

Taking a Special Interest in the Girl-Child Education: The Konyefa Foundation Responds

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ABSTRACT *Education for All* (EFA) has been a ‘hot’ topic for discussion for the past three decades or so. From the adoption of the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All and a Framework for Action in Jomtien, Thailand, through to the 1996 Mid-Decade Meeting of the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, in Amman, Jordan, then to the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal. Since then the clarion call to meet children’s basic learning needs, has been resounding throughout the world. It was at the Dakar meeting that the EFA principles were adopted. Although these and subsequent meetings were attended by government non-governmental and inter-governmental delegates from more than one hundred and fifty (150) countries, the education of the girl-child remains a serious issue. This paper explores the situation of girls’ education in Nigeria, in particularly, Bayelsa State, via desk research. Clearly, from the literature reviewed, the Nigerian education system has not lived up to its commitment to meet the basic learning needs of all children, especially girls. The inconsistencies between the education that boys and girls receive are great. The Konyefa Foundation is making a valiant effort to tackle the educational problems that plague the girls in that State. Since the first Bayelsa Women’s Summit was organised by the Foundation in 2012, other community women organisations have aligned themselves to the Konyefa Foundation with a view to helping girls to get a quality education. The paper asserts that educating girls is beneficial for the economic development of Bayelsa, neighbouring communities and the entire African Nation.

Keywords: girl-child education, gender disparities, education for all, the Millennium Development Goals, Bayelsa

Introduction

Over the past three decades or so, *Education for All* (EFA) has been a recurring topic for discussion on the agendas of Ministries of Education around the world (Hasan, Halder and Debnath, 2018; Miles and Singal, 2010; UNICEF, 2007). It all began in 1990 when the World Declaration on Education for All and a Framework for Action was adopted in Jomtien, Thailand. It continued through to the mid-1990s when the 1996 Mid-Decade Meeting of the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, was convened in Amman, Jordan. The 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal is an unforgettable meeting. It was from that time onwards that the clarion

call to meet children's basic learning needs, has been resounding throughout the world. The Dakar meeting saw the adoption of the EFA principles. At all these conventions, including the follow-up meetings, government non-governmental and inter-governmental delegates from more than one hundred and fifty (150) countries were in attendance. Yet, the education of girls remains a very serious issue. This paper explores the situation of girl-child education with particular reference to Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

Based on the information gathered from the literature reviewed for this paper, the Nigerian education system has not lived up to its commitment to meet the basic learning needs of all children, especially girls. There are clear inconsistencies between the education that boys are exposed to and that received by the girls. On recognising these discrepancies, the Konyefa Foundation is making a valiant effort to tackle the educational problems that plague the girls in the entire nation, but in particularly Bayelsa State. This does not mean that the focus of the Konyefa Foundation is on Bayelsa alone, but rather that addressing the needs of girls begins in Bayelsa with the hope of expanding the programmes to include other states, and eventually, the whole nation. The first Bayelsa Women's Summit was organised by the Foundation in 2012. This summit was supported by other community women organisations because they believe in the vision that the Konyefa Foundation has embraced for girls to have a quality education. The paper strongly asserts that educating girls has multiple benefits, including personal, community and local development. But alongside these are the economics advantages that are possible to sustain economic and sustainable development for Bayelsa, neighbouring states and all the other territories that make up the continent of Africa. The paper begins with a brief statement about how the data were collected, before introducing the themes for discussion.

Collecting the Data

The data collected for this paper was done via desk research, which is also known as secondary research. The aim was not to generate numerical data to be used for statistical purposes. The paper therefore followed a qualitative approach which has to do with looking for analytical meanings from descriptions and observations (Creswell 2014; Descombe, 2010). Desk research is a time-effective process that involves gathering data from the Internet, published sources such as government and non-government institutions annual reports, press releases and magazines (Watson and Noble 2007, p.61). The paper utilise the information gathered from the desk research to build and support the discussion. The data-gathering process started by searching the Internet for research work, conference papers and government reports that looked into the activities that related to the Framework for Action on the World Declaration on Education for All and other narratives that speak to the EFA principles.

Limitations: All forms of inquiry have limitations; desk research is no different. The information gathered from the search may be limited (CIELO, 2010). For example, the Konyefa Foundation is a relatively new organisation. To date, there are no empirical studies that were conducted to look into its operations. Also, no informed comparisons can be made because there are no other such known foundations in Bayelsa. Nonetheless, the information used for this paper is quite significant.

International Literacy Year -1990

Nineteen ninety (1990) is the starting point for the discussion because of its link to the International Literacy Year. But it is fitting to make reference to 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child since it precedes the United Nations' (UN) adoption of the International Literacy Year. One hundred and seventy six (176) nations became state parties to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child in November 1989. The paper employs United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2018) to make reference to two articles:

- **Article 28** says that "State Parties recognise the right of children to education" and "should take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity."
- **Article 29** of the Convention focuses on the aims of education and says that governments agree that "the education of the child shall be directed to, among others:
 - The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
 - The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin".

