Girl Child and Women Education: Exploring the Narratives of Six Educated Nigerian Women.

Margaret Ebubedike

University of Worcester

The narratives of six female Higher Education (HE) leaders' in Nigeria were examined. As educated women themselves, the participants mention that education empowered them to explore further on their capabilities, assert their agency, and subsequently challenge structures and institutions that limit them as women. Hence, denying women and girls access to education has implications both on their lives, and the society in terms of missed opportunities. The key decision-makers and influencers of their education were their fathers. The experiences of these women could possibly provide insight into government gender policies in Nigeria, and other developing nations: particularly, in the area of, women and girls education. This study, took into account the aspect of voice and experiences of the women and how education has contributed to changing their lives. It adds to a global scholarship of the phenomenon under review which allows for the development of more in-depth and holistic understanding of women and girls education, and how it could be redressed in order to provide equal educational opportunity for all by 2030.

Introduction

Education is the right of every child irrespective of gender or family background. It is the access to a transformed life and a liberated mind. Consequently, denying a girl child the right to education is depriving her of the opportunity to discover herself and her full potential. Evidence provided by the Human Development Report (HDR) (2001), suggest that access to education is divided along gender lines. The report shows that male school enrolment prevails over female. Salman et al., (2011) highlights that, to achieve any form of national development; both the male and female members of any given society must be involved. Similarly, at the

World Conference on Education for All (EFA) (1990) in Geneva, awareness was raised on the need for gender equity in education. The Beijing Conference of (1995), and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2005), also placed emphasis on gender equity in education. The sustainable development goal (SDG) 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education is aimed at promoting lifelong learning opportunities for both boys and girls by 2030, (UN, 2015).

Contextual Background

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2013) identifies the need for equal opportunities for all children in Nigeria who are of school age irrespective of their gender. One of the main concerns of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (5) is providing women and girls, with equal access to education (UN, 2015). Aikman and Unterhalter (2005), draw attention to the emphasis of EFA goals-ensuring girls' full and equal access to, and achievement in basic education of good quality. More so, the Beijing Declaration Document of the twenty-third Assembly states that women and girls' education is a human right, and an essential element for the full enjoyment of all other social, political, economic and cultural rights (Women Watch, 2005). The emphasis here was, to persuade member countries, to focus on the education of women. Nigeria is on the path of promoting women and girls' education programme which is aimed at assisting women to function effectively in all spheres of life. Momodu (2014), points out that education helps women to be intellectually sound, rationally disposed, and patriotic so that they can contribute meaningfully and realistically to national development

According to the Human Development Report (2001), In Nigeria, male literacy rates are higher than the female rate by 15% or more. Reacting, Nussbaum (2003) questions: why should we think that the above report matters deeply? Here is why, if there was a time when illiteracy was not a barrier to employment, that time has passed. The nature of the world economy is such that illiteracy limits

a woman (or man) to a small number of low-skilled types of employment (Nussbaum, 2003). Arguably, education is an important factor to consider if the status of women would be improved; and as such, education is a recognised fundamental strategy for development. Dauda (2007) confirms that no sustainable development is possible if women remain uneducated. Therefore, improving and widening access to education, especially basic education, is not only an objective in itself but also accelerates social and economic advancement (Dauda, 2007).

According to the report by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2007), girls' access to basic education, especially in northern Nigeria, has remained low. It further explains that only 20% of women in the north-west and north-east of the country are literate and have attended school. They argue that this situation is even more alarming in the north-central and north-west of the country (UNICEF, 2007). Adeniran (2009) reminds us that there is the need for more access to female education. Hence, the current reform in the education sector by the Federal Government of Nigeria. The aim of these reforms is to design practices and programmes intended to bring about positive changes and new development in one or more aspects of the education system in Nigeria. The main concern is to address the inequality in education as a result of gender prejudice and socio-cultural misconceptions (Salman et al., 2011). Within this reform, some of the significant changes made, to provide more education access to all children of school going age in the country include: The National Curriculum Conference in 1969, Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1976, the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1977, revised in 1981, 1998, 2004, 2007 and 2013, and the 1999 Universal Basic Education (UBE), which brought about the UBE Act of 2004. The UBE Act redefined basic education in Nigeria, and now covers the early childhood care and education of all Nigerian children of school age, irrespective of gender, by providing them with uninterrupted and free, compulsory

access to nine years of formal schooling, thereby creating more opportunities for the education of girls and women (Obong, 2006). The NPE (2013) states that access to education should not be along gender lines. The policy stipulation went on to stress that the government will continuously make special effort to encourage girl-child education in Nigeria.

