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**Felicia Edu-Uwem Etim**

# POSITIONING THE GIRL- CHILD FOR THE REALIZATION OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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*Prof. Comfort M. Ekpo*

## **Preamble**

Then I got the request to participate in honouring such a great icon in education, my mind went straight to the womb that bore late Chief Ernest J. Etim and the environment where he was nurtured. I reach the conclusion that one must be properly positioned to reach one's destiny.

## **Introduction**

**T**here are two basic concepts in the topic I have selected to write on, namely, 'Girl-child' and "Millennium Development Goals" (MDGs).

These need some clarification.

## **Girl-Child: Her Make and Worth**

Girls are essentially regarded as "gap fillers" and buds of womanhood. They constitute very important component of the society. Biblically, a woman was created from the strong component of man – a man's rib. There is therefore an ingrained resilient power in every woman irrespective of age. Adam in Genesis 2: 18 was witty enough to recognize that resilient quality of a woman as he observed in Genesis 2: 23, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh". She shall be called woman". Her beautiful qualities are meant to complement the seemingly roughness of the man. The girl-child (a young woman) is a budding man with a womb. The presence of the womb makes her an incubator of ideas and tenderness. If she is educated and God-fearing, she is a builder of home and community. The old adage says, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." It is today's girl-child who transforms into tomorrow's woman and mother that rocks the cradle. Girl-children therefore deserve enabling environment for proper nurturing. Positioning the girl-child for the realization of the millennium development goals is a strategy in that direction.

The Commonwealth Secretary General, Don McKinnon said in one of the International discourses, "if you exclude women, you diminish democracy and reduce development. If you want more development, include women in decision making". Thus, one could say that a girl-child is a carrier of great potentials but highly vulnerable to under utilization or non-utilization because of improper positioning.

### **What are the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)?**

Millennium Development Goals are eight international development goals with 21 targets and a series of measurable indicators that 192 United Nations member states and at least 23 International organizations have agreed to achieve by the year 2015. Nigeria is one of the countries that endorsed the millennium declaration in 2000 and later reaffirms its commitment to these global goals. These goals may be summarized as follows:

- Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger,
- Achievement of Universal Primary Education,
- Promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women,
- Reduction of child mortality,
- Combating disease epidemics such as, HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases,
- Ensuring environmental sustainability, and
- Development of a global partnership for development.

The MDGs are therefore specific time-bound goals to spur developments by improving social and economic conditions in the poorest nations of the world. Various national leaders are challenged by these goals and they are putting up spirited fight to meet the target time. In order to assess how Africans were doing with the development goals, Africa held its second Pan-African Forum on children in Cairo on November 2007, and that resulted in the "Call for Accelerated Action to Make Africa Fit for Children". This became Africa's position on the MDGs.

### **Discriminatory Condition of a Girl-Child**

The meaning and relevance of the girl-child has worn different faces because of the different religions, traditions, cultures, socio-political and economic practices of different countries of the world. In all, three distinct

types of girl-child may be identified due to the existing discriminatory conditions;

- girl-child conditioned by religious discriminations,
- girl-child conditioned by traditional/cultural discriminations,
- Girl-child conditioned by socio-political as well as economic discriminations.

In each of these conditions, one common factor persists, that is, the fact that education has always remained the way forward for the total liberation of the girl-child. A critical look at these different discriminatory conditions will expose the present status or position of the girl-child.

### **The Girl-Child Conditioned By Religious Discriminations**

Islamic religious doctrine and practices do not permit the girl-child to be seen nor heard beyond the boarder of the home where the woman performs her household chores; and as a female, she is physically veiled during outings. The same doctrine allows the practice of polygamy whereby a girl-child can be married at a tender age and could be the 4th or 5th wife to the man old enough to be her father. The girl-child has no chance to consider what her fate will be under such circumstances. Can she truly be fulfilled as a woman in later years?