Articles 28 and 29 were specifically chosen because they make mention of *the right to education* and *equality of sexes*, which are linked directly to the main thrust of the paper. So how do these two aspects from the International Convention on the Rights of the Child relate to the International Literacy Year? Eric Digest (1990) provides an answer via United Nations Educational Cultural and Scientific Organisation's (UNESCO) outline of the goals for International Literacy Year:

- To promote better understanding internationally of the problems of illiteracy;
- To help strengthen and revitalize existing primary education programs;
- To encourage new programs to reach adult illiterates, especially women; and
- To promote the struggle against reverting to previous levels of illiteracy (Eric Digest, 1990).

Undoubtedly, if primary education programmes give special attention to problems of literacy, and if governments ensure that girls are education, it seems reasonable to conclude that illiteracy figure will decrease. Most importantly, girls would be in a position to make meaningful contributions to the development of their respective nations. This assertion finds some resonance in the following, which is based on findings from a study conducted in the south-east states of Nigeria—Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo.

Girl-child education has become a serious agenda in many educational fore and debates in Nigeria, the World's Bank, forum for Africa women educationalists and many other interested organizations and these groups are willing to spend money and time to promote girl child education. This is due to the fact that sustainable human development cannot be effective if half of the human race made up of the girls and women folk remain ignorant, marginalized and discriminated against. Furthermore, various government and Non-Government organizations have realized that for national and international development to be achieved - there is need to promote the education of the girl child (Nwokolo and Nwokolo, 2016).

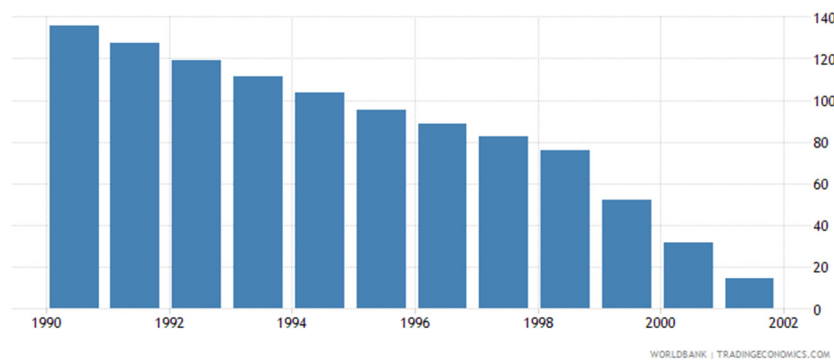
To support the above statement, a personal experience comes from Tabreek Somani, an independent researcher who “personally witnessed the innate potential of the girls to develop and contribute to the society...” During interactions, with the girls, she “observed how they were able to unleash their potential and excel given the right opportunity” (Somani, 2017, p.125). These examples clearly demonstrate that girls who acquire an education can play a vital role in the development of their respective societies.

EFA and the Dakar Framework

EFA and the Dakar Framework for Action go hand in hand. The World Conference on Education for All, which was convened in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, was sponsored by United Nations Development Program (UNDP), UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank (Unostamps, 2008). Educators, government delegations, non-governmental agencies and financing organizations from around the world participated in this conference. The discussions and dialogues all focus on EFA.

After Jomtien, it was expected that basic education would be made available to every individual, and that literacy rates would improve. Figure 1 illustrates that literacy in the Nigeria did improve because illiteracy decreased over the years. But there is still a long way to go in terms of the gender disparity in literacy rates, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Nigeria - Illiteracy Rate, Youth Female (% of females ages 15-24)

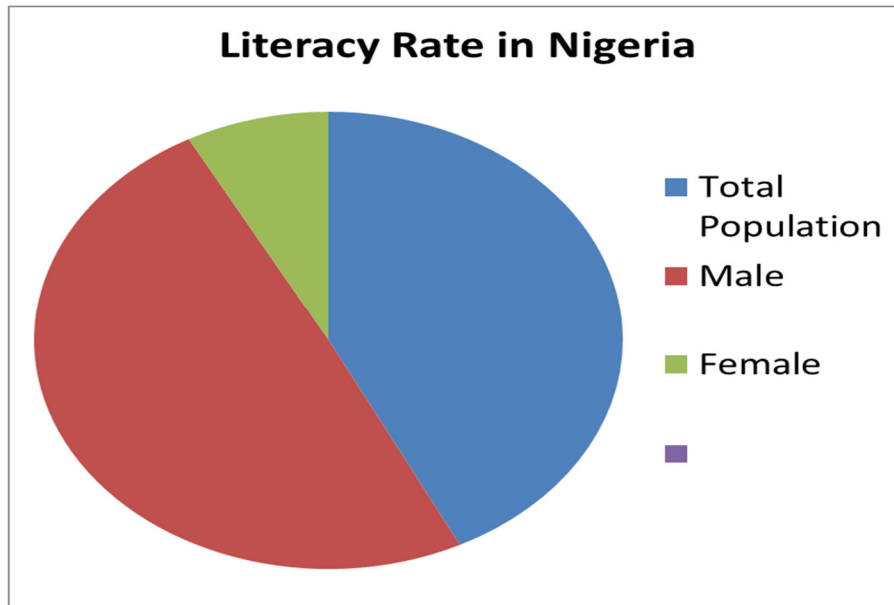


Source: World Bank (taken from Trading Economic (2019))

