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## **Exploration of the Impact of the COVID-19 on Girls' Education in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls' education in Nigeria. COVID-19 raises concerns to every nationality and has thus made

way to the continent of Africa, therein Nigeria. This pandemic has a significant gendered impact on children, especially girls being out of school. The vast majority of pupils affected by this pandemic are rural girls. Despite the fact that these rural girls from poor backgrounds are already marginalised, the pandemic has highly disadvantaged them in terms of access to education, limited provision of resources and infrastructure to ensure learning is taking place even at home. While some research was found to have been done on COVID-19, none was found specifically on rural girls and education in Nigeria. This paper utilised a secondary research methodology which involved reviewing and interpreting past data to explore the impact of this pandemic on the Nigerian girl child. Among other impacts, peer pressure temptations, sexual abuse, unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, and child exploitation were found to put girls at risk. The researchers were able to suggest possible interventions for the girl child's education in the post COVID-19 era which include the reviewing of cultural practices and customs, making education fashionable, providing extra classes, establishing programmes and initiatives to empower women, and awareness against gender-based violence. This pandemic has drawn attention to the injustices girls live under; and if these interventions are put into practice, a better life for all can be assured.

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, Coronavirus, Girls' education, Pandemic, Nigeria*

## **Introduction**

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak has been declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a novel pandemic that countries must prepare to manage. The World Health Organisation defines a pandemic as the worldwide spread of a new disease (WHO, 2010). The first case of COVID-19 incident was discovered in November 2019, in Wuhan, China (Bryner, 2020). Due to the nature of the pandemic, the disease had spread to multiple countries and territories; hence, infection and death are growing daily in exponential numbers (Mail & Guardian, 2020; Daily Maverick, 2020). On March 30, 2020, the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria issued the COVID-19 regulations and declared COVID-19 a dangerous infectious disease (Federal Government of Nigeria NCDC, 2020). In a document prepared by Bender (2020) for the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) with support from WHO and International Federation Red Cross (IFRC), it was presented that a lot is unknown

about this Coronavirus but its transmission is through direct contact with respiratory droplets from cough and sneezing of an infected individual. Furthermore, infection is conveyed through touching virus-contaminated surfaces and subsequent touching of body parts such as eyes, nose and mouth. Conversely, awareness for preventive measures against the spread of COVID-19 is being massively employed by every government, organisation and community in the global world to flatten the curve of the pandemic. These precautionary measures include wearing masks, using sanitisers and staying home.

One of the key measures is the national lockdown that led to shutdown of all social activities including the schools to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 in schools. While there is an intense order provided for complete shutdown by the government and awareness by media houses, it is very difficult for citizens in the marginalised communities to adhere to these regulations. Mahler, Lakner, Aguilar and Wu (2020) used the World Bank's online tool (PovcalNet) household survey data in arguing that this pandemic is pushing people to extreme poverty. Nigeria as well as its communities is no exception; it is number 2 after India in the countries estimated to have the biggest change worldwide (Mahler et al., 2020).

Regulations to combat the spread of this virus put in place by different governments include closure of schools and businesses, etc. Many people have been affected by this pandemic, but females have been hit the most (OECD, 2020; WHO, 2020). Hence, this study focuses on them. Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey and Tertilt (2020), OECD (2020) and WHO (2020) concur that this pandemic has a disproportionate negative effect on women's socio-economic status and health, as well as a tool for gender-based violence among others. The already rural and poor marginalised girls and women in general have been greatly disadvantaged in terms of access to education, limited provision of infrastructure to ensure learning is taking place at home. Girls' education in this study focus not only on girls going to school but also on their safety in school, their ability to go through all the levels at school just like their male counterparts, and getting the necessary skills to enable them to secure jobs and contribute to their communities. This paper argues that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the marginalisation of Nigerian girls with the focus on formal education and it is guided by the following objectives:

## **Objectives of the Study**

Specifically, the objectives of this study are to:

- (a) examine the impact of the COVID-19 on the girl child education; and
- (b) suggest the possible interventions to improve the girl child education in Nigeria in the post COVID-19 era.