The rationale for this stance by the federal government is based on the idea that nations that invest in girls' education enhance economic productivity and growth. In fact, the World Bank (2011) mentioned that there is no investment more effective for achieving developmental goals than providing equal opportunities to the education of girls. Dugbazah (2009) opined that gaining access to education will create more economic opportunities for women. Education, is no doubt one of the most powerful and proven avenue for sustainable development. Sadly, while the world has achieved progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment through education under the Millennium Development Goals, girls in Sub-Saharan Africa, still face barriers to entering both primary and secondary school. This concern births the overarching research question for this study. Which seeks to understand the extent to which women and girls' education reduce certain socio- cultural factors that hinder women empowerment in Nigeria?

Theoretical framing

To capture fully the experiences of the participants in this study, and to represent their realities, and to make their voices central in this research, Critical Race Theory (CRT) would provide a framework for contextualising the epistemological views of their lived experiences regarding discrimination and marginalisation (Bernal 2002; Ladson-Billings 2000). Ladson-Billings (1998, p. 10) points out that CRT has its foundations in the 1970s' "leftist legal movement." Therefore, the emergence of CRT was a response in part to the shortcomings of Critical Legal Studies (Rollock & Gillborn, 2011). As

noted by Dixson and Rousseau (2006), scholars such as Ladson-Billings and Tate only began to apply the context of CRT in studies within the field of education in the mid-1990s. At present, in order to make sense of the ongoing inequality in educational experiences and outcomes, CRT offers the major yardstick through which educational research and practice could be analysed and critiqued (Ladson-Billings 2005). Furthermore, scholarship and social justice where identified by Gillborn (2005) as the two key objectives of Critical Race Theory. Gillborn (2005) went on to claim that scholarship and social justice interrupts several 'common sense' assumptions that inform education policy and practice. CRT is therefore concerned with discrimination and subordination (Bernal 2002; Morris 2001). Delgado (1990), cited in Morris (2001, p. 578) mentioned that naming one's own reality as a central theme, makes the experiences of prejudiced people significant. However, Gillborn and Ladson-Billings (2010) draw attention to the fact that within the literature, there is no single position or account that wholly defines CRT. Thus, CRT approach continues to go through a process of change, revision and refinement and it is constantly responding to the scholarly experiences of CRT theorists in relation to the developmental changes within legal doctrine and policy discourse.

Nonetheless, the aspect of CRT relevant to this study is in its commitment to understanding and challenging systems that oppress and subjugate women (Bell, 2009). In particular, the focus is on the concept of 'voice' of the marginalised. To explore their stories and to understand how the patriarchal social structures within their cultural societies oppress and marginalise them. The participants in this study create a sense of awareness which brings about some sort of emancipation and rationalised thinking around the oppression they face (King, 1992).

Socio- Cultural Barriers to Women and Girls Education in Nigeria

The enrolment of the girl child in school is minimal due to obvious socio- cultural reasons. The Nigerian society is rooted in patriarchy, and as such, the social structures, permeates male dominance in most spheres of the society. Sadly, this institutional discrimination against women is also evidenced in their acquiring formal education. According to Makama (2013), the major aspects of discrimination and oppression often encountered by women is as a result of a systemic conditioning, which has its roots in the family and in the society. The patriarchal structures in the society are rooted in tradition, and are further strengthened by religion, which continuous to patronise male superiority (Makama, 2013). Despite the evident pledge by various international bodies towards bridging the gender gap, particularly, the efforts of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing platform, discriminatory practices against women is still evident in Nigeria.

According to UNICEF (2007) young girls, particularly in Northern Nigeria, are denied the right of education. This is in accordance to the prevailing cultural practice in that region; they are rather given out in early marriage and become teenage mothers. Elliot (2010) reminds us that the culture of a collective group or individual relies upon the culture of the society they belong to. Hence, the gender inequity evidenced Nigeria is a creation of cultural influence, a practice which enshrines the subjugation of women (Oluyemi and Yinusa, 2016). Subsequently, this traditional conceptualisation of the position of women in the society, promotes this sort of negative values and images of the female gender. It could therefore be argued that culture is often positioned as a tool of oppression to preserve inequality and gender injustice against women within this context.

