a priority for us. Our current realities are that:

- Over 70.8% of women aged 20-29 in the northwest are unable to read and write compared to 9.7% in the south east zone
- More than 2/3 of 15-19-year-old girls in the north are on able to read a sentence compared to less than 10% in the south
- In 8 northern states, over 80 % of women are unable to read and write compared with 54% of men. In Jigawa state, 94% of women and 42 % of men are illiterate
- Only 4% of female's complete secondary school in northern Nigeria
- The children of educated mothers are 50% more likely to survive past the age of 5 years, while educated mothers are also more likely to send their own children to school
- Almost 9 in 10 women with higher education and 2/3 of women with secondary education give birth in a health facility; but only 1 in 10 women do so.
- 80% of children whose mothers are educated are well nourished, compared to less than 50 % of children whose mothers are uneducated.

GIRL CHILD MARRIAGE SITUATION, NORTHERN NIGERIA

- The rate of child marriage in Nigeria may be lower than in some other countries, but the size of the population makes Nigeria a large contributor to the incidence globally. Some 2.7 million girls in Nigeria (between 2000-04) marriage before the age of 18, making the country the fourth largest contributor of girl-child marriages, well below India (24.2 million), but not too far behind Bangladesh and Brazil.
- Nigeria's female population of ages 15-19 is 8,606,910, out of which 28.7% is currently married.

- 76% of adolescent girls are in NW, 68% in the NE and 35% in the NC 2, incidentally where poverty is highest in Nigeria. Whereas the statistics for other zones are: SS 18%, SW 17%SE.
- Over half of all women in the NE& NW are married off before the age of 16 and expected to bear children within the first year of marriage.

PRODUCTIVITY OF WOMEN DUE TO EDUCATION

Child marriage is often a strategy of economic survival: it generally means one less person to cater for. Although child marriage is seen as an immediate strategy of escaping the cycle of poverty, it, in fact, entrenches and reinforces the cycle of poverty. Research has demonstrated the following:

- An extra year of girl's primary, secondary, or tertiary education may boost her eventual wages by about 11.7% (average value across countries). The returns for each year of primary education for girls are at 10.9%, versus 8.7% for secondary education, and 16.8 for tertiary.
- On the average, only 70% of girl with 28 hours or more of household chores attend school. When that chore burden is reduced to less than 14 hours, 90% attend school.
- This suggest that a very high work burden leads to dropping out, although a more detailed analysis is needed to establish this as a fact, and at which threshold this happens.
- Women in the rural areas provide 60-70% of the rural workforce, and women tend to work longer hours than men due to the combination of domestic and productive work.
- As at 2012, women occupy less than 30% of all posts in the public sector and only 17% of senior position.
- As at December 2014, only 7 out of 109 senators and 19 out of 360 Members of the House of Representatives were female.
- Only 7.2% of women own the land they farm, which limits their access to credit and constrains entrepreneurship and business activity.
- About 42.1 million Nigerian children are eligible for primary school, but only 23.3 million are in school.
- About 33.9 million adolescents are eligible for secondary school but only 6.4 million are more likely to send their own children are in school.

- Children of educated mothers are 50% more likely to survive past age of 5 years, while educated mothers are more likely to send their own children to school.
- Each year of child marriage below the age of 18 can to decrease of up to 6% points in the probability of literacy and secondary school completion for girls. In some cases, the impact is lower, but it is often statistically significant.
- According to house hold survey data from Nigeria that provide perceptions by parents of the reasons why girls drop out of school, child marriage accounts for 15%-20% of school drop-out by adolescent girls.

IMPORTANCE OF GIRL CHILD EDUCATION TO THE FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND NATION

- Reduces inequality
- Increases productivity and earnings
- Drives economic competitiveness
- Reduces poverty, severely breaking the cycle
- Improves health and nutrition
- Lower infant and child mortality rates
- Lowers maternal mortality rates
- Protects against HIV/AIDS Infection
- Increases women's labor force participation
- Creates multiple inter-generational education benefits
- Promotes peace building, stability, reconciliation and security, while enhancing cohesion and harmony within the communities and the larger society.