Note:

- Illiteracy rate, youth female (% of females ages 15-24) in Nigeria was reported at 14.63% in 2001, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators, compiled from officially recognized sources.

Figure 2: Literacy Rate, Nigeria



Compiled with information from Ibenegbu (n.d.)

Notes:

- The total population - 59.6%; Male – 69.2%; Female – 11%.
- The literate population is defined as people who are older than 15 and can read and write.

It was also expected that individual talents and learner personalities would be developed so that all can help to transform their individual societies. In order to follow through on the decisions made in Jomtien, the Dakar Framework for Action was adopted at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000. The forum was attended by one thousand five hundred participants (1500), including one hundred and fifty (150) NGOs/CSOs and numerous bilateral and multi-lateral agencies and development banks, from one hundred and eighty one (181) countries (Shaeffer, 2002). With such resounding endorsement from supposedly well-meaning people from all over the world, it is reasonable for one to wonder why girls' education is still not at its peak. Too, Shaeffer (2002) also notes that one of the goals of the Framework is the elimination of gender disparities, thus raising even more pertinent questions concerning literacy and girls' education. Ibenegbu (n.d.) reminds of the circumstances that can perpetuate the disparities: "The biggest problem with the illiteracy is that an illiterate adult leads to an illiterate child. The cycle may continue on and on if nobody intrudes".

Girls' Education in Nigeria and Bayelsa State

There is a direct link between education and literacy. The implication is that illiteracy thrives in the absence of basic education (Shaeffer, 2002). In Nigeria, as at 2011, 4.5 million girls are out of school. Abdulrazaq (2013) identifies the following barriers to girls-child education in Nigeria:

- Gender discrimination;

- Early marriage;
- Teenage pregnancy;
- Violence against girls in school;
- Funding;
- Child and domestic labour;
- Lack of encouragement; and
- Low Government effort.

Nigeria is not the only African nation that is facing challenges with regard to girl-child education. Gordon, Marston, Rose and Zubairi (2019) claim: “Even when governments have made commitments to girls’ education, there are not always adequate plans for implementation”. Gordon et al cite this example of Uganda to back up their claim:

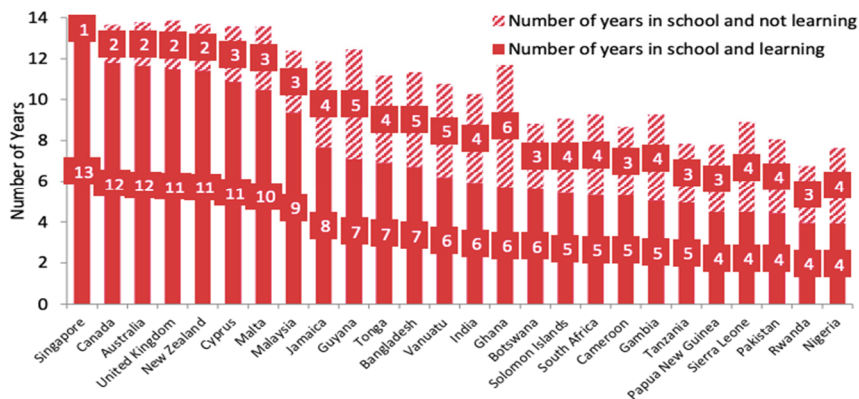
In 1999, Uganda’s National Strategy for Girls’ Education committed to redressing the imbalances and injustices in girls’ education. However, in the early years, it had not made much progress towards removing barriers to girls’ education. One reason for this was that the Strategy had not been incorporated into the Government of Uganda’s Education Sector Investment Programme.

The foregoing example does demonstrate that all sorts of challenges prevent African nations from keeping their commitment to support girl-child education. This is not to say that no progress has been made in achieving access for girls to primary schooling, for over the past two decades significant has been made in increasing access to primary schooling (Gordon et al, 2019). Yet, although such notable progress has been made, “12 years of schooling remains a distant reality for many of the most disadvantaged girls residing in Commonwealth countries”, including Nigeria, as shown in Figure 3. Comparatively, the Nigerian situation tells a very sad story with respect to being in school and learning and being in school and not learning. Figure 3 was included for the sole purpose of highlighting the need to focus on girl-child education.