Education and Women Empowerment

Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process (ICPD Programme of Action, paragraph 4.2) "A process of enabling women to develop the capacity to actualize their potentials" (Fadeiye and Olanegan, 2001, p.66). Education is significantly beneficial to all, but more importantly to girls and women. Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, improve nutrition and promote health and well-being.

According to Ojobo (2008), the educational empowerment of Nigerian women is the springboard to every other form of empowerment. Women empowerment is a process by which unequal power relations are transformed and women gain greater equality with men. At the government level, this includes the extension of all fundamental social, economic and political rights to women. At the individual level, this includes processes by which women gain inner power to express and defend their rights and gain greater self-esteem and control over their own lives and personal and social relationships. The major agent of empowerment is education (Gupta, 2014). This includes formal education, informal education, skill acquisition and access to information.

Methodology

This study adopted narratives (Bell, 2010; Cousin, 2009; Chase, 2011) to adequately respond to the identified research question. The rationale for the choice of narratives in this study was majorly influenced by Bruner (1986) who reminds us that narrative studies, narrative inquiry, or good stories, have also become equally significant epistemological tools for understanding human

experience.

Samples

This study is a piece of narrative research which purposively sampled (Silverman, 2013), six female highly-educated HE leaders from different cultures and backgrounds in Nigeria. All the women were, at the time of the research, occupying senior leadership positions in various universities located within the contexts investigated. The participants agreed to share their educational background and experiences. I defined "highly-educated" in this study as having acquired a university doctoral degree. The selection on the basis of doctoral degree is restricted to the women whose doctoral degrees were earned academically. The women shared their experiences, as educated women themselves on how education has helped to provide a foundation for their agency. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher in this instance to source for relevant research participants, those who were likely to give certain kinds of answers having experienced the benefits of education themselves. The participants were seen as possessing the most information on the characteristic of interest.

Procedure

The interview dates were arranged via email contact, and followed-up by phone calls. Consent forms were also emailed out to participants. In addition, a letter of invitation for the interview stating the nature, purpose, and mode of dissemination of the study was emailed to participants. Five of the interviews took place in the office of the participants, whilst the Sixth interview was carried out in the participant's home. All interviews were tape-recorded with the participant's permission and a reflective journal of all six interviews was kept.

Each interview commenced after a brief summary of what the study was all about. The interviews lasted for one hour. At the

end of each interview, the participant was encouraged to send an email if they thought of further points in their stories that they would like to include or elaborate on. In addition, a transcript of the interview was sent to each participant and this was to allow them to review, remove, amend, or elaborate points as they preferred. This enhanced the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data.

Treatment of Interview Data

Participants' stories were examined as narratives of experience (Squire, 2008). The transcriptions of the interviews were segments of the interviews the participants permitted to be reported. The task of transcribing was personally carried out. The initial transcript was then sent back to each participant for verification to allow them to correct any information that they might have thought about following the interview, or note any area that they wanted to be removed or added- it was important that each woman had ownership. The major part of the research drew on the stories told by these women. Particularly, their personal experiences as educated women themselves, how they construct education, and the suggestions they make based on their own experience on the prospects education holds for the girl child and the Nigerian woman. The individual discussions were conducted in the broad format of semi-structured, one-on-one, tape-recorded interviews. In all, six separate interviews were carried out.

Each participant and their narrative were safeguarded as far as possible, by presenting them and the institutions they work as anonymous. Care was also taken to ensure the participants were prevented from harm as a result of the narratives they gave. They were also given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point they felt uncomfortable. Transcripts from the interview were also sent off to the participants to ensure they were willing to allow the researcher proceed with publishing the narratives just as they have shared it.

I declare any bias, which may have emerged from my own background as a cultural insider researching women from my own broad cultural context. This is a small-scale study with a sample size of six; the data is self-reported; and, because the researcher was based in the UK at the point the study was carried out, it was only possible to make one trip to Nigeria for the interviews. Therefore, a single one-on-one lengthy interview was conducted considering cost and modalities of international trips as this was a self-funded research.

Nevertheless, the study has raised some salient points, especially as it concerns the need for increased support for girl child and women education in Nigeria, not least was the importance of trying to understand how education of the girl child and that of the Nigerian woman could result to certain changes in the way women are socially perceived and positioned.

