

**INFLUENCE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS ON FEMALE
CHILD PRIMARY SCHOOL ENROLMENT AND RETENTION IN
RURAL COMMUNITIES OF EBONYI STATE,
SOUTH EAST NIGERIA.**

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Abstract

This study investigated influence of socio-cultural factors on the enrolment and retention of female children from primary one to primary six and the study was inclined towards an interpretative paradigm. A total of 383 respondents participated in the study. Face to face interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data. The study elicited an understanding of the multifaceted nature of the socio-cultural factors affecting enrolment and retention of female pupils in primary schools in rural communities of Ebonyi state, Nigeria. Results show that the majority of factors are culture-related: farming and fishing lifestyles, early marriages, misconception that female child cannot be educated, polygamy, boy child preference, lack of interest in attending school and involvement of female child in domestic chores. Other factors include female genital mutilation, poverty, environmental factors among others. The study recommended among others the intensification of sensitization programs via vigorous advocacy by the government and NGOs geared towards creating awareness on the need for girl child education in Ebonyi State.

Key Words: Enrolment, retention, socio-cultural, female child.

Introduction

Girl child accessibility to basic education has been a topical issue among policy makers in several states in Nigeria. Culture and Education are intertwined as the basic definition of education is acculturation. In many socio-cultural setup-ups, the female child is treated inferior to the male child (Rosaline and Jane, 1998). Development of the female child is considered wasteful and pointless. At times the female child is used as a means of settling debts owed by the family (Awake, Feb. 22, 2006). Since the World Declaration of Education for All (EFA) in 1990, developing countries have been striving to realize the universal goal of primary education as well as to reduce illiteracy. However, it does not seem to be easy to realize them as was indicated in the World Education Forum held in Dakar in 2000 with the purpose to evaluate the progress made about them in recent times. The Dakar Framework of Action 2000 indicated that EFA goals could not be achieved without promotion of

girls' education and made a target to eliminate gender disparities in secondary education by 2005 and achieve gender equality in education by 2015, with focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement of basic education of good quality.

In rural communities in Ebonyi State, a female child is sometimes betrothed to a proposed husband at the age of seven (7) years before she grows up to maturity. As regards formal education, a female child may not be trained by the father, the father may instead prefer to train a nephew. A female child if so wish may be trained by the mother (Hobert and Fronket, 2001). There have been cases of some stern warning given to the wives by their husbands for giving birth to females (Awake, Feb. 22, 2006). Sometimes, the wives were made to pay for the cost of delivery of their babies by the midwife and subsequent care.

Girl's education is a human right. Educating girls contributes significantly to the development of a stable, prosperous and healthy nation-state whose citizens are active, productive and empowered. Yet data indicate that in Nigeria:

- Over 5.5 million girls are out-of-school (UNESCO, 2014).
- 40% women and 28% men have never attended school (NPC, 2009).
- The Net Enrolment Rate at primary school level is 56% for girls and 61% for boys (UNESCO, 2014).
- Drop-out rates are highest at the sixth grade of primary school and higher among girls than boys (NPC, 2009).

Girls' education is good economics. It is the best investment in a country's national development. Girls and women suffer educational exclusion across Nigeria. Nigeria's out-of-school population is one of the largest in the world and it is growing. Of the staggering 10.5 million out-of-school children in Nigeria today, the majority are girls. (UNESCO,2000)

Socio-cultural factors are the large scale forces within cultures and societies that affects the thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Such factors include attitudes, child rearing practices, cultural identity, ethnic identity, widowhood practices, farming structure, religious beliefs, religious practices, rituals, taboos, ethnic values, patriarchal practices, discrimination etc. Most rural communities in Nigeria have one or two socio-cultural values that possesses negative underpinnings to female child primary school enrolment. Socio-cultural values such as early marriage and pregnancy, circumcision practices, patriarchal practices, social roles/occupation have direct implications on girl child enrolment and retention in primary school.

In recent times, some parents did send their female children to their relatives in the urban areas as caregivers who are not given the opportunity to see the four walls of primary school, and later sent back home to become married.(Mamman,2003) In view of these hardships being meted out by parents and society and subsequent inhuman behaviour towards the female child, there is need to examine the influence of these factors on the enrolment, retention to primary education and overall educational development of the female child with reference to Ebonyi State.