Figure 3: 12 Years Target of Being in School and Learning

Figure S2: Girls are far from the 12 years target of being in school and learning

Learning adjusted years of schooling for girls, latest year



Source: World Bank (2018). Accessed November 2018.

Note:

- Figure 3 was taken from Gordon et al (2019) Cambridge REAL Centre’s recent report on *12 Years of Quality Education for All Girls*.

To bring Bayelsa into the frame, I refer to NDLINK (2019) who comments on the situation. That source reports that in January 2019, UNICEF collaborated with the Bayelsa State Government on a campaign to reduce the rising rate of out-of-school children in Bayelsa. Walton Liverpool, the Executive Secretary, State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), led a 15-member enrolment drive committee that was installed by the state Commissioner for Education, Jonathan Obuebite. The commissioner pointed out that the Nigerian government had invested over N70 billion on education in order to encourage school enrolment. This is a step in the right direction because there are 12.3 million out-of-school children in Nigeria. It is also commendable that a special focus was on girl-child education. However, the resulting condition appears to reflect the Ugandan situation mentioned earlier, for as the Executive Secretary of SUBEB pointed out, of the 265 000 children who are out of school in Bayelsa, 159 000 of them are girls.

Clearly, there is a dire need to push the enrolment policy in the entire State of Bayelsa. In spite of the many barriers that are yet to cross, it is advantageous to continue the fight for girl-child education in Bayelsa and the African nation.

The Konyefa Foundation

The Konyefa Foundation is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that has its headquarters in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Its main aim is to encourage and assist in the education of the girl-child. Founder of the foundation, Dr (Mrs) Rachael Dickson, is committed to championing the cause for girl-child education via the Konyefa Foundation. Her passion for the development of girls by way of a sound education has led her to establish the foundation, which she refers to as her *pet project*. Dr Dickson strongly asserts that the empowerment of women enables them to make a meaningful contribution to the development of the State, and eventually the African nation. For

this to become a reality, the education of girls is not an option, but an imperative. So how has the Konyefa Foundation been championing girl-child education in Bayelsa?

Space does not allow for a full account of the Foundation's operations. The paper will therefore make mention of an event that merits attention. It is the sponsoring of 220 girls for the Spice Catering School in Yenagoa in March 2015. During the graduation ceremony, the participants were encouraged "to maximise the opportunity provided by the Foundation by engaging in meaningful activities so that the resources put in their training would not have been wasted" (The Nations, 2015). This example is certainly one to emulate by other NGOs and organisations because no single company can successfully deal with the numerous challenges that are related to girl-child education.

The aims of the Konyefa Foundation are tied to girls' education in order to realise three specific outcomes: (1) personal development; (2) national development; and (3) sustainable education and development. But in addition to these long-term results, the improvement in feelings of self-worth can have far-reaching effects on family life and the multiplier effect in terms of financial upshots and positive influences on children's lives. The Foundation recognises that it is a long way off from achieving its goals, but it is unswerving in its bid to help the girl-children of Bayelsa to be schooled and educated.

Conclusion

The main purpose of the paper was to examine girls' education, with a special focus on Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Literature from various sources was reviewed in order to build and support the discussion. In light of the review, it is quite clear that girls' education is a serious problem in many countries around the world. With the spotlight on Nigeria, the paper asserts that the Nigerian education system has not honoured its commitment to care for the basic learning needs of all children, especially girls. It relates how the Konyefa Foundation has come forward to help the education plight of girls in Bayelsa, and how it is planning to widen its scope to consider neighbouring states, and eventually the entire African nation. The Foundation contends that there are many levels of benefits that can be derived from educating girls. Long-term advantages are linked to personal, national and sustainable development.

Malala Yousafzai, with the mononymous name Malala, is a Pakistani activist who fights for female education. She makes this acknowledgement I one of her famous quotes: *Nigeria faces many challenges—but none of them can be solved without education. Today tens of millions of Nigerian children are out of school; most of them are girls. This is a tragedy for girls, an enormous waste of human potential and a threat to the future of Nigeria.* Joaquim Chissano, former President of Mozambique, has also use a strong quotation to highlight the female education in the African context: *Women and girls are Africa's greatest untapped resource, and it is they, not diamonds or oil and minerals, that will be the foundation for solid, sustainable and equitable progress...* Neither Malala nor the former President of Mozambique is misguided. The girls' education in Nigeria is indeed a serious one. The paper therefore concludes with this reminder via a well-known African Proverb, to Ministry of Education officials, governmental authorities and policy makers: *If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a nation.* This very proverb is one of the premises that drives the Konyefa Foundation to pay special attention to ensuring that all girl-children in Bayelsa, as well as the wider African community, get a sound and meaningful education.

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