Data and discussion

As this study was of a relatively small sample of only six women, any findings must be taken as suggestive rather than conclusive. Appropriate literature on the phenomenon under investigation has been drawn upon on in order to discuss the emerging issues in this field. The women categorically distinguished between the formal schooling and non-formal training they received. They specifically referred to the non-formal aspect of education they had, as "training or discipline" which they gained from home and the socialisation they were exposed to. The women constantly make references to such training or discipline as that which takes place outside the walls of a formal school system. One of the women from the Northern context descried how she was trained:

> "I was brought up into a Muslim family and they instilled the values of Islam into me."

Thus, the participants tend to discuss these informal learning

experiences separately and describe themselves as being educated when they make reference to the academic institutions/schools they attended right from their basic schooling up unto their college education, first, second and third degrees as the case may be. One of the participant's, described her academic journey thus:

> "I finished from primary school and proceed to a model secondary school… I went into teachers training college…. I then moved to university of Lagos to do an NCE and from there I proceeded to obtain my first degree, and then continued to pursue my master's degree… I later returned to do my doctorate degree."

Another participant was very keen to refocus her narrative on her educational background when her story digressed initially. She was quick to draw my attention back when she said:

> "So let me just go back to my educational background."

The women take pride in relating their academic profile. They perceive their education as one of the key factors which has enhanced their career progress and as such forms an important aspect of their life story. The informal training they received also ranks as important. However, having only informal education does not pave the way to leadership. Nevertheless, the values learned from such training are equally relevant in dispensing their duties as women leaders as we read in their narratives:

> "The training and discipline you receive from home prepares you to function within any capacity as an educated woman, because you need those values. You need to respect elders, abide by the rules and regulations of the family and the state. Values teach you to be obedient to people older than you are,

and to respect their authority over you."

"My socialisation, background and training are all purely based on the Yoruba cultural context. The Yoruba culture teaches you, as a woman to be respectful, dutiful and hardworking. These virtues are very important if you must succeed in life."

"Okay I grew up taking a lot of responsibilities, taking care of my junior siblings, helping my parents to do one or two things domestically as a girl-child. As a child, I had a lot of responsibilities."

"I was trained to be helpful at home. My mother ensured I was involved in washing clothes and dishes, assisting in farm work and other general household chores. So as a child, I started with being assigned to handle a lot of responsibilities. I had two younger sisters, so I was trained to be both a boy and a girl in terms of taking responsibilities and facing challenges."

"The training I received from home eventually turned out to be useful. Initially, I felt my parents were being unkind. Now, I know better, that the discipline they gave to me as a child was to prepare me for the future. My training has helped me to show dedication and commitment to duties."

"Values learned from home are as important education. The two must go hand in hand. Whilst formal education provides you with the role, the informal training equips you with the virtues required to take on the role. That training is very relevant in whatever position you find yourself later in life."

The above excerpts conform to (Okafor 1992, pp. 2-4; Ifemesia, 2002, pp. 55-56). Both scholars mention that the family plays a leading role in the socialisation of every Igbo child-male or female. The family provides some sort of informal learning to children, and is expected to provide every form of orientation and acquaintance a child would require in order to become well-balanced and responsible. Informal training, integrates children into all acceptable aspects of traditional and cultural life. Within this "family school", every grown-up partakes in ensuring the child is given the basic training needed to promote the Igbo sense of solidarity.

Furthermore, when asked how they make constructs of the education they have acquired. In their narratives, all six women identified that education is vital, and it is essential for girl children as they recount that education is a 'valuable', thing, that which is worth being 'sought after', and which should be 'pursued'. One of the women in her interview shared her own perception on the importance of education:

> "Education is so important; you seek knowledge wherever you can. The awareness you gain from being educated equips you for the future and prepares you to take on other life challenges."

Another participant had this to say:

> "Education is gradually bringing about a change to our prevalent cultural practices. There is now more exposure, people are becoming more informed, culturally people are now getting wiser, people are now seeing things in a different light. These changes are mainly brought about by education. Education, changes the way people originally perceive things. Education is like a light that illuminates your path."

Yet another woman narrates:

> "The education I received is a major factor that has contributed to my achievement, and the value gained has in no small measure prepared me for the position I occupy today. Providing me with education was one of the best gifts I got from my father. Education, gave me a voice, it gave me carriage. It also equipped me to face challenges squarely, and how to comport myself, when faced with male opposition. Knowing that I am on an equal footing with the men intellectually, I am bold enough to speak up and render my voice to express what is in my mind, without fear of intimidation."

