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GIRL CHILD EDUCATION FOR INCLUSIVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The socio-economic marginalization of females derived from gender disparities, lack of access and quality education leads to subsequent youth unemployment, working poverty, poor standards of living, diminished career choices, unequal salaries and economic exclusion. It is therefore imperative for leaders and governments to invest in girl-child education for Africa's development by castigating gender-based violence, sexual discrimination, gender stereotypes and obliterating early-child marriage. The blatant repudiation of girl's fundamental rights to access equal and quality education is the indictment of a continent that has failed young women and their broader continuous struggle for emancipation, equality and power. This paper lays out some of the problems that girls face and presents an outline of how girl child education is critical to fostering inclusive sustainable development in Africa.

Key Words: Agenda 2063, Africa, girl-child education, early-child marriage, African Union

INTRODUCTION

“These aspirations reflect our desire for shared prosperity and well-being, for unity and integration, for a continent of free citizens and expanded horizons, where the full potential of women and youth are realized.” – Agenda 2063.

The above quote emanates from the African Union's (henceforth the AU) Agenda 2063 which proposed human-centered development approach that caters for gender equality and youth empowerment. The reasons why there are gender imbalances in education is due to policy factors that contribute to gender gaps such as lack of government funding for schools and teacher salaries; lack of free and compulsory primary education; poor financial incentives for girls' education and discrepancies between policy and practice in girls' education discussions. Such gender inequalities with regards to fair access and enrollment are therefore impediments to the vision that young African females deserve. Consequently strategies must be carried out in order to ensure that girls' education policy programs receive sufficient funding and consideration so as to reduce the gap between policy and practice. Inclusive prosperity and socio-economic progress should be availed to all without discrimination on the basis of race, gender and geography hence education is a fundamental right for both boys and girls. Education itself represents the means to social mobility and access to innovation which will propel Africa's industrialization. The premise of this paper maintains that educating girls freely and fairly across Africa is indeed crucial to Agenda 2063 therefore there needs to be a strategy developed in alignment with the United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is especially true for goal number four which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN, 2016). As well as goal number five for achieving gender equality and empower all girls and women thus acknowledging that gender inequality is a persistent reality and an impediment to progress in inclusive sustainable development. In order to attain inclusive sustainable development, it is important for African leaders, civic and private sectors to collaborate with both local and regional organizations to tackle the challenges that girls face in school enrollment, learning environments, infrastructure, curriculum and social barriers.

Poverty, early child marriage, gender-based violence and sexual discrimination are some of the hindrances that lead to the girls dropping out of schools. In areas where menstruation is a taboo, girls can stop going to school to avoid embarrassment and social stigma during their menstrual cycle. The worst cases involve areas where sharia law is instigated and girls are completely barred from getting an education or where practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) are encouraged. For example, Sudanese law discriminates against women and girls through the application of Sharia (Islamic) law penalties for “morality crimes,” such as adultery or dress code violations according to the World Report by the Human Rights Watch (2018). Hence taking into account that eight of the ten countries in which child marriage is most common worldwide are located in Africa (UNICEF, 2017), it does not suffice therefore for African countries to declare that, “All forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls will be eliminated...All harmful social practices (especially FGM and child marriages) will be ended and barriers to quality health and education for women and girls eliminated”

(Agenda 2063). There needs to be subsequent policies and independent working groups to monitor progress in quality of education, access and national development taking into account the factors in the subsequent section which hinder access to fair and quality education for girls.

IMPEDIMENTS TO EQUAL AND QUALITY EDUCATION

The concept of equity in education denotes the ability of children to reach their full cognitive, physical and social development without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity or where they live (UNICEF, 2013). According to UNESCO (2004) quality and equality in education are intricately linked. Thus neither of these factors should therefore be overlooked when introducing programs that support girl-child education across the continent.

