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European Journal of Experimental Biology, 2012, 2 (6):2188-2191



Gender issues and its effect on the development of the girl child in Ogbunabali community in Port Harcourt, Rivers State Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Discrimination on the basis of sex often starts at the earliest stages of life, greater equality for the girl child and the adolescent girl are necessary first steps to ensuring that women have equal rights later in life. Disparities in the way girls and boys are raised and treated are at the root of many sexual and reproductive health problems and developmental challenges. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of gender issues on the development of the girl child in Ogbunabali community in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. Descriptive survey research design was employed. A total of a hundred and twenty (120) girls within the age range of 12 – 18 years were randomly selected from a population of over one thousand two hundred girls in Ogbunabali community. A questionnaire was administered to respondents and responses retrieved. Data collected was presented using pie chart, histogram and graphs and were analysed using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). Ninety three percent (93%) of the respondent agreed that gender issues have negative effects on the development of the girl child physically, educationally, politically and psychosocially in the society especially in the Ogbunabali community where a high value is placed on the boy child. Hence formal education of the girl child will go a long way in the resolve of gender issues which have a negative effect on the girl child in Ogbunabali community.

Key words: Gender, Effect, Development, Girl child, Ogbunabali.

INTRODUCTION

Gender issues have become a household name in many countries today. Violence and inequality especially on the girl-child cannot be overemphasized. Many authors have written extensively on this topic, and have also proffered solutions to ensure that women realize their full potential and become equal partners in development.

Onwuka [2002] defined Gender as the roles, attitudes, behaviours and values ascribed by the society to males and females. She went to say that Gender is socially constructed; learned for specific cultures, and can be changeable. It is based on society's perception.

She also discussed elaborately and extensively on Gender issues affecting reproductive health thus:

- Reproductive rights (Sex negotiation): Women are not allowed to express themselves sexually and at such most women have sex when they do not want, while others go through their life time without experiencing orgasm. The number of children to have in a family is decided upon by the man and not the woman. Uses of contraceptive

devices are highly prohibited for the men; they do not get involved in family planning, they call it purely women affair. This is purely due to gender inequality.

- Fertility: Women are expected to bear and rear children as much as the man wants irrespective of her health status and the risks associated with child birth.
- Access to family planning can be difficult for a woman sometimes because of the belief that women are supposed to be “children makers and should have as many as God has put in their womb.
- Economic Situation sometimes forces women into situations where their health can be compromised for example exchanging sex for money.
- Girls do not have same opportunities for education as boys which may lead to poverty and reduced access to information on reproductive health issues.
- Male Children are valued more than female children.

I quite agree with what Onwuka [2002] said above. Gender violence, inequality and discrimination has so much eaten into the marrows and fabrics of our society that it has become a malignant condition like in cancer of the breast which needs an emergency and prompt surgical intervention to free such a woman from such condition before it gets to its terminal stage.

The Girl-child in Nigeria society is so relegated to the background in many aspects of human endeavor so much so that she sees herself as a “second class” citizen, and she has come to accept and adapt to the saying that “women are supposed to be seen and not heard”. She has also come to accept the saying that “women’s education end in the kitchen”. But because change has remained the only permanent phenomenon, we are at the verge of change, and Gender inequality and violence will soon be a thing of the past.

The problem of Gender discrimination and the quest for Gender equality can be dated back to antiquity. Many believe that the rights of the girl-child are trampled upon psychologically and socially, while the boys are highly valued in the society. The girl-child is relegated to the background and is not given equal opportunities with the boy-child in all spheres of life. It is widely believed that the girl-child is to be “seen” and not “heard”. She is used as a “beast of burden,” and is seen as a “load” that needs to be offloaded one day, and at such she is not given priority of special attention in anyway including health. This attitude has therefore affected the development of the girl-child physically, psychologically and otherwise.

This research will therefore need to know if there is a significant relationship between Gender Issues and the growth and development of the girl-child.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was conducted among girls of 12-18 years of age in Ogbunabali village of Port Harcourt City Local Government Area of Rivers State.

The population of the indigenous members of Ogbunabali village is about twelve thousand people (12,000).

Since it was difficult for the researcher to study every girl child in that village, a sample of the population using Stratified sampling method was adopted. The population was divided into sub-groups whose members have more in common with one another than they have with the population as a whole. Thus, people fell into sub-groups according to age and social background. A total of one hundred and twenty (120) girls were used in the study.

The research design for this project is a combination of descriptive and explanatory. The questionnaire for the study was properly scrutinized and, reliability was established through a pilot study using five randomly drawn respondents to ascertain the strengths and weakness of the questionnaire.