Ebonyi is primarily an agricultural producing region. It is a leading producer of rice, yams, potatoes, maize, beans and cassava. There are nine major first languages (Igbo languages) spoken in Ebonyi State: Afikpo, Mgbo, Izzi, Eaza, Ikwo, Kukele, Legbo, Mbembe and Oring. Ebonyi is divided into 13 Local Government Areas. An average Izzi, Eza, Ikwo and some major tribes marries more than one wife. (ebonyionline.com)

Furthermore, close to the global commitment to Education for All by 2015, a UNESCO Report 2010 recognised and children from marginalized groups had not yet benefited from basic education strategies. Despite efforts by governmental and non-governmental organizations or agencies aimed at improving the life of woman folk through international conferences, workshops, seminars and home-based interventions, women in the study area (Ebonyi state) are yet to attain the present day's realities of life compared to women in the other states.

There is prevalence of child marriage in rural communities of Ebonyi state with attendant detrimental effects on girl child such as domestic violence and abandonment, denial of education and vesico-vaginal fistula. These social cultural practices/local perceptions are bane to female child primary school education in the area. Despite government intervention via sensitization programs and construction of National Obsteric Fistula Centre in Abakaliki the state capital to care for victims of VVF which is aftermath of early marriage, there is still high incidence of early marriages in most rural communities of the state. This has grave consequences on girl child enrolment and retention in primary schools.

A man's wealth and dignity is assessed in some rural communities in Ebonyi State is assessed by the number of wives and children he has. The size of the family is considered significant because, the wives and children assist the husband to carry out his routine economic activities. In some families, the women take greater responsibility in ensuring the provision of food. They do so by taking active participation in farming and fishing (in riverine areas) with help from the children.

While schooling keeps female children off labour and early marriages, some sociocultural factors lead to a somehow systematic exclusion of female children from primary school. Understanding this exclusion is rather complex or complicated as this can only be understood through extremely focused investigations. The current study investigated socio-cultural factors that affect enrolment and retention of female child in primary school in Ebonyi State.

Statement of Problem

Many studies have focused on out of school children in South eastern Nigeria, and indeed documented factors that lead to non-schooling, little efforts have been made in investing the socio-cultural factors vis-à-vis female child primary school enrolment and retention. Most of these studies have only focused on the school, while household investigations: socio-cultural factors have remained rather unexplored.

In Ebonyi State Ministries and parastatals, the number of women is quite insignificant. As more boys are enrolled into higher institutions of learning, fewer number of girls child enrolment was observed or registered following available

statistics. This has a bearing on the rate female child primary school enrolment and retention in the area.

Human development is a joint effort of both men and women, but on this regard, the women in the study areas are seen as housewives who are seriously involved in farming, fishing (for those in the riverine areas), poverty stricken followed by ignorance that is transferred to their offspring turning in to a vicious cycle of poverty perpetuation. Women in Ebonyi State are seen partaking in very hard and menial jobs such as brick layering and concrete mixing. These are considered an odd jobs meant for the male folk but women in the study area engaged themselves in such jobs just to eke out a living because there are not educated. This is also attributed to the rate of primary school enrolment and retention of female children in the area.

Finally, most young girls are usually seen in the rural communities with pregnancy and are eventually married to boys bearing babies they could not afford to cater for. This situation has remained unabated in the communities and has hampered rapid socio-economic development that needs to adequately investigated and addressed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify the influence of socio-cultural factors on the female child primary school enrolment and retention in rural communities of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study addressed the following objectives:

- (a) To identify socio- cultural factors that affect primary school female child enrolment in selected communities of Ebonyi state
- (b) To determine how the identified socio-cultural factors influence female child primary school enrolment and retention

Research Question

Two research questions guided both the FGDs and open-ended interview, which are:

1. What are the socio-cultural factors affecting female child primary school enrolment and retention in rural communities of Ebonyi State
2. How does tradition and culture affect female child primary school enrolment and retention in rural communities of Ebonyi State?