The Christian religion on the other hand appears to be more liberal concerning the girl-child issues. Although, in some denominations this stigma of adhering to admonition of the "woman of Corinth" who was not to be heard in the church is still present. The application of this doctrine in some churches has limited those talented women of God who would have excelled in their different endeavors or calling and who would have subsequently become a positive influence on other women.

In some other traditional beliefs where superstition and ignorance have sway, some children, including the girl-children are tagged witches and forced out of their homes into streets, becoming a public nuisance. Some girl-children can also be maltreated for being born twins or carrying a sign of doom from the ancestors, (*Essienemana* or *EkaAbasi* in Ibibio).

### **The Girl-Child Conditioned By Traditional and Cultural Practices**

The Nigerian society and some other similar societies have relegated the girl child to the background thereby preventing her from

becoming her best. She is expected to perform household chores diligently and submissively without complaining no matter the condition or circumstance she finds herself in. She is trained by the mother to produce food through farm work and trading on locally produced food materials. These virtues of hard work and diligence make the girl child to stand out for exploitation. (Ekpo et al, 2003)

In most communities, the girl-child has no shares in family inheritance and as such family property is shared on the basis of the number of boys in the family and not girls. Only few communities give due recognition to the girl-child's inheritance notably, the first daughter (the Adiaha) of the family among the Efik people of Cross Rivers State. Depending on the society, the girl child could be married out any time even at birth before she could even come of age. For some parents, the girl-child is for wealth creation through marriage and in which case the consent of the girl may or may not be sought as long as the suitor is a rich person. The girl-children are occasionally used in establishing political, social and economic relations with renowned and well placed people in the society.

In some communities socially, renowned and well placed people used the girl-children as house helps to show off their wealth and affluence in the society. The number of maidens a man could hire for his wife/wives is regarded as a symbol of his strength and status in the society.

The girl-child is a member of an age-group who may be called upon to perform traditional dance at functions or ceremonies irrespective of time and season. She could be withdrawn from the classroom to entertain dignitaries at any time. Their age group would usually form a workforce that take turn in helping each other out in farm work, palm oil production and other tedious task.

### **The Girl-Child Conditioned by Socio-Political and Economic Discriminations**

In some societies, sons are valued more highly than daughters, (Udofot, 2006). The foetus baby-girl still growing in her mother's womb may already be in a great danger because her parents may chose to end the pregnancy when they find out the sex, (UNICEF, 2009). The value placed on the girl-child influences the expenses the family invests in her education because she will be married out. The first financial consideration is therefore given to the male child even in situations where

the girl-child shows greater potentials. She has to help produce money to train the boy-child. She can even be given in marriage or sent out as a house help so that she can help to train the boy. The opinion of the girl-child is hardly sought regarding any important issue in the family.

### **Indicators of Girl-Child Discrimination**

The indicators of the various forms of discriminations as discussed above are intense in countries and societies where the level of education is low and level of poverty is high. For instance, in developed countries the girl-child has been liberated from many of these discriminations. In societies where the girl-child is still entangled by many of these discriminations, the following indicators abound:

- high rate of child labour,
- sexual abuse and exploitation,
- early and forced marriages,
- high maternal death,
- child abandonment, abortion and child trafficking, and
- High rate of child mortality, (Rena, 2009).

From the millennium report, vital statistics have shown that:

- of more than 100 children who are not in school, approximately 60 percent are girls,
- by age 18 years, girls have received an average of 4.4 years less education than boys globally, because out of more than 130 million primary school age children not enrolled in school, nearly 60% are girls,
- in some countries in sub-Saharan African, adolescent girls have HIV rates up to five times higher than adolescent boys,
- pregnancies and child birth related health problems take the lives of nearly 146, 000 teenage girls each year,
- in sub-Saharan Africa, a woman faces a one in 13 chance of dying in child birth, in western Europe, the risk is 1 in 3, 200 chance;
- at least one in three girls and women worldwide has been battered or sexually abused in her life time,
- an estimated 450 million adult women in developing countries are stunted, a direct result of malnutrition in their early life (Millennium Report, 2009).