Each of the respondents was administered with the questionnaire and their responses were retrieved. The same respondent were re-administered with the same questionnaire and analyzed, and the result of the analysis shows no variations depicting strong reliability of the question. Data was collected and represented using pie charts, Histogram and Graph and analyzed using chi-square. Rank correlation coefficient

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of one hundred and twenty copies of questionnaires were distributed and one hundred and seven were retrieved.

Hypothesis 1

Gender Issues and the development of the girl-child.

From the questionnaire, 93% of the respondent agreed that Gender issues have effect on the development of the girl-child drastically in the society educationally, politically, physically and psycho-socially, while only 6.5% could not see what gender issue have got to do with the development of the girl-child.

Social problems and social issues are very often gender biased, too [Brückner M. 2002] , the ones involving nurturing being –somehow disparagingly-labelled as ‘women’s issues’ [Bochel and Briggs, 2000] as is the case with child care. Young women face more reproductive health vulnerabilities than men. Biologically, women's risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections during unprotected sexual relations is two to four times that of men. Of particular concern are the dramatic increases in HIV infection among young women, who now make up 60 per cent of the 15- to 24- year olds living with HIV. Globally, young women are 1.6 times more likely to be living with HIV than young men.

The problem of child marriage

Social expectations often put pressure on girls to marry and begin bearing children before they are ready. Despite a shift towards later marriage in many parts of the world, 82 million girls in developing countries who are now between the ages of 10 and 17 will be married before their 18th birthday. Child marriage jeopardizes the health and limits the opportunities afforded to women, usually disrupts their education and often violates their human rights. Married adolescent girls often find it difficult to access reproductive health services. In some countries, marriage to older men makes girls more vulnerable to HIV.

About 14 million women and girls between ages 15 and 19 - both married and unmarried - give birth each year. For this age group, complications of pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death, with unsafe abortion being a major factor. Early childbearing is linked to obstetric fistula, a devastating and socially isolating condition that leaves women incontinent. Teenage mothers are more likely to have children with low birth weight, inadequate nutrition and anaemia. And they are more likely to develop cervical cancer later in life. When young girls marry older men, they may be at additional risk of contracting HIV.

The risk of gender-based violence

Adolescent girls are also exposed to various forms of gender-based violence from harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting to the growing problem of sexual trafficking. The first sexual experience for many adolescent girls is forced, often by people they know, including family members. This can lead to long-term physical and psychological damage. Dire poverty may result in young girls being 'sold' to traffickers or being forced into sexual relations as a survival strategy. The male child is not exposed to all these circumstances.

Hypothesis II

Gender Issues and high value of the boy-child. Some of the questions that were answered in the questionnaire by respondents also show that Gender Issue is one of the major reasons above the boy-child. 92.6% of the respondents affirmed that there is a significant relationship between Gender Issues and the high value placed on the boy-child, against 7.4% that said there is no significant relationship between Gender Issues and the high value placed on the boy-child.

Disparities in the way girls and boys are raised and treated are at the root of many sexual and reproductive health problems and development challenges. For boys, adolescence can be a time for expanded participation in community and public life. Girls, however, may experience new restrictions, and find their freedom of movement limited. Socially constructed gender roles may give girls little say about their own aspirations and hopes, and restrict them to being wives and mothers.

Hypothesis III**Formal Education and the resolve of Gender Inequality.**

A total of 73% of the respondents suggested and agreed that making education accessible to the girl-child will go a long way in the resolve of Gender Issues, while 27 recognized other means of Gender issues' resolve apart from education.

Educating girls is a powerful lever for their empowerment, as well as for reducing poverty. Girls who are educated are likely to marry later and to have smaller, healthier families. Education helps girls to know their rights and claim them, for themselves and their families. Education can translate into economic opportunities for women and their families. The importance of education in reducing gender inequities is highlighted in by its inclusion in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs call for the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015. Negative gender-based norms and practices can be gradually transformed through educational, social, legal and other processes that promote equality of girls and boys. Without such action, unequal gender relations and power imbalances are likely to persist throughout adult life.

CONCLUSION

This research study was on Gender Issues and its effect on the Girl –child, carried out in Ogbunabali village of Port Harcourt City Local Government Area of Rivers State, on girls of 12-18 years of age. Gender Issues are the roles, attitudes, behaviours and values ascribed by the society to males and females. It is socially constructed, learned for specific cultures, based on society's perception, and can be changeable.

There is the need for creating awareness on gender issues by the government, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Mass media and religious groups in all societies. The government should make formal education of the girl-child compulsory in all societies. The girl-child should be given equal opportunities in all spheres of life in order to harness her potentials. Human Rights/Girls-Child rights should be taught in schools, Churches and other organizations. Government should enact laws and by-laws stipulating the punishment for anyone that will trample on the rights of the girl-child.

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