## **Significance of the Study**

This conceptual study will guide the policy-makers and all stakeholders in the education sector to overly ready and effectively respond to measures for any infectious diseases such as COVID-19, reduce barriers to the education of the girl child and ultimately improve girl child education, and enable learning to continue uninterrupted for most especially those in the disadvantaged communities in the post COVID-19 era. Recommendations of this study can be useful to other countries on how to address gender-based threats in girl child education during pandemic and post pandemic.

## **Methodology**

This study employed secondary data which are vastly available through technological advances. This data method involves utilising existing data to address the study's research questions. It is becoming more prevalent over the years (Johnston, 2014; Andrews, Higgins, Andrews, & Lalor, 2012; Check & Schutt, 2011). Johnston (2014: 619) defines secondary data analysis as "Analysis of data that was collected by someone else for another primary purpose". This method of data collection and analysis was determined by the nature of this study's research questions. Creswell (2009) opines that the process of secondary data analysis assists researchers with the ways of collecting, analysing and interpreting data for a study. This study, being a conceptual review, solely relies on the review of secondary data to unpack the impact COVID-19 can have on the disadvantaged communities of the girl child in terms of discrimination and suggests possible interventions to improve girl child education in Nigeria in the post COVID-19 era.

## **The Context of Girl Child Education in Nigeria**

The education of a girl child is one of the basic attempts to get academic emancipation for the girl child. The evidence of ethnicity, culture, illiteracy, ignorance and religious beliefs that exist within the country makes accommodating the girl child education a topical issue in Nigeria. Many parents consider education for a girl child as a waste of time, energy and resources compared to a boy child (Huzeru, 2012; Atama, 2012). Girls are also favoured by mainly Nigerian women to assist in the labour force (Okam & Shuaibu, 2019). These challenges affect a certain class, preventing girls from accessing educational opportunities. Moreover, in some communities, the families still believe that girls must be given out in marriage at a very young age because it is believed that their only roles are those of wives and mothers (Okam & Shuaibu, 2019). Wodon, Male, Nayihouba, Onagoruwa, Savadogo, Yedan, Edmeades, Kes, John, Murithi, Steinhaus, and Petroni (2017) opine that young girls who end up in early marriage are usually unable to finish schools, and this puts them at a disadvantage of not being able to secure any good income; thus, they are dependent for their whole lives. Ajaegbu (2005) attributes some of the challenges being faced by women to the cultural practices of early marriages. Nigerian girls are usually victims of systems that disadvantage them mostly revolving around the culture and traditions. They are gender-disadvantaged based on the cultural construct developed by the society (Umoh, 2004). The gender roles are passed from one generation to the next, and they are practised without questioning them such that they become the norm. Through these roles, girls are marginalised because of their gender, age, culture and race, which Amoah (2007) refers as GRACE. The more women are prone to gender inequality and regarded as second-class citizens, the more their overall well-being will be affected. Poor women are the most affected as Wodon et al. (2017) state that a whole 96% cannot read or write in the north-western part of Nigeria, while only 1% of the people in the south-eastern part of the country are rich.

According to the National Policy on Gender in Basic Education, the Federal Government of Nigeria affirms education as its top priority, both as a right and as an instrument of development to address the wide gap of inequalities caused by illiteracy, ethnicity, culture, ignorance and religious beliefs within the society. The policy strongly ensures gender

equity in the delivery of basic education provision in Nigeria (FRN, 2004).

Furthermore, the policy specifically highlights how these principles conform with the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as follows:

- (a) A commitment by all stakeholders to gender equality, social justice and equity
- (b) To strive for gender balance at all levels of policy planning and implementation
- (c) To commit to free and compulsory Basic education as a human right to all children irrespective of gender, at all levels of the system (federal, state, LGA, community and school)
- (d) That the federal and state governments acknowledge and exercise responsibility to provide Nigerians, and especially girls, with adequate information to ensure enrolment in, retention and completion of basic education
- (e) That various levels of government in Nigeria acknowledge and exercise their responsibility to provide for the basic education and well-being of pupils especially girls, which shall be fulfilled by the provision of appropriate gender sensitive, child friendly school/schooling environments.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF] (2007) indicates that any government should not expect immediate rewards from empowering girl child through education but must be seen as a best investment for the country's development. Hence, education received by these girls helps to develop their essential skills including self-confidence, the ability to participate effectively in the society, and protection from diseases and other sexual exploitation. The agency notes that girls' education also helps in stemming the tide of children and maternal mortality rates, thereby contributing to national wealth and controlling diseases and health status.