It is evident that the unequal burden of being female begins at the birth and continues through out their childhood. Parents unfortunately perpetuate these practices. In order to help the girl-children survive and reach their full potential under such discriminatory conditions, an accelerated action plan needs to be taken. In this case, the recommendations made by Beijing Platform for all government agencies and private sectors should be enforced to meet the needs of different societies. It was recommended that the following be urgently effected namely, the elimination of;

- all forms of discrimination against the girl-child,
- negative cultural attitude and practices against girls,
- economic exploitation, child labour, and
- Violence against the girl-child.

The United Nations Forth World conference of 1995 also recommended the promotion and protection of the rights of the girl-child in social, economic and political life. It recommended the strengthening of the role of the family by improving the status of the girl-child. The plan of action listed above does not exclude any group of persons, religion, political or other union, ethnic, national, disability, birth or status etc, (UN fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995).

### **The Relevance of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) To the Needs of the Girl-Child.**

A review of the millennium development goals would show specific relevance to the needs of the girl-child. If adequately planned and implemented these eight (8) goals will surely uplift the status of the girl-child. The realization of these goals will change the status of the girl-child. The more educated the girl-child is, the more enlightened she becomes. She will be able to combat discrimination and enable the fulfillment of all other goals which more or less occur as a result of ignorance of available opportunities and chances for survival, (Kerala, 2009).

### **Liberation from Ignorance**

The girl-child has to be able to liberate herself from ignorance placed by religious bodies and cultural restrictions before she can benefit from the opportunities that will enhance her liberation from discriminatory conditions. Many countries have some forms of legislation banning child

labour, but the practice remains endemic and culturally acceptable. High levels of poverty, lack of education and awareness among the girl-children pushed some of them into extreme and deplorable living condition out of their own self will/volition.

### **Education of Girl- Child on Human Rights**

How many of the girl-children understand their rights as citizens? The girl-child needs to be informed of her rights, right from her immediate family into the larger community. The human rights of children are explicitly set out in convention of the Right of the child. These include those that also specially relate to the girl-child being the more vulnerable of the two sexes.

To refresh our memories, the following are some human rights issues for the girl-child:

- Freedom from discrimination based on gender, age, race, colour, language, religion, ethnicity or any other status, or on the status of the child's parent.
- Free and compulsory elementary education, equal access to readily available forms of secondary and higher education.
- Right to information about health, sexuality and reproduction;
- Protection from all physical or mental abuses;
- Protection from economic and sexual exploitation, prostitution and trafficking;
- Freedom from forced or early marriage;
- Equal rights to inheritance;
- Freedom to express their opinion about plans or decisions affecting the child's life.

Human rights are universal, civil, political, economic, social and cultural and they belong to all human beings including children and girl-children. Children and youths also enjoy special human rights linked to the status as minor and to their need for special care and protection. Girl-child required additional protection because of their frail nature.

### **Positioning the Girl-Child for the Realization of the MDGs**

UNICEF devoted the 2009 world day against child labour to the tackling of the core issues that lead to the child labour – poverty. The



theme was, "Give Girls a Chance: End Child Labour". Amankwah (2009) makes it clear that the only way to achieve success is through education. He emphasized that most women work eighteen hours in a day and only get wages for six hours. In order to disentangle the girl-child from her mother's routine work schedule, she needs to go to school as this will upset her usual routine. It will further expose her to varying opportunities that will engage her time more profitably.

Schooling also provides a break in the habits and culture which stultifies the growth of the girl-child. It opens up options and possibilities and dreams for a new future. When in school, they are no longer exploited. They no longer have to work for others; they are discovering themselves and their potentialities instead. They acquire self esteem and confidence. This is the first step to gender equality and breakdown of stereotypes. This is the beginning of the role as individuals in their own right.

### **Strategies to Position the Girl Child**

From the foregoing discussion, the girl-child may fail to meet the eight international development goals if she is restricted socially, educationally and culturally.