More so, the participants were asked if they would advise that every girl child should to be given the freedom of choice when it comes to career path, and not suffer restriction based on certain cultural ideologies. Sharing her experience as an educated woman, one participant conceived education as 'knowledge':

> "Knowledge is important. You seek knowledge wherever you can, because you need knowledge."

> "Then in the north, the problem I had was being a female wanting to read a particular course. Only few of us girls were admitted into that department. Some courses are termed to be difficult, most of the parents then in the north did not like the idea of their daughters reading those courses because they felt that by the time we graduate, we would have to work…several hours a day. . .and then we would become big women and very important women. . .the culture just want you to be a full time housewife. So that was the idea … when admitting northern girls into the university, the school

> authority ensured females were restricted to study only in certain courses…Those were the courses they perceived as feminine."

As such, education is perceived within that region as a threat to a woman fulfilling or living up to her social role as a female. Equally, one of the women from the Yoruba cultural group recounts in her narrative that:

> "Well, in my days, the belief then was that the girl-child was meant to be trained for the kitchen, so the emphasis then was to give the girl-child the minimum educational training or opportunity so that you prepare her eventually, for her responsibility as a house wife. That was the norm obtainable then."
>
> "There were certain courses then that were seen as too masculine, so I did not even consider applying for those courses when I was considering higher education. As a female, you were expected to study a course that would allow you take on your maternal role later in life."
>
> "The kind of socialisation and upbringing I received, already defined what sort of course I would settle in for. In those days it was not rampant for women to go into fields that were described as masculine."

Leaper (2013, pp. 2-3) argues that through socialisation gender division of labour is often reinforced. In most instances, parents reinforce gender stereotypes in very subtle ways. For example, parents would usually and unconsciously make use of essentialist statements about gender when they relate to their children. Some common examples would be when they casually say

"girls like dolls" or "boys like football." The images of femininity portrayed in our social institutions, such as schools, work places, homes and even in the social media, depict women as being passive and obedient. For example, in a Ugandan context, Kagoda and Sperandio (2009, p. 53), states that a successful Ugandan woman would be portrayed as "one who got married, raised a family and submitted to her husband." Leaper (2013, p. 1) identifies that children's gender assignment becomes a powerful social identity that shapes their lives. Therefore, education remains strategic to transforming the life of the girl child which would in turn have a positive impact on her community (Offorma, 2009). When a girl-child is denied the opportunity to education or restricted to a choice of career, she is deprived of the chance to fully develop her potential and misses out of the opportunities to influence and contribute to the national growth and development (Offorma, 2009).

When asked if they believe education is responsible for this shift in the prevalent cultural practices which initially prevented and restricted girl-child access to education. The women acknowledge that, education has in no doubt brought about changes in the society. Particularly, there are now more choices for women. More and more women are beginning to experience some sort of liberation. Through their narratives, they perceive education as bringing about enlightenment and exposure. The participants also mention that education has also been instrumental in challenging the idea, that training a female child is a waste of family resources.

One of the women explained that:

> "There is a lot of improvement in the way girls are now being brought up, and yes education is a contributing factor. These days, there is more enlightenment, limited restriction to choice of career, and more exposure. I think the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), actually, emphasised on the need to educate both boys and girls-the need for gender

> parity. So there are many organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), organising programmes even in our rural areas, so as to empower the girl-child, and talk to parents to see the need to educate them."

Another participant had this to say:

> "When I was growing up, many of my peers, family members and friends thought my father was wasting his money because the cultural orientation they had was that the girl-child will be married off, and will eventually end up in the kitchen, so that is our culture…So the education given to a girl-child is just to the minimum level. But like I said things are changing, there is now a shift from the prevalent cultural practices. This we owe to education, which is bringing exposure, and so parents are seeing the need to educate the girl-child."

One other participant recounts that:

> "The orientation is getting down to even our rural areas. I will say that culturally people are getting wiser. So this exposure and education is really affecting our culture and it is making us see things in a different light now."
>
> "The general assumption then was that women should be offered a place to study less stressful courses because at the end of the day, their certificates will not be put to any use as they resume their duties as wives and mothers."
>
> "It was not easy then in the north for parents to allow their daughters to go to school. Even when choosing courses of study, female students then were only permitted by the

> university to study in those areas that were perceived to be feminine. Also, with the courses termed difficult, the admission office ensured it maintained a low admittance rate for the female students. However, now things are beginning to change gradually. The restrictions to female career choices are no longer as much as it used to be."