Based on the set objectives of the national policy on gender education, government's collaboration with various non-government agencies introduced different initiatives, programmes and campaigns for girl child education in Nigeria, which to some extent are successful efforts. However, female learners from rural and poor background have been disadvantaged in the country due to the socio-economic background, religious beliefs, culture, poverty and ignorance. This

requires special attention and consideration in terms of educational accessibility and equity (OECD, 2020). Majority of these disadvantaged female learners are found in the northern part of Nigeria as impoverished and illiterate groups. Northern Nigeria is highly populated but has fewer universities and large households that are deeply rooted in cultural practices that promote early marriages among the teenage girls. The early marriage tradition among the people of northern Nigeria prevents education of female children but supports the practice of give birth to many children to help with the labour force (Dapel, 2018).

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Girl Child Education in Nigeria**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a downturn in many sectors, including education sector, globally. The outbreak of this novel virus has resulted in school closures, meaning that children spend all their time at home. According to PLAN International in a recent report by UNESCO (2020a), 89% of students are currently out of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that 1.54 billion children and youths enrolled in schools or universities are out of schools; this includes 743 million girls in this estimation. Abari and Orunbon (2020) and UNESCO (2020) also reported that more than half (51%, representing 890.5 million) of the world learners are affected by COVID-19. With this global situation, Nigeria is significantly affected with a massive female children being out of school due to the pandemic. Seemingly, the pandemic has further marginalised these female children (Badejo, Ogunseye, & Olasunkanmi, 2020). The Nigerian educational system has not been prepared to handle this pandemic as limited provision and infrastructure for alternative teaching and learning that can take place at home are lacking. While this virus is just a health emergency, it has affected males and females differently (Alon et al., 2020). It has placed girls living in contexts with persistent gender discrimination and harmful social norms at risk. Girls living with disabilities and in conflict-affected areas in Nigeria are further deprived of learning resources due to the limited capacities of humanitarian efforts by state and non-state actors. Hence, this article highlights as follows five of the significant impacts facing the girl-child education:

1. **Exposure to sexual abuse:** Girls being out of schools where they can be constantly be guided and occupied, can become more exposed

to sexual abuse which may lead to unwanted pregnancies, thereby affecting their education as a result of stigmatisation and other factors. PLAN International (2020) posits that girls living in refugee camps or who are internally displaced, or during school closures will be more devastating as they are already at a disadvantage. Only half of the refugee girls at secondary level may likely enrol compared to their male peers because of the cultural belief that “Educating a girl is like watering a neighbour’s tree” (Chinese saying).

2. **Negative peer influence:** School children are vulnerable and can be desperate to fit in, so they tend to give in to many peer-pressure temptations. Negative peer influence may lead to sex-for-money or gifts/smoking, exchange of wrong ideas and information.
  
3. **Increase in child labour:** Despite the lockdown (the confinement of people to their homes to combat the spread of the virus), parents are still compelled to hunt for means of survival which have prompted some girls to join their mothers in raising income to support the family. This has considerably increased child labour (OECD, 2020). During the normal school days, hawking and road side sales take place in the evenings and mostly on weekends for girls; however, because of school closures, the number of girls hawking on a day-to-day basis has increased greatly. This may affect the number of girls that may likely return to school based on their exposure to money-making initiatives during the pandemic period. However, street hawking increases girls’ risk of exposure to COVID-19; they may be infected with the virus and possibly infect others with the virus. Supporting this narrative, PLAN international (2020) states that where limited social protection measures are in place, economic hardship caused by the crisis will have spill-over effects as families consider the financial and opportunity costs of educating their daughters.
  
4. **Increase in the burden of girls’ household chores:** Girls usually are the ones who do most house chores. This poses a big challenge for girls, especially those in transitional classes, making it difficult for them to study and prepare for assessments. With school closures, the burden of girls’ household chores may increase, as other family members go out to work, or if family members become sick from the



virus. When school resumes, girls' academic performance may be affected due to increased domestic chores. The shame of repeating classes may lead to dropping out of schools which then increases the population of out-of-school girls in the country and even globally (OECD, 2020).