### **Positioning a Girl-Child Socially**

A careful analysis of the situation of the girl-children in our societies today reveal that their vulnerability and deplorable status result largely from poverty, hunger, destitution and the apparent insensitivity of the different levels of government to their needs. The basic life requirements of safe water, shelter and food are not met. Such deprivation heightens the effect of the others. Therefore when two or more of such coincide, the effect on children generally can be catastrophic. For instance, girl-children will be expected to assist their mothers in fetching water for household use. This will affect their school attendance and performance. Poverty contributes to malnutrition which in turn is a major contributing factor in the death of under five children in developing countries. It is reported that some 300 millions children globally still go to bed hungry every day. (UNICEF, 2009). Many young girls are seen in the night and during school hours hawking wares to supplement family living.

The best start in life is critical in a child's first few years. A girl-child needs good social services for her intellectual and emotional

development. These deprivations will greatly hamper her ability to achieve her full potential, contributing to the society's cycle of endless poverty and hunger. To break that cycle, primary health care, improved nutrition, safe water, decent and affordable accommodation should be provided.

Little or no attention is given to children's welfare in this country. Any commitment to child welfare is very sporadic. Some international agencies like the UNICEF, Safe Child Organization etc. have introduced various interventions through vaccination and fortified food supplements aimed at supplying micronutrients like iron and vitamin A which are essential for a healthy immune system. These provisions should be systematic and not sporadic.

Similarly, one of the biggest primary causes of preventable mental retardation and brain damage is being looked into and through the Universal Salt Iodization (USI) education campaign. Mothers and care givers should be sufficiently sensitized to position the girl-children where they can access these facilities.

### **Positioning a Girl-Child Culturally**

Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society where men dominate nearly all spheres of women's life. Culturally therefore, girl-children are in subordinate position. They need to know their rights and be properly educated on how to assert these rights. Our girls need qualitative education that can empower them to negotiate intelligently for their right.

We need to produce the likes of the Biblical daughters of Zelophehad in the book of Numbers. These five girls had information about their rights and inheritance. They said, "Our father died in the wilderness but he was not in the company of those who revolted against the Lord ... and he had no sons", (Numbers 27: 3 – 4). The five young girls (Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah) were bold; they stood before Moses the leader of the children of Israel, Eleazar, the priest and before the leaders and the congregation by the door way of the tabernacle of meeting. They were able to justify their claim, "why should the name of our father disappear just because he had no son? Give us our father's possession, they insisted"! And they got their rights.

Many socialization and traditional beliefs as well as sex stereotyping are still clouding and exerting negative influences to some extent on the girl-child development. The traditional division of labour where girls are assigned house chores of caring for siblings and the

elderly while the boys are at liberty to read, sleep or play games exert negatively on the girl-child's psychology. This should be discouraged. Household cores should be equitably distributed. Who said boy-children cannot wash plates and change baby's diaper? Let the parent break this cycle of enslaving the woman.

The girl-children may be too young to wrestle their way through myriads of harmful socio-cultural practices like female genital mutilation, early and forced marriages fattening room and harem restrictions. All hands should be on desk for them. Patriarchy must be confronted so that a culture that places premium on the protection of all including girl children can be developed (Ciroma, 2006). That will be the enabling environment needed by every girl-child for her all round development and the realization of the millennium goals.

### **Positioning a Girl-Child Educationally**

To a girl-child, education is not only regarded as a human right issue, but as a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development in life. Education is an enabler for all other millennium development goals yet about 720 million children globally have remained out of school (Veneman, 2007). The historical antecedents that made the public to regard the education of their girl-children as an investment in futility should give way to gender parity in the provision of educational opportunities to boys and girls-children.

Globally, significant progress has been made in primary enrolment attendance and if current trends continue, most of the countries in the Middle East, North Africa, Latin America and Caribbean regions appear to be on course for 2015. Nigeria still has to double its efforts in this regard. However, enrolment alone is not a good indicator of literacy level. Girl-children must be properly positioned to complete their primary and secondary education.