EMPOWERED WOMEN & GIRLS LEADS TO EMPOWERED SOCIETIES

CHILDREN 'S HEALTH

If all women completed primary education in low and lower-middle income countries, the under-5 mortality rate would fall by 15%. If all women completed secondary education, it would fall by 49% equal to around 2.8million lives saved a year.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

If all women completed primary education, there would be 66% fewer maternal deaths, saving 189,000 lives per year.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

If all girls completed primary school in sub-Saharan Africa and south and west Asia, the number of girls getting married by age 15 would fall by 14%; with secondary education, 64% fewer girls would get married.

EDUCATION

For each additional year of mother's education, a child spends an extra 0.32 years in school. For girls, the benefit is slightly larger.

CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Marrying at a young age has lifelong consequences. Child marriage thwarts the girl's chances at education, endangers her health and cuts short her personal growth and development. It impacts directly (adversely) on her community, as she often remains unskilled and unproductive, most often resorting to 'talla' (hawking) in the rural communities. The incidence of girls hawking severely exposes underage girls to pedophilia. It further encourages the acceptability of adolescent girls as mature and eligible for marriage, while keeping them out of School-Quranic or otherwise. Islam is unequivocal on its stand against pedophilia and for education, yet there appears to be a general conspiratorial silence about the concept. The 'talla' industry appears to be gradually taken over by rural communities that send young girls to urban areas to hawk.

Getting married (and divorced repeatedly) becomes a means of survival for the child, irrespective of the negative implications for her, her children and the dysfunction that ensues from the disruptions in the sphere of health and her children's welfare, especially. Very few child brides in our rural areas can continue school in view of the onerous burden of combining all the functions of wife, motherhood and studying, without the support of outside help and the use of modern gadgets and facilities like fridges, ovens, etc, which are obviously non-existent in poorer communities. Indeed, the fact that she is not literate only results in her lack of appreciation for the value of education for her child, and the cycle of ignorance becomes perpetrated. Indeed, child marriage has robbed the north of sorely needed professionals and field workers, such as female teachers, doctors and nurses.

Maternal health risks are particularly troubling as the risk of death in pregnancy and delivery for girls under the age of 15 is five times higher than for women above 18 years of age. Malnutrition and stunting permanently afflict her children, whose cognitive ability remains impaired for life.

Immaturity in marriage only increases the chances of multiple divorces, which in turn leads to the sheer number of uncared-for (compromised and abandoned) children and the seeming never-ending supply of 'almajiri', their welfare concern and increasing incidence of drug abuse amongst our youth.

Indeed, child marriage is known to have resulted in murder, suicide and prostitution, as perceived feasible alternatives to the unwanted marriage.

Current realities are that more and more girls are studying out of school in Northern Nigeria, thereby exacerbating an already dismal situation. Violent conflict has had a severe impact on the education of the girl-child, as girls have been known to suffer abduction and the disruption of their education because parents are afraid. With over 300 school buildings having been damaged, destroyed or otherwise closed as a result of being targeted by the insurgents in this region, parents prefer to keep their daughters at home, rather than let them attend school. In addition to physical injury, abuse or psychological distress, family disintegration and the displacement of whole population only make the girl even more vulnerable.

Ultimately, the costs of this practice of child marriage are too high to be ignored, as has been the case so far. Because young girls are innocent, voiceless and helpless in the face of such far-reaching decisions being taken by their own immediate Families (who only seem to focus on their self-serving, short term financial interests) compounded by the fact that our political leaders consider the prohibition of child/forced marriage a taboo, communities in Northern Nigeria have remained bedeviled by objects indices in so many spheres of endeavor, with barely any prospects for transformation in human capital development. Societies cannot progress when the common practice of child marriage condemns girls and women to a lifetime of unhappiness, needless deaths, diminished opportunities, shortchanged future, ill health, dysfunction and disrupted family units, which sundry challenges translate into poverty and helplessness in the communities and the society where the practice is prevalent.