Methodology

A case study design was adopted for this study because it was deemed to provide invaluable information on socio-cultural factors affecting female child primary school enrolment and retention in Ebonyi State

Ebonyi State comprises of 13 Local Government Areas. For the purpose of this study, simple random technique was used 18 rural communities from six (6) Local Government Areas were used for data collection

The study sample comprised of 383 participants (63 head teachers, 64 classroom teachers, 69 pupils, 65 youths who had never been to school, 28 youths who had dropped out of school, 60 parents and 62 opinion leaders). The study

participants were purposively selected because the varied categories would provide rich information on socio-cultural factors affecting enrolment and retention in schools. Data was collected during face-to-face interviews using open-ended questions, while four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were employed to collect data from pupils in all the communities visited by the researchers. The face-to-face interviews lasted 30 minutes each, while the (FGDs) were 40 minutes each. Data was analysed using content analysis, which is a method that involves comparing, contrasting and categorising data in order to draw meaning and themes from the data (Gall, and Burg, 2007). Open coding was employed in this case and the coding was done statement by statement to get the main ideas. This was followed by axial coding where ideas were grouped to form themes (Barbie, 2010).

Results

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

From the four FGDs responses are presented and discussed in the following themes: Lifestyle, early marriage and misconception that female child cannot be educated and preference of male child. The most common factor why female children do not attend school is the people's agrarian life style. In this life style, the rural communities in Ebonyi State engage in intensive agricultural activities. The female child is often involved in farming activities in the study area by the mother in order to complement her efforts for subsistence. Sometimes mothers feel that involving the female child prepares her to face challenges in her husband's house. This is reflected in the selected direct question from only the first session of the FGDs "Agricultural activities in the rural areas causes' major obstacle to female child school enrolment and attendance." (Session 1). In most rural communities in Ebonyi State, female children who were formally enrolled may be pulled out of school to assist in farming activities during peak periods of the year agriculture.

In all the four focus groups, the issue of early marriage was presented as another key socio-cultural factor why many female children in the area could not enrol and stay in school. For instance, one of the responses from the focus group expressed that "some parents would present their daughters to marriage at an early age since they do not have the resources to train them in school" (Focus Group Session 2). Furthermore, the participants expressed that "the choice of the partner is made for a girl by the parents depending on the wealth and prestige of the suitor" (Focus Group Session 1).

In terms of the misconception that the female children cannot be educated, some of the participants expressed that "some people in their area are obsessed with an old conception that females could hardly become educated." This age long thinking discourages parents from sending their female children to school." (Session 3).

Fathers instead of enrolling female children in schools would rather prefer to train their nephews. In some cases, mothers take it upon themselves to train their daughters in school.

The most interesting finding was that of boy child preference. This idea was pointed out in all the four FGDs. A quote from Session 4 “boy child preference is a serious matter as a question usually asked if a woman gives birth is”, “is it a boy or a girl” not minding the health status of the mother.

Open-ended Questions

The findings from the open-ended questions were analysed and summarised using themes, frequencies and percentages as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Responses on socio-cultural factors affecting enrolment and retention of female child in primary school.

Theme	Response	Frequency	%
Cultural factors	▪ Involvement of female child to domestic chores	24	6.3
	▪ Female genital mutilation	12	3.1
	▪ Polygamy	32	8.4
	▪ Early marriages	86	22.5
	▪ Lack of interest in attending school	90	23.5
	Sub-total	240	63.8
Socio-environmental factors	▪ Precarious situations	11	2.9
	Sub-total	11	2.9
Social factors	▪ Hawking, sexual abuse or exploitation, engaging female child as house-helpers	52	13.6
	▪ Peer influence	25	6.5
	Sub-total	77	20.1
Strategies by the government	▪ School was far away from home	9	2.3
	▪ Irrelevant curriculum to the immediate and economic needs of these communities.	1	0.3
	▪ There were not enough teachers	5	1.3
	▪ The school was not providing enough food	3	0.8
	Sub-total	18	4.7
Others	▪ Poverty i.e. lack of financial support, both parents dead and lacked support from relatives, lack of clothing to wear to attend classes and insecurity	33	8.6
	Sub-total	33	8.6
	Grand Total	383	100

Table 1 shows that early marriages, lack of interest in attending school and negative attitude towards education of parent's negative attitude towards education ranked higher based on participants responses 22.5% and 23.5% respectively. Hawking, sexual abuse, engaging of female child as house-helps was rated 52%.