Kendall (2006) posits how in Malawi, researchers discovered that teacher behavior and the availability of desks affected girls more than boys. Whilst according to UNICEF (2017) the percentage of young women who married before turning 18 years old is above 30 per cent in Central, Southern, and Eastern Africa and above 40 per cent in Western Africa. Another hindrance to keeping girls in school is the fear of violence from male teachers, classmates and community members on their way to school. UNODC (2013) states that increasing gender-based violence disproportionately affects women, youth and children and takes place mostly in rural areas where concentrations of poverty, marginalization, exploitation and violence exist. The other factors that account for gender disparities in education include socio-cultural issues like religion, gender stereotypes, fears of teenage girls becoming pregnant at school, ignorance, prejudiced attitudes and patriarchal social norms that affect how girls learn. Jones (2011) adds that some of the issues that impede girls' access include inadequate sanitation, poor school facilities, the predominance of male teachers and lax school management.

Some instances exist whereby teachers are often severely underpaid; schools are situated long distances away from where girls live; dilapidated school buildings; not enough text books or school furniture and increasing sexual harassment of girls by their teachers or classmates. All of these challenges must be taken into consideration since the learning environment is generally not conducive to learning or retaining knowledge. Provisions must also be made for girls who are refugees, displaced children from fragile states, asylum seekers, migrants and those abducted by militants like the Boko Haram.

When families are faced with extreme poverty, limited resources and lack of funding for sending girls to school, relegates females to unpaid labour, caregiving duties, household chores, farming and child rearing thus depriving them of their capacity to innovate and excel in academia. Furthermore, this is aggravated for girls who are orphans and vulnerable children (OVC), conflict areas and girls with physical or learning disabilities. It is important to involve boys and men in deliberations pertaining to patriarchal cultural and societal practices such as early-child marriage that hinder girl-child education. Early-child marriage is a huge deterrent to gender-inclusive development as child brides are much more likely to drop out of school and complete fewer years of education than their peers who marry later. Ultimately, this affects the education and health of their children, as well as their ability to earn income.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

This section describes gender-inclusive innovation policy considerations and proposed solutions to the issues raised in the preceding section that can contribute to promoting girls' access and right to education.

1. The abolition of early child marriage by instigating punitive measures for religious sects, communities or families who perpetuate the practice.
2. Safety and security for girls who live in conflict areas, protection from militants and violence. Safe spaces, separate toilet facilities for girls, sanitary ware provision and social protection systems to protect girls in school.
3. National government incentives for improving teacher salaries; training and allocating qualified teachers for remote rural areas; increasing female teachers and quality school facilities for girls with special needs like physical or learning disabilities from poor families.
4. Government initiatives to upgrade public services and improve infrastructure such as school electricity; lighting; proper ventilation; accessible and clean drinking water; proper waste management; school lunches; ablution facilities; proper school furniture; equipment and a manageable student-teacher ratio for classrooms.

5. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) scholarships at tertiary institutions, grants, mentorship programs for girls and increased female teachers in those subjects to bridge gender gaps in science and math subjects. Affordable or free primary school education and stipends to improve primary and secondary school completion for girls.
6. Use of big data and girl child education statistics to measure and monitor school enrollment based on gender as well as upgrade national statistics databases on unemployed youths, school leavers, skilled and unskilled youths based on age, location and gender.
7. Gender sensitivity awareness training and capacity-building programs for all those working with and for children and families.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, the tutelage of girls is perhaps the most peaceful form of justice in order to address deep-rooted educational gender imbalances which relegate females to second-class citizens across Africa and usher them to poverty. The penalties for early child marriage, discrimination, violence against girls and unfair practices should be so severe to deter their perpetrators. There are innumerable factors to address gender inequalities in education such as enrollment policies and practices, curriculum relevance, teacher deployment, gender-inclusive learning environments, security in fragile states or conflict areas, innovative e-learning technologies and resource allocation. It is essential to examine how precise educational programs and policies will affect boys and girls differently by considering their different roles, responsibilities and needs as well as the degree to which their culture or society treats them. The goal is to ensure that girls enter and stay in school, access the same quality academic resources afforded to boys, learn safely, study STEM subjects and achieve academically. It is only when no girl child is left behind in education that inclusive sustainable development becomes a reality.

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