

Millennium Development Goals on Sexual Health in Africa: Education and Gender Equality as Implications for Reduction of Sexual Violence against Women in Africa

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Abstract: The discussion on education with regards to gender equality and women empowerment is gaining significant attention in recent times. Education as a veritable tool for both human and national developments proves itself a great equalizer of human conditions. In September 2000, the United Nations (UN) declared eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by its member States by 2015. Goals two and three have to do with the achievement of universal primary education and gender equality, respectively. These two goals have seriously affected Africans at personal, national and continental levels. Besides, the women folk have been notably marginalized due to poor accessibility to education through which they can be disposed and empowered with the acquisition of relevant skills to think clearly, appreciate their lives and that of others, develop better and contribute constructively to the growth of their nations and promote human dignity. Consequently, they fall prey to various abuses and violations that dehumanize them. This paper therefore evaluates how education and gender equality help to reduce the widespread cankerworm of violence against women in African societies and how far the dictates of the MDGs have assisted in the health of African women. However, it highlights the limitations that are inherent in African settings that militated against the full actualization of the universal education and gender equality by 2015 as demanded by the United Nations (UN) and the way forward even after the UN deadline.

Key words: Women, development, education, gender, equality, sexual violence

I. Introduction

Interests on sexual violence, universal basic education, gender equality and women empowerment heightened enormously with the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals by the United Nations in the year 2000. These goals especially the second and the third; education for all and promotion of gender equality as well as empowering women have been evaluated to be the bond of other goals as they have both intrinsic and extrinsic values. This is simply so because as the great African patriot, Nelson Mandela remarked, “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

As a catalyst for constructive and sustainable development, the African philosopher, Emmanuel Edeh upholds that good education must go with good character formation (academic and moral excellence), otherwise it will be more ruinous; for education without good morals, as valuable as it is will make man even a more devastating being. In philosophers’ catchphrase, education should serve to build a sound mind in a healthy body “*mens sana in corpore sano*”. This means that good education is a veritable tool for both men and women for the unfolding of their mental and physical capabilities to reason clearly, appreciate their lives and that of others, develop better in respect of human dignity and contribute constructively to the growth of their nations and the world at large. Ultimately, education should help to preserve the citizens and ensure peace. Above and beyond all, it should offer one the ability to see oneself and others as “goods that are”¹ (Edeh, 2007), having the same ontological nature, sharing the same creative source and the same cosmological resources. Consequently, good education is a sure remedy to all forms of atrocities including the malady of sexual violence against any being but especially against women and children who are the most vulnerable groups.

II. MDGs on Education and Gender Equality Specified

To promote social justice and human dignity as well as to preserve the lives and integrity of the citizens, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states categorically that, “everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.” Education has been essentially deemed a genuine instrument for proper human formation and development. Following this intent on universal accessibility to education, the UN Assembly in 1979 had a Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) where the rights of women were outlined under law to liberate them from all sorts of violence, discriminations, marginalization and social injustice. Again, in 1995, the World Congress on Women articulated their commitment “to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of humanity.” Based on this and other factors

affecting the health of women, human and national developments, the United Nations in the year 2000 deemed it optimal important to include universal education for all as well as gender equality and empowerment of women among the eight targeted Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015.

The classical Greek philosopher, Aristotle observed that the educated differs from the uneducated as much as the living differs from the dead. Therefore every one; man and woman has a fundamental right to education for a more fulfilled and peaceful life. The empowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality have both intrinsic and extrinsic values and at the same time they are situated at the heart of the attainment of all the other goals. Particularly, healthy, educated, empowered, employed women with integral formation approach of knowledge and good character can inflame stable constructive development that can efficiently break cycles of poverty; for self, family, nation and world at large as well as improve maternal health and consequently reduce child mortality, etc. Against this background, education and gender parity are inevitable pathways to sustainable human and social developments.

At this juncture, it is noteworthy to delineate that gender equality does not necessarily remove the traditional roles bestowed on each sex. It does not also mean that men and women are equal, the same and must exhibit exact responsibilities. After all, men are gifted with masculine nature, while women on the other hand are also naturally equipped but with feminine body and soul that account for their extraordinary qualities for motherhood. Gender equality rather means that the rights, opportunities and responsibilities of individuals are not just based on sex as they exercise their roles within and outside the family in a manner that makes them uniquely different. So understood, they complement each other to attain unity in their diversities, while responding to the social roles and automatic division of labour in the family generated by the enormous physiological differences. The grandeur of the sex differentiation demands therefore, that each of the gender be accorded the respect due to him or her.²

III. The Consequences of Education Imbalance Among Africans with Regards to Sexual Violence Against Women

The World Health Organization (2007) defined sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim in any setting including but not limited to home and work.”³ Furthermore, *On the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993)*, the United Nations declared that violence against women is “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, psychological or sexual harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life”.⁴ Such violent acts consist of intimidation, threat or sexual harassment, rape and sexual assault (including marital rape), forced kissing, domestic violence, spousal battering, sexual torture and abuse of female children, traditional practices that are harmful to women (such as female genital mutilation), forced prostitution and any form of forceful sexual contact and unwanted sexual behaviour.