The interviewees share the same perception as Abiribi and Jekayinka (2010) who argue that education is instrumental in promoting the advancement and development of any given society. Overall, the importance of girls' education can be seen as a global ethos that take different forms from the declarations of UN, to the practical projects set up for the enhancement of girls' education and to the lives of the women who have been able to attend school as girls. Furthermore, the interviewees strongly share the same perspectives as Duze and Yar'zever (2013), who examined the factors that deter girl-child education particularly in northern Nigeria. Using Kano State as a study location, 1000 male respondents were randomly selected and questionnaires were used to elicit responses from all participants both in urban and rural areas. Findings from that study showed that parental cultural beliefs as well as location were determinant factors in negative behaviour towards girl-child education. For instance, 66% of urban respondents had positive attitudes towards girl-child education compared with 34% of rural respondents. Other factors identified as responsible for preventing girl-child education includes Religious misconception regards girl-child education and family income.

The Federal Ministry of Education points out that girl-children and women are generally disadvantaged in the Nigerian educational setting. This trend is raising concerns due to the implications it would have on the county's equality and human resource distribution. Thus, Aladejana and Aladejana (2004) argue that stereotype has also been found in the cultural division of labour

by which some professions/positions are designated as either masculine or feminine. According to Uduigwomen (2004), these stereotypes are built on the cultural assumption and general belief that women are the weaker sex and that their ideal roles are those of childbearing, raising a home and cooking.

Another interesting aspect of the narratives as provided by the participants is the role played by their fathers'. When asked who the major decision-maker and influencer of their education were, they shared thus:

> "Well, in my days, the belief then was that the girl-child was meant to be trained for the kitchen, so the emphasis then was to give the girl-child the minimum educational training or opportunity so that you prepare her eventually, for her responsibility as a house wife. That was the norm obtainable then. But my father did not key into that, he had a different view, unlike his siblings and friends he actually believed in the education of his girl children because he was educated."

Another participant in her narrative recalled that:

> "My father was an oil worker with a multinational company, so he was exposed and had a high value for education. He did not think because I was a girl child, I should not be sent to school."

Yet another woman in her interview said:

> "Those days, going to school especially for a girl child was seen as pointless, they believed then that when you send a girl child to school it is a mere waste of money, so rather than send a female child, to school, it is more economical to send only the male children. The female children can help out at

> home, and learn from their mothers how to be good house wives. My father felt it was unfair for only the boys to be allowed to go to school."

While recounting her own story, a participant from Northern Nigeria recalls that:

> "It was not easy then in the north for parents to allow their daughters go to school, but being that my father was a teacher and was educated himself, he allowed me to go to school."

The perspectives shared in the narratives by the participants have a strong similarity with the report compiled by the British council (2014) which investigated "Girls' education in Nigeria: issues, influencers and actions". One of the chief aims of the named inquiry was to identify decision-makers and influencers of girls' education at school, community and local levels in Nigeria. Findings from that study suggest that in Northern Nigeria particularly, there are two major actors in the decision to enrol and retain girls in primary school: family heads (predominantly fathers) and religious leaders. The study further indicates that the major actors in the decision to send a girl child to school are the authoritative male figures in the household and in the community, who are also the critical decision makers. Consequently, there is an absence of the female voice in this decision-making.

This inquiry leads us to ask the women if they perceive that education is a major contributor to achieving cultural change. Particularly, as it concerns female independence and gender parity. Their narratives reveal that the greater awareness of the need for them to improve themselves seems to be the motivation which steered them to continue to seek knowledge beyond their basic education. It is interesting to note that all six participants progressed

academically and did not just settle for the basic education their fathers offered. They kept 'seeking' wherever they could. As we read from the excerpts below:

> "I gained admission to the University of Lagos to study for my National Certificate in Education (NCE), and from there I proceeded to obtain my first degree. I went off to teach again in another school, but after a while, I took another break from teaching to pursue my Master's degree. When I completed my degree, I went off yet again to teach. I later went ahead to study for my doctorate degree."

Another participant recounts:

> "I went off to Teachers' Training College (TTC), but got married while I was still doing my TTC, after I completed my TTC, I went off to college of higher education, then I gained admission to read Social Studies education at the University of Ibadan and I graduated with a second class upper division. I went off to teach for a while as primary school teacher, I then proceeded to University of Nigeria Nsuka where I obtained my MSc and a doctoral degree."