5. **Existence of technology gap between girls and boys:** Presently, there is a technology gap between girls and boys (PLAN International, 2020). Hence, the emergence of COVID-19 is now increasing this gap. This implies that an average boy has better access to technological tools compared to a girl child since boys have always been given priority, making it very difficult to have more girls on online platforms than boys, thus affecting their ability to continue with their academics during the pandemic (OECD, 2018). The girl's approved place even during her leisure time is the kitchen sorting out one house chore or the other.

Furthermore, Ifijeh and Osayande (2011) affirm that children of educated women are likely to be educated. This means that the unfortunate girls from poor families are far from moving away from poverty. Consequently, this has exponential positive effects on education and poverty education for generations to come. One very important aim of every family should be to raise healthy and productive individuals who will contribute meaningfully to the society. This can be achieved through the education of the girl child who is a mother tomorrow. However, it is vital to liberate parents from cultural practices that prevents this from taking place successfully.

### **Possible Interventions to Improve Girl Child Education in the Post COVID-19 Era**

It is without a doubt that no single intervention would be sufficient to cater for the educational needs of the girl child population in the post COVID-19 era. Thus, it should be the responsibility of all stakeholders to introduce and prioritise the educational and social needs of adolescent girls who were at risk and disadvantaged during the pandemic to make learning accessible to them. Some possible suggestions or approaches that can be deployed in making education accessible to the disadvantaged girl child in Nigeria include the following:

1. **Improved infrastructural facilities:** Making available facilities and enabling environment is a forerunner to improve teaching and learning engagement with girl child in the post COVID-19 era both in rural and urban settlements. To change the approach to the kind of education being offered to the girl child in order to stand out from the previous education known with the system, there must be modern-day toilet facilities with safe water so they can have proper sanitation and hygiene. Keep the UNESCO recommendation by making the classroom less congested (physical distancing) with an appropriate ratio of teacher to learners.
  
2. **Continuous provision of online learning materials:** The use of electronic learning should be a continuous educational programme. Gadgets for learners should be provided, and available content should be stored in external storage devices for students, and there should be partnership with telecommunication industry so as to ensure that students have access to relevant online content, most especially the girl child in disadvantaged and rural areas. Similarly, hard copies of online learning materials could be printed for those who cannot access technology. For continuity, the Ministry of Education should ensure the incorporation of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in education; it should also adopt strong initiatives in strengthening the ICT incorporation in education (Akintolu, Adelore and Nzima, 2019). For proper implementation, the Federal Ministry of Education must adhere to the following strategies:
  - (a) Expand ICT infrastructure in education by ensuring learners, most especially girls, in the rural areas have access to their educational contents.
  - (b) Leverage and strengthen public-private partnership or organisation working in the area of ICT.
  - (c) Encourage innovative centres that nurture innovative ICT-based ideas.
  - (d) Support the connections on the use of ICT in education, training and research, and relevant ministries.
  
3. **Adequate emotional and psychological support:** Emotional and psychological attention must be set up to accommodate the girl child

in order to tackle the indiscriminate acts that have been experienced during the pandemic. It is of utmost importance for the Ministry of Education to fast-track the emotional and psychological counselling service programmes in schools, most especially in the rural settlements to cater for the post COVID-19 survivors like female students that experience Gender based Violence (GBV), teen pregnancy victims, drug abusers, pornography addicts, and other indiscriminate acts during the protracted school closure.

4. **Re-evaluation/revision of cultural practices:** Culture has been identified as one factor creating barriers for female learners to access resources and participate equally as their male counterparts in education. Because of these barriers which include the never-ending household chores, fending for families, raising many children, etc., females are unable to reach their potential. There is a need to empower females and expose them to opportunities for societies to develop and alleviate poverty. Re-evaluating cultural practices would be the first step into working towards a better future for all regardless of gender. Such evaluations should involve both males and females in determining which cultural practices are retained, modified and discarded (Akintolu, Nzima & Kapueja, 2018). Culture is supposed to determine how individuals and communities from that culture understand the world today. Therefore, this means that it should be revised every now and then to suit the present people practising it. Currently, culture is infringing on the rights of females in most societies which, in turn, pushes them backwards. UNESCO states that culture, religion and tradition are frequently referenced to justify gender discrimination. Change is said to be inevitable, cultural practices should also be open to change for the benefit of the whole society as women are key role players in the growth of any community as they bring life to Earth. Hernandez-Truyol and Esperanza (1997) suggest the questions that could be useful in evaluating the cultural practices we do in the name of culture which do not necessarily benefit everyone:

- (a) What are the origin and value of the cultural practice?
- (b) What is its level of significance to the culture and within the community?
- (c) What is its level of intrusion on a protected individual right?

