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## Birth of the girl-child in Nigeria society: Cultural implications

Amadi-Ali Beatrice O. \*

*Department of Early Childhood/Primary Education, Faculty of Education, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.*

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### Abstract

Culture is the way of life of a people. It includes everything people do and have as members of a society, such as knowledge, ideas, skills, beliefs, literature, philosophy, religions, language, among others. Culture represents the way of life of a group of people. Every child has the right to be born; right to survival and development; right to enjoy the best attainable state of physical, mental and spiritual health, irrespective of the sex of the child. Also, every child has the right to free, compulsory and universal education; and, every child who is in need of special attention and special protection measures has the right to such measures as is appropriate to his/her physical, social, economic, emotional and mental needs and under conditions which ensure his/her dignity, promote his/her self-reliance and active participation in the affairs of the community. This paper discussed some of the injustice infringed on the girl-child from birth through to her life as a woman. The paper discusses the denial of the girl-child's right to be born; the girl-child discriminated after birth, the girl-child's education and its cultural implications and, the girl and national development. It was concluded that the birth of a girl-child today is a blessing because no family, community or society can develop without women involved directly or indirectly. When a girl is born, a woman is born; and a nation is born. In the same vein, when a girl is trained, a woman is trained; and when a woman is trained, a nation is trained. Based on this conclusion, it was recommended among others that Nigerian society should appreciate the birth of girl-children; as well as welcome the western ideology in training or educating females.

**Keywords:** Birth of the girl-child; Nigerian society; Cultural implications; People

### 1. Introduction

The sex of an unborn child is instantly determined during fertilization; and it is the father's sperm cell that is exclusively responsible for this decision. The ovum or the egg that a woman produces is female because it contains an X. The woman's sperm cells carry an X chromosome, while the male sex chromosome carries a Y and an X. At the time of fertilization, if an X chromosome is released by the man and another X chromosome is released by the woman to join the X released by the man (father and mother), the result will be a baby-girl; but if a male Y chromosome joins with the female X chromosome, the result will become a baby-boy. Whether a woman bears boys or girls that is not decided by her chromosome factor, rather the chromosome factor of the man. If any man therefore gets angry because his wife bears either only male or female children, that man is ridiculous. The man should get angry with himself for being unable to give his wife mixed sex chromosomes. It is a matter of procreation, therefore not even the man should be blamed (Amadi-Ali, 2003)

When a man or a woman gets angry because God gave them only boys or girls, this is called gender discrimination. Gender discrimination can be defined as any action implied or applied that lowers the self worth of a child due to the

\* Corresponding author: Amadi-Ali Beatrice O.

Department of Early Childhood/Primary Education, Faculty of Education, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

child's gender. In Nigerian society, the discrimination rests heavily on the girl-children. In some cultures in Nigeria, male children are preferred to female children. In those cultures, parents of three to four daughters without a son express bitterness for not having male children. Regrettably, many mothers have died in the process of having more and more pregnancies in pursuit of male children. A good number of women have been divorced or chased out of their matrimonial home because they bore only female children. This shows the value placed on male-children over female children in some Nigerian cultures.

Though, Nigeria is a signatory to all the international policies on human and women rights. It is surprising that in societies all over the world, sexism is a constant phenomenon. It creates for women (girls) condition of exploitation and subjection. Women's right, freedom, dignity, equality and even the right to be born are persistently compromised all over the world by customs that affect their social status in spite of the universal declaration of human rights. In Nigeria, specific instruments that facilitate the protection of the right of women has not been put in place. Women's rights are violated on regular basis in some parts of Nigeria. They hold the belief that women's human rights is simply a western construct, as such these rights are disregarded on the ground that it runs contrary to cultural stipulations. In many cultures and customs as stipulated Okoh, cited in Wokocha & Wokocha (2013), male children enjoy greater importance than female children.

Parents who do not have male offspring feel unfulfilled and can go extra length to ensure they have one. The arrival of a female baby is welcomed in some cases with mixed feelings by disappointed parents who would have preferred a male baby. Wokocha and Wokocha (2013) further assert that although Nigeria is evolving gradually from traditional and cultural settings to urban drift due to the influence of industrialization and western education, the attitude of her citizens towards female offspring has not changed significantly.

### **1.1. Girl-Children Denied the Right to be Born**

The negative attitude towards the birth of the girl-child and the preference over male children is not limited to Nigerian society. In many African countries, girls are subdued to take care of their younger ones and perform domestic chores, while boys play a lot and are less involved with domestic chores. Beyond Nigeria and other African countries, some countries of the world also discriminate against girl-children and even deny them the right to be born.

As revealed Awake, July 8 1992, cited in Amadi-Ali (2003), women in India are using scan or ultra-sound machines to determine if their foetus is male or female. If female, the foetus is often aborted, but if male, the foetus is retained. This same practice is applicable to countries like China and South Korea. This had resulted to dramatically altered sex ratio in India. In Haryana State for instant, there are only 874 females for every 1,000 males. The adverse sex ratio occurs not because fewer girls are conceived and born, but because fewer are allowed to be born or to survive. Females are considered to be liabilities because in Indian, dowries must be given at the time of marriage to the groom. The journal Indian express as cited in Amadi-Ali (2003) revealed that a survey conducted in Bombay showed that out of 8,000 foetus aborted, following sex-determination tests, 7,999 were female.