SUGGESTIONS ON THE WAY FORWARD

- Co-opt and train selected male and female broadminded and well-read religious and community leaders into advocacy programs, highlighting aspects of the faith that encourage and feature education, health and maturity, as well as the concept of preventing harm, as preconditions for a successful marriage;
- Structure tangible and short-term incentives for (both adults and girls) in pursuance of girl-child education.
- Government policy frameworks to clearly define roles and responsibilities and provide adequate resources and synergy across relevant Ministries, Departments & Agencies; women and children, justice, education, education, health, water, social protection, community development, agriculture and security;

- The implementation of the UBEC Act (domesticated by all states in the SUBEB laws) which emphasizes free and compulsory basic education of ALL school AGED CHILDREN. The law prescribes punishment for parents or wards (and in this case husbands) who do not send school. Communities can be mobilized to hold government accountable for poor implementation. Gate keepers (traditional rulers) can also be persuaded to support the efforts in ensuring that all girls and boys from their communities are enrolled in and attend school.
- Proper training head teacher and class teachers on gender and social inclusions practices.
- Make learning and attractive in schools by creating spaces for networking and sharing experiences, and for acquiring life skills, vocations, leadership and entrepreneurship, as well as information relating to nutrition, hygiene, creativity, integrated with religious education. This would also include establishing schools based management committees for close oversight, improved planning and community mapping; ensuring the availability of female teachers, female role models and mentors, which strategies clearly demonstrate the advantages of girl-child education and debunk negative myths;
- Make the school environment safer and more conducive for learning (by eliminating bullying and violence) improve on the quality of teaching, ease difficulties of transportation to and pro the premises and provide infrastructure such as safe water, nutritional meals, instructional material, separate toilets bearing in mind gender considerations;
- Create safe spaces where women and girls have autonomy, to ensure that they are less likely to become victims of gender-based violence(GBV) and in turn are more likely to participate public like. Informal safe learning spaces should be encouraged in areas of violent conflict, including the provision of teaching aids and basic education materials, as a priority component of humanitarian assistance.
- Abolish hidden user fees that prohibit poor parents from sending their daughters to school such as levies for parent, teacher associations, uniform and chalk fees'
- Provide scholarships and conditional cash transfers for poor parents who educate the girl-child thereby enabling her to attend maturity before marriage, to cater for the

opportunity costs of diminished income as a consequence of this decision. Mechanism and definite framework must be put in place, to ensure transparency and accountability, thereby safeguarding against abuse;

- Remedies (life skills, vocation, health education, hygiene, nutrition, entrepreneurship, literacy and numeracy, integrated with religious education) should be designed specifically for married adolescents who have not been to school, with their usual schedules in mind;
- Create income-generation options for married adolescents with structured skills and vocations to be prioritized, providing opportunities to develop competencies.
- Attitudinal change relating to laws and policies and their relevance in the lives of the community is critical for compliance, but legal and regulatory mechanisms and strategies are necessary to provide a backdrop for improvement, and act as deterrent. Incentivizing and rewarding compliance may serve as an effective initial step, but devising systems to monitor implementation and enforcement are imperative. Laws to be enacted include those that serve as formidable protections to women's and children's right (maintenance & custody), property rights, access to justice, health services (and to sanctions and remedies, protections from violence, strengthened civil registrations system for birth, marriage and violence).
- Birth and marriage registration must be made compulsory, with protective clauses inserted in marriage contracts that prohibit the reckless abuse of divorce, while providing recourse for arbitration with sanctions for breach;
- Establish sustained dialogue and scholarship through a special committee of Islamic jurist and scholars, doctors (psychologists, pediatricians, obstetricians), traditional rulers , influential community leaders, teachers and relevant partners to reflect and examine the diverse principles and concepts (including the justification for similar laws in other Muslim countries), with a view to agreeing on a consensus for the minimum statutory age for marriage as an issue of public interest , with practical strategies on how to proceed enabling implementation ;This consensus must be adopted by our male religious leaders, and then accompanied by strategic and visible advocacy, publicity and the enactment of the Child Right /Protection law in the

jurisdictions where there has been the reluctance to, including the agreed minimum age for marriage, taking all the considerations in to account.