- (d) How significant is the human rights norm to the international community?

Girls need to be set free from customs that deny them education such as forced marriage. One of the Sustainable Development Goals by the World Bank is ending child marriage because of its impact on the society (Wodon et al., 2017). Committed to ending child marriage, the World Bank aims to assist girls and women by:

- (a) providing conditional cash transfers, stipends or scholarships;
- (b) reducing distance to school;
- (c) targeting boys and men to be a part of discussions about cultural and societal practices;
- (d) ensuring gender-sensitive curricula and pedagogies;
- (e) hiring and training qualified female teachers;
- (f) building safe and inclusive learning environments for girls and young women; and
- (g) addressing violence against girls and women.

5. **Creation of awareness about the worth of women:** Awareness must be made that woman worth so much more than just being wives and mothers through educating them which brings a lot of empowerment. Education is the key to girl-child empowerment. Through education, girls would have goals to grow up and contribute to the economy and society at large as opposed to getting a husband and having many children. Their lack of education infringes on their human right to education and leading a healthy life. UNESCO (2014) emphasises the importance of human rights for all mankind.

6. **Provision of extra classes for the girls left behind:** After any pandemic, learners actually go back to their normal school activities. The teachers should acknowledge that not all their learners, especially the girls, had access to online resources during the pandemic. The teachers can organise extra classes to help the learners catch up on the missed learning and to help those who had been occupied during the entire lockdown with non-academic activities. Teachers can help these learners recover while taking them one step at a time.

7. **Protection from gender-based violence that girls are always subjected to in schools:** Although this is not a new phenomenon

that came with COVID-19, it needs to be addressed further in schools. Discipline of girls by flogging or spanking violates their rights to dignity as they are often laughed at and mocked. Their dignity is affected and it influences their academic performance (UNESCO, 2015). These children end up losing interest in schools and ultimately drop out of the system, thus increasing the number of illiterate people in the country.

UNESCO (2013) reports that there are programmes and initiatives to empower females in cultural industries that have been rolled out, particularly for rural females unable to pursue formal education. This is definitely a way towards a better society. However, without addressing the oppressive cultural practices, these are deemed to fail.

### **Possible Challenges**

Several challenges can be highlighted in responding to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). These include: unsafe environment where girls experience sex abuse; unwanted pregnancy; stigmatisation; drop-out; and arranged or early marriage.

It can take a while to change people's thinking towards their culture since it has been practised for years and they can resist change. They, especially males, might not understand the need for change and see nothing wrong with the current cultural practices since they are on the favoured end. They may also fear what would come after females have been empowered. Males may be skeptical about accepting change in protection of their 'power' and refrain from sharing it with females. Starting a new path can be scary to anyone because people tend to be connected to the old way of doing things and we, therefore, do not want to start something new. This is what males might go through and therefore resist change.

Some parents will still prefer giving away their young daughters for marriage instead of taking them to school. Other than culture, poverty is another factor pushing families to continue with this practice. To help the family put food on the tables, families might resist educating their daughters.

## Conclusion

Investing in education as a nation has proven to be an expensive endeavour, especially during and after the pandemic. Yet, it is imperative to accommodate this group of gender which constitutes over 50% of Nigerian population. It is an endeavour to embark upon as our lives and livelihood in the future, among families and society, hang in the balance as a result of this group.

A public-private partnership approach supports the government to provide basic and essential materials and tools for girl children to have access to quality education with emphasis on education inequity.

People sometimes resist change; this has to be planned for in advance and measures put in place to deal with such. Being prepared is proactive and it will help in recognising the behaviours. Males, especially the ones deeply rooted in culture, need to be educated on how empowering females would help improve their lives and those of the societies as well.

Education plays a major role in the emancipation of societies. Families need to be schooled on the importance of education in general as it builds people mentally, emotionally, psychologically, etc. Once people comprehend the importance of education, they should see the need to educate every child regardless of their gender.

Girls have already been disadvantaged throughout Africa and the pandemic has worsened it. The next step is to help them recover with their school work.

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