Furthermore, in China and in South Korea, from the time technology made it possible for doctors to dictate the sex of an unborn baby, the birth of baby girls have seriously declined. These two countries are the most fanatics in sex discrimination. Added to this, about 30,000 women or more decide in present time to commit abortion when they discover that they are carrying female foetus.

In Nigeria society, some families tend to prefer male children to female children. Until very recently female children were not sent to school. In certain cases, husbands are known to marry second, third, fourth and even more wives because the first wife could not give birth to a male child. Some husbands are known to divorce their wives because they could not bear male children. This action of the husbands is predicted on the belief that it is only the male child that can propagate the name of the family and possibly takes care or inherit the father's property and eventually replace the father in the event of death (Ikoh, 2013).

### **1.2. The girl-child discriminated after birth**

Girl-children are not only denied the right to be born, they are even discriminated after being born. For instance in Nigeria and some other African countries, when a son is born into a family there is happiness and rejoicing. The boy-children are viewed as the head and owners of the family (mostly the first sons). Traditionally, the boy-child is a protection to the family and not a burden during his parents' old age. He is the heir, the next of kin of his father. The mother's position as a full wife is guaranteed, the family's social security is also guaranteed. When a daughter is born, the situation and belief change. The negative reaction is mild at the birth of the first daughter though, but at the birth of the second, third, fourth and so on, feelings no longer hide. The mother is looked upon as a failure and disappointment.

Her position in the family becomes shaky; fear of her husband abandoning her for another wife becomes obvious. The mother lives with much anxiety and insecurity; she could lose her husband any moment to another woman.

The birth of many girl-children is as if the mother has merely brought burdens to the family. In countries such as India and Greece where women pay dowry, it means increase in burden since parents have to provide dowry to marry the girls off. Their survival is not considerably important to the well being of the family (Asuka, 2014).

### **1.3. The girl-child education and cultural implications**

Some cultural practices in Nigeria abound, which deny girl-children the right to be educated. As opined Nwagor (2018), some Nigerian girls who are below 18 years of age are given out in marriage very early, while some are withdrawn from school and given out in marriage without their consent. Some of the girls are sometimes given out to people as house helps and nannies. Some also are made to engage in hawking during school hours, thereby deny them the right to go to school.

Furthermore, girls are not as highly valued as boys; this sometimes results in a situation whereby the parents quickly give the girl out in marriage to any man nor matter the age. Child marriage is common among rural dwellers and illiterate parents. Child marriage has been a subject of intense debate among women organizations. Campaigns have been mounted to discourage this practice because of the health, moral and physical dangers associated with it. Parents are encouraged to send their children to school (Obioma, 2014).

In Nigeria today, girls are not only badly treated, but are almost completely isolated in the field of education; reason being that some cultures and tradition view girls as another man's property. It is almost common belief that training or sending a girl to school is a waste of money because after her schooling, she will be married to a total stranger who will acquire her and change her name. Girls are traditionally regarded as child-bearers, kitchen managers and farm-cultivators, hence, sending them to school is considered less significant. Sometimes too, girls are denied the right to go to school in favour of their brothers. To buttress this, Zahra, a 15 year old girl exclaims:

*"When I see how women are treated, I really don't want to become one"* (Watch Tower, September 1, 2012).

A United Nations (UN as cited in Awake 2012) reports a worldwide education discrimination against girls. It reports that worldwide, women and girls make up to two thirds of those who had less than four years of schooling.

Njoku (2012) informs that due to so much work, girls are expected to perform at home, many of them do not have access to formal education, as well as chances for self-development. Njoku (2012) therefore recommends that children (girl-children inclusive) should be made to see themselves as valued individuals. In this way, every child will have the opportunity to flourish in a supportive and loving environment designed to meet the child's needs.

Furthermore, one of the six EFA (Education For All) goals stipulated during the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal in April 2000 declaration to achieve education for all by 2015, being four years ago, was assessing gender parity and equality in education. This being the number 5 goal, required eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality (Asuka, 2014). Asuka (2014) however identified low rate of girls to boys in school among some of the greatest challenges as obstacles for achieving the EFA goals in Africa (Nigeria inclusive). There is a considerable level of parity in the enrolment of boys and girls in primary and secondary schools. Gender parity has not been achieved, girls are still disadvantaged.

Education is the best process of human capital development. It is a process by which an individual's cognitive, affective, psychomotor and social abilities are developed and harnessed to cope with future challenges. Both men and women are confronted with developmental tasks at every stage of life; education empowers them to cope with or surmount these challenges. In order words, education is a way of empowerment through which people acquire the requisite skills needed for development and increased productivity (Nwagor, 2018).