In Akwa Ibom State, there is much talk about free education. This is commendable. Equal action should follow this declaration otherwise, it is not good enough. Sending children into schools is only the beginning. Free and compulsory education policy should include adequate resource provision (human and material) and monitoring. The children should be made to attend school regularly and be armed with marketable skills that will enable them face all future challenges. This is the ultimate objective of the MDGs. Ensuring that girl-children attend and complete full course

of primary and secondary education is imperative. With education, they can create wealth and upgrade their living standard. It is also important that the education they receive at each level of their training be of very high standard. This has a "multiplier effect" because educated girls are likely to marry later, and have fewer children, who in turn will be more likely to survive. They are more productive at home and better paid in the job market.

Elsewhere, Ekpo (2008) pleaded that teenage pregnancy and its accompanied societal ridicule should not be allowed to hinder them. If a girl-child falls on the wayside due to unplanned pregnancy, she should be showed love, forgiveness and acceptance. She should be put back on course to complete her educational pursuits. Similarly, a situation where the girl children are occasionally harassed by the male tutors who were expected to train them is not healthy. Such tutors should be severely disciplined.

## **Conclusion**

The realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is a human right issue and every girl-child is entitled to reach her goals. The UN Secretary General has called on rich and poor countries to boost their efforts and meet commitments. He observed that more than half way to the 2015 deadline to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) major advances in the fight against poverty and hunger have begun to slow down and even reverse as a result of the global economic and food crises. Thus, despite many successes, the overall progress has been too slow for most of the targets to be met by 2015.

Various nations are accelerating their actions towards meeting these goals. Nigeria should not be left behind. Humanly, looking at the challenges facing Nigeria at the moment, one could say it is impossible to position our girl-children for the realization of these millennium development goals. But hope should not be lost. If good governance and true democracy are practiced, social services and infrastructure are maintained, then positive impact, wealth creation and improved living standard would be seen in the villages and not on the pages of print media. Peace is a "sine qua non" in the process of any development, many people have lost hope when political and economic climate in Nigeria is viewed.

What rate of progress can we actually make with the upsurge of unprecedented violence in the land, destitution, apparent insensitivity of the different levels of government to the needs of girls and women, pervasive incidences of poverty, denial of basic amenities, insanity, and lack of life requirements of safe water, shelter and food? However, let every mother and teacher create opportunities to provide counter signals to the girl-child. Myles Munroe (2010) opined that innovations do emerge in crisis. Thus positioning the girl-child for the realization of the millennium development goals is not impossible. Every girl-child should be assisted to build personal empowerment by accepting the fact they are talented and have the capacity to lead and can achieve. They need to know their rights and properly educated on how to assert them. This type of transforming education cannot be achieved in the present school structure alone. We need role models mothers and teachers for them to emulate, rich learning environments with learners' friendly teaching strategies, supportive school environment and transparent public administration.

Dear readers, "...the fields are all wide, but the reapers are few...." The girl-children are eager to improve themselves. They will be the carriers of the likes of late chief Etim. Therefore, let there be a purposeful positive change at all levels:

- Let the news of the birth of the girl-child be received with equal excitement as that of the boy-child.
- Let the girl-child and the boy-child have equal opportunities for quality education.
- Let schools be provided with teaching and learning resources;
- Let professionally trained teachers be deployed to these schools.
- Let proprietors of schools rethink the issue of de-boarding girl's schools.
- Let teachers form themselves into learning teams and work collaboratively to create knowledge that will empower girl-children educationally, meeting their specific needs.
- Let governments and other stakeholders in the actualization of MDGs be more practical than theoretical working together to fight against all forms of violence and social insecurity.
- Let everyone give peace a change.

Then, these buds of better tomorrow (the girl-children) will unfold in a conducive environment. They are the channels of great and renowned

teachers, noble doctors, learned lawyers, astute politicians, articulate diplomats, intelligent engineers, creative writers, successful businessmen and businesswomen and many other icons in their callings, and the resource and strength of our nation.

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