Discussion

Five broad themes emerged from the various responses, namely cultural factors, socio-environmental factors, strategies by the government, others and social factors. Among these themes, factors relating to the people's culture had the highest frequency of (63.8%) and social environmental factors had the lowest frequency of (2.9%) (Table 1). Included in the cultural factors were; lack of interest in school which constituted the highest values of 23.5%, followed by the early marriage which was 22.5% and the lowest was female genital mutilation with 3.1%. From the FGDs and the interview, the way of life of the rural communities and parental negative attitude towards education remained major obstacles to the participation of the female child in formal education in the study area. This finding is in agreement with Chelimo's (2000) observation that children's labour is critical to the survival of the household and that a formal school system may disrupt the household's micro-economy. This also concurs with a study carried out by Otuonkuku (2005) in the South-South geopolitical zone of the country who buttresses that majority of female folks are usually engaged in farming activities and fishing in rural communities. The study carried out in Kenya by Oyoko (2006) also agrees with this finding as the author opined that African women were poorly represented in the formal sectors and that their main occupation was farming and fishing. More so, Ebigbo (2000) stated that forced and early marriages are common in some parts of the country such as North East. As agrarian communities, parents are torn between the conviction that education of the female child is valuable and the fact that farming is the family's main source of livelihood and identity. This is enigmatic when parents have to decide whether to withdraw the girl child from farm in order to attend school. On the other hand, the parents' negative attitude towards education could also be influenced by the failure to see the immediate benefits from the quality for education delivered.

During data collection, there were children who were neither attending to farm work nor were in school. As Koilembo (2000) argues, the household decision to enrol a female child in school is not only influenced by costs and anticipated future benefits of school, but also by how parents perceive the quality of education services offered. The high frequency of culture-related factors suggests that the people of Ebonyi State generally have a different world view, which is in agreement with Jegede (1995) who argues that people harbours views, beliefs and experiences and preconceptions. This study did not attempt to analyse the poverty levels of people of Ebonyi State, but the more fact that children could not attend schools because of farm work somewhat contradicts the poverty factor since UBE is free and that parents' contribution to education is minimal. Some parents expressed that they could not send their children to school as the children lacked clothes to put on.

From observations, many of the children in the villages were barely dressed and many in schools did not have proper uniforms and the vast majority were dressed in frayed clothing. This may imply that low level of income had an effect on enrolment and retention as some children could not enrol in school because they had no clothing to wear to school. For government strategies, some respondents indicated that schools were far from settlement and thus they could not send small children to walk long distances. It is also possible that most rural communities in Ebonyi State look at the UBE curriculum as irrelevant to the needs of their regions. The communities' ways of being (ontology) as farmers may further require revising the curriculum to make it more relevant to household survival. This is similarly to the Tibetan experience where people considered the government system of education as too nationalistic and alien (Bangsbo, 2008).

Conclusion

The findings of the study portray that enrolment and retention of female child in schools in rural communities of Ebonyi State is a complex issue which is affected by many diverse socio-cultural factors. The study established that the socio-cultural factors affecting enrolment and retention of female children in rural communities in Ebonyi state include: early child marriage, agrarian lifestyle, misconception that female child cannot be educated, boy child preference, lack of interest in attending school, the environment, strategies by the government.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made;

- (a) There is need to conduct vigorous advocacy and sensitisation programs by the government and non-governmental organisations geared towards heightening the awareness of the need for educating female child.
- (b) There is also need for positive involvement of government and other non-governmental agencies in all intervention projects and proposals that are intended for female child educational development including other female related issues.
- (c) Government should extend more dividends of democracy to the rural areas.
- (d) More female teachers should be posted to rural areas of the study area to serve as role models to the female children.
- (e) Government should carry the female folk along in all her programs and activities such as giving women more political relevance.

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