In another narrative, a participant relayed:

> "After my first degree, I knew I wanted more, especially as a woman. If I wanted to be heard, then having a first degree was not going to be enough. Hence, I immediately started off my second degree. After my second degree, you would have thought I would have stopped-no. I woke up one morning realising even a second degree was not enough."

Yet another woman had this to share:

> "I walked down the ladder to success armed with a huge ambition. I wanted to be the best in everything. Knowing that women in this society have only few chances, I badly wanted to be part of that few. I graduated with a very good first degree result. I was encouraged by my lecturers then to apply for a second degree. By the time I was finishing off my master's degree, I knew naturally, what I wanted- a PhD."

The above extracts from the women's narratives, goes on to show that, the participants commitment to pursuing further education stems majorly from the agency which was opened up by their basic education. They perceived their basic education as "essential" but not sufficient to give them the required empowerment they required to attain equality with the men. Hence, they sort for higher education. Their claim collaborates with the findings from Samarakoon and Parinduri (2015) who investigated whether education empowers women. Their sample was drawn from a middle-income country-Indonesia. In their study Samarakoon and Parinduri (2015) making use of an exogenous variation in education induced by a longer school year in Indonesia in 1978, within a fuzzy regression discontinuity design, identified that within the context of their study, education does empower women.

Accordingly, the choice of higher education for the participants in this study is to empower them to assert greater levels of agency which basic education cannot provide. Therefore, as they suggest, being armed with a higher degree has enabled them to knowledgeably question unfavourable actions against them by patriarchal structures, and seek for equal opportunities with their male counterparts. In effect, these women are saying that their career success is largely dependent upon a powerful sense of personal agency and awareness gained majorly from their higher education. A university degree, they claim, equipped them to be able to

successfully negotiate the labyrinths created by cultural and institutional structures that prejudice females in their upward career trajectory.

Unfortunately, despite the relevance of higher education to women empowerment, regrettably, in Africa today relatively low numbers of women gain access to tertiary schools Louise (Katjavivi, 2000). For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, the rate of female enrolment into higher education is relatively lower than male enrolment. Similarly, Ilie and Rose (2016) posit that higher education enrolment rate in sub-Saharan Africa, tends to tilt in the greater favour of young men due to unequal wealth distribution in this region. This practice tends to contribute to the continuous silencing of female voices within this region.

When asked how valuable they consider Higher education in terms of women empowerment, the women all agreed that HE no doubt is valuable and gives women the voice to stand up to male dominance and demand for equal treatment as we read from the extracts of their interviews:

> "I was nominated to be part of a committee, the chairman was a man, and so were all other members. In fact, I was the only female member, one morning, the chairman worked up to me and instructed me to report to his office every morning when I arrive to work; and I said that was fine with me as long as you get the men also to do that."

> "The Northern woman is brought up under the cultural background that your role as a woman should be at home as a housewife, hence you have no business with a career not to think about competing with the men towards occupying positions of leadership. I try to maintain professionalism at all times. I avoid anything that will bring ridicule to my office. I know that if I failed, I have failed not just myself, but a whole

lot of other women who look up to me as an inspiration."

"I was invited for a promotion interview and in the panel were all men. Several questions were asked and I gave answers to them, then the questions became tougher and when I realised that they were spending more time with my interview session than they had spent on all others who had initially been men, I complained and one of the men retorted "do you think you came for a fashion parade?" I appealed against the decision of my promotion interview, my appeal

was granted, and this time, a moderator was assigned to sit with the panel. It was successful, I got my promotion."

"… a lot of challenges, most of the men, especially the male professors… you see they put me there because they believe that I should act only on what they say, and that I should actually toe on their own line of thinking, so when they discovered that unfortunately, contrary to their expectations, I had my own mind and I wasn't going to dance to their tune, they were not happy."

"When I try to introduce a change, it is met with a lot of opposition. For instance, we used to have a centralised exam system which was very chaotic and left the students stressed during and after exams. However, when I came into office as the dean, I changed this method. I came up with a decentralised process that will allow for a more relaxed exam atmosphere and many staff members opposed it. They argued with me and challenged me that it will not work, in fact they fought it so vehemently, but I stood my ground. I pleaded with them that my approach should at least be given a chance and were it fails; we can revert to what we used to have.