Education plays an indispensable role in the empowerment of women. Western education is not culture-bound, therefore, it goes beyond the provisions, beliefs, customs and norms of local cultures. It nurtures and moulds people beyond the frontiers of cultural boundaries which set limits to what women should do. To this end, Osuji (2013) opined that for women to get empowered, they must be given the opportunity to embrace education which is a gate-way to harnessing all beauties of nature. Education enhances the political, economic and social empowerment of people, including women.

Unfortunately, irrespective of the above assertion, some cultural beliefs about the dividends of women education remain static, and have not changed. Some cultures and sub-cultures in Nigeria give preference to male children, as they are usually regarded as the pillars of the family. Females are usually less privileged and consequently not given adequate opportunity to acquire education and formal training, a practice which supports that women's education ends in the kitchen.

#### **1.4. The girl-child and national development**

Some cultures and tradition follow religious beliefs and practices that foster or even justify abuse of women and girls, and violence against them. Women are the backbone of the nation. The success of any society is not complete without women. Children who are the future of the nation are always with women and are taken care of by women. Yet, despite the significant contributions of women to the immediate and extended society, as well as the nation as a whole, wrong belief, traditional practices and customs are exhibited even among the literate and educated folks of the society.

In some parts of Nigeria, women are not allowed to appear before the gathering of men to make suggestions. Women are left behind in major cultural ceremonies; and some cultures prefer the death of a female child to that of a male, hence, negating the purpose of creation. In some parts of Nigeria, custom does not permit women to inherit property and own land. Some families do this because it is believed that women are their husbands' property since they change their maiden surname to their matrimonial surname.

Osuji (2013) informs that empowerment of women is an important tool for advancing productivity of a nation. Empowering women is an essential tool for advancing development and reducing high level of poverty in various families. To corroborate this, Adiele (2009) confirms that women contribute to the health and productivity of families and communities; as well as improve prospects for the next generation.

Empowered women contribute immensely to national development in all facets of life. Marcus (2012) highlighted that there are some social problems that only women can really solve. In instance, women empowerment in education, economic opportunity and legal rights has become the tool that has brought birth rate to a manageable level in some countries. Unfortunately, irrespective of the laudable contributions women make towards the overall development of the family and country at large, they are still looked down upon and reduced to second class citizens. This erroneous belief makes the education of girls to be given a second thought, while that of the boys gains top priority. Some vocations and jobs such as engineering jobs, carpentry, brick laying, among others, are regarded as men's jobs; while music, nursing, teaching and trading are designed as feminine. Some cultures hold the belief that when a woman has a career and involves in politics or paid employment, she will not have enough time for her children and husband (Nwagor, 2018).

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## **2. Conclusion**

The birth of a girl-child in the contemporary world is a thing of joy where beside every successful man is a woman. When a girl-child is born, a woman is born, and as a woman is born, a nation is born. There is hardly a developed family, community or nation without women being directly or indirectly involved. In time past, women were not given opportunity to work as engineers, carpenters, drivers and mechanics; but today women occupy these positions, as such contribute to national development. Women are involved in politics, irrespective of cultural beliefs. For example, in Rivers State of Nigeria today, a woman (Ibanibo-Harry Banigo) is the deputy governor, a woman (Zainab Shamsuna Ahmed) is the finance minister of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Notably, Professor (Mrs.) Grace Alele William was a Vice-Chancellor of the University of Benin; Professor Dora Akinyili was the NAFDAC; Professor (Mrs.) Stella Ogbuagu was appointed Chairman, Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO); Dr. (Mrs.) Ngozi Okonji-Iwuala was a Minister of Finance during President Goodluck Jonathan's administration. Professor Rosemund Dienne Green-Osahogulu was a female Vice-Chancellor of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State.

There are a good number of women in Nigeria today occupying strategic political and economic positions. Women are medical doctors, lawyers, lecturers and accountants in Nigeria. This therefore reveals that women are very significant in the helm of affairs and should be allowed to be born; should not be discriminated after birth; should not be given out in early or childhood marriage and should be given equal opportunity with their male counterparts to education. The significance of the contribution of women to national development is enormous, hence they should be regarded, valued and respected.

### *Suggestions*

- This paper believes that the birth of a girl-child is a blessing; and that women's education is not consigned to the kitchen. Based on this, the following suggestions are made:
- Female foetus should not be the major target of abortions, hence forth. In the first place, God frowns at abortions generally; but if abortion is ever committed, it shouldn't basically be because the foetus is female. The girl-child should be given the right to be born and should not be discriminated against after birth.
- All customs and traditions that discriminate against women should be abolished.
- All cultures should respect and dignify women.
- Women should be given equal right to education with men.
- Government should design, implement and monitor the participation of women in the political ring for effective, efficient and mutuality, re-enforcing gender sensitive policies and programmes at all levels that will foster the empowerment and advancement of women.
- Nigerian society should appreciate the birth of girl-children; as well as welcome the western ideology in training or educating females.

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### **Compliance with ethical standards**

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