> Eventually since I did not yield to their pressure, they gave in and we tried it out and everybody saw that it worked very well for both students and staff members. We had students coming in to attest that they preferred this new approach."

The women's experiences shared through their narratives, can offer us an ample insight into how the social structures and institutions within their traditional societies have so created constraints and worked at silencing female voices. However, their narratives take an interesting turn, as they recall of how their choice of HE contributed to the development of their agency and raise their voice. This has enabled them to achieve significantly. More so, their narratives sit well with the aspect of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which provides a framework for contextualising the epistemological views of lived experiences regarding how the participants rose above discrimination and marginalisation (Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

According to Gillborn (2009), CRT is centred on a profound responsibility of those who find themselves belonging to the minority group to struggle towards attaining a tangible transformation in their life situation. Thus, CRT projects the development of new capabilities-voice and agency. Thereby providing ample agency for women and this equips them to raise their voice challenging subjugating practises in other for them to successfully accomplish, and make their own contributions to their societies. Additionally, Klugman (2014) presents that women with more education are likely to experience fewer constraints to their agency, and that lack of education could possibly in most instances lead to agency deprivation.

Importantly, education is also seen to provide a foundation for social reconstruction. Education is majorly responsible for the emancipation and expansive opportunities, particularly for young women and girls. The centrality of women's empowerment

inarguably stems from education. Education also prepares a person to be a responsible citizen. According to Oniye (2008), in order for Nigeria to develop her potential politically, economically, socially and technologically, there is need for her citizens to be educated to be patriotic (see also Ocho, 2005; UNICEF, 2007). Oniye (2008), additionally, argues that achieving this feat becomes easier if the female children are allowed to have equal access to qualitative education, as they are future mothers and teachers of children. Consequently, training a girl-child is giving a future mother the opportunity to be enlightened, which she would in turn transfer to her children through socialisation. "Education is important for development and gender equality: education can help shift gender norms that restrict women's voice and choice" (Klugman, 2014, p. 53).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Girl child and women education in Nigeria has been a major concern to both the government and civil society as education provides the foundation for the emancipation and liberation of women and girls. Education also provides women and girls access to multiple informed life choices which allows them to live lives that they have cause to value. However, girl child access to education especially in Northern Nigeria and rural areas is limited. This obviously means that there remain a large number of uneducated women and girls in the country, rendering them as vulnerable to continuous cultural exploitation. Suguna (2011) proposes that the most powerful tool of changing the cultural positioning of women in any society is education.

This discussion has examined how six educated women make constructs of education which is embedded in their pursuit for cultural change and women empowerment. It has considered how the women's idea of education is the formal teaching they received in the school setting and not just what they learned at home or in religious

settings. Their sense of agency seems to be built around this formal type of education. This study also provides insight into the constructs of education made by their fathers. It is evident how through their way of thinking they were compelled to allow access to education for their female children irrespective of the then prevalent cultural assumptions and views as regards female education. The discussion also explained why women were not given equal opportunity to enrol on some courses which were seen as study fields for men only. The women in their narrative state that allowing women into such areas will eventually give them the opportunity to enter high level positions which will bring them in competition with men.

Furthermore, the participants identify that, education is gradually changing the way women are culturally perceived. Because according to them, education brings about enlightenment. Note, the SDG (4), was highlighted in this study. Hence, it is recommended that the federal government of Nigeria would need to encourage school-community relationship to ensure the target of this goal is met by 2030. By so doing, this would allow education institutes, the access to collaborate with parents and communities. Ultimately the girl-child stands to benefit from this partnership. It would be interesting to explore further on the role of school-community relationship, and how it could boost girl child education particularly in Northern Nigeria in subsequent studies.

Another interesting aspect of this discuss would be to ensure that there are mechanisms put in place to implement and enforce the National Policy on education. This study also recommends that adequate resources should be allocated to education. The burden of educating a child should not just rest on the parents alone, particularly, those from low income families. The concern being that such families would be left with no other choice than to educate a male child over a female one due to lack of finance. It is only when the government takes a closer look at the inter-relation of all these factors recommended, that equal access for the girl-child and women

in education will begin to be realised. It is at that point, the nation may possibly begin to reverse the effects of missed opportunities of women's contribution to national development. To that effect, the gradual attainment of the SDG 2030 on gender equality would become feasible and not a mere facade.

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