Generally, any society without reasonable education becomes a breeding ground for violence, coercive and all sorts of inhuman feats that debase human dignity. Victor Hugo once remarked, “teach the ignorant as much as you can; society is culpable in not providing a free education for all and it must answer for the night which it produces. If the soul is left in darkness sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness.” Nations with low literacy rate suffer significantly from weak economic growth and sustainable development. In Africa, the deficient literacy level has been tagged to be strongly responsible for all kinds of difficulties that confront the people in their daily dainty life activities because through education, relevant skills can be acquired to face life’s challenges which include socio-economic and health problems as well as sexual violence against children and women. Education therefore is the key to freedom from all forms of subjugations and enslavement. The former President of Tanzania and educationist, Nyerere (Nyerere, 1978) captured it better when he said, “education is the liberation of man from the restraints and limitations of ignorance and dependency...increase man’s physical and mental freedom... to increase their control over themselves, their own lives and the environment in which they live. The ideas released in the mind through education therefore should be liberating ideas, the skills acquired by education should be liberating skills.”⁵ In fact, each child; girl or boy represents a future of the community, country, and indeed that of the whole world. Education helps to build and nurture the spirit of patriotism and responsible citizenship in them for the promotion, advancement and sustainability of development, justice and peace. Therefore, “a state that does not educate and train women is like a man who only trains his right arm.” Besides, Brigham Young once stated that when you “educate a boy, you educate an individual. Educate a girl and you educate a community.” Women are germane to the survival and development of children and the building of healthy communities, societies and nations. The neglect of girl-child education therefore creates a missing link in development.

Despite the significant acceleration in education, the following studies show that less than one-quarter of countries in sub-Saharan Africa met the MDG target for gender parity. The 2008 MDGs Report⁶ reveals that the adult literacy rate in sub-Saharan Africa is sixty seven percent (except in Zimbabwe, 90percent and Burkina Faso, 12.8percent) with women having generally a higher illiteracy compared to men. On the other hand, the 2010 UNICEF study⁷ reports that the enrolment rate of children of educated mothers is somewhat seventy one percent, while that of uneducated mothers lag behind with 22percent (51percent enrolment) with more children in primary rather than secondary school. Again, the tertiary education enrolment divulges also a considerable difference; 6.8 percent for men and 4.5 percent for women. Hence, for every 100 male students enrolled, there are only 66 female students.

Educational imbalance leads to serious societal problems including violation of women which has gained a global concern and treaties. Such substantial literate differences contribute significantly to the vulnerability of women to social ills and violence accruing from:

- Poor educational achievement and consequential effect of lack or limited access to gainful employment
- Economic and social dependence on another due to poverty and associated factors
- Financial insecurity that reduces women's power to negotiate safe sexual practices in their sexual relationships
- Lack of sex education and sufficient health care
- Cultural barrier to self-fulfilment and marginalization of women and gender inequality
- Early marriage and even marriage with domineering, abusive and possessive partner
- Inability to resist domestic violence
- Weak system of criminal justice that indirectly encourages violence
- Socio-cultural beliefs, practices and rigid gender norms that endanger maternal and consequent child health
- Polygamous family relationships and marital conflicts

Educational imbalance and lack of intellectual power create a threatening gap in the exercise of choice and decision making in breaking cycles of patriarchal mentality and attitude towards the subordination of women and resultant effects of harmful cultural norms. In Nigeria for example, women's physical integrity is not amply protected. The enforcement of the law in relation to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) has proved difficult and domestic violence is very common especially in polygamous families. Because of low level of legal protection, reporting abused cases and filing for divorces are considered as very disgraceful for most families.

To this effect, the great Pontiff, late Pope John Paul II reflecting on the dignity and vocation of women wrote in his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988) expressed that, "human dignity commands members of the society -man and woman alike- be allowed to take part in the decisions that affect them in the climate of genuine freedom."⁸ Education and empowerment of women is therefore a *conditio sine qua non* in accelerating development and ensuring peace. It is a great equalizer of human conditions. Hence, it also empowers a woman to control, protect and manage her own destiny in favour of human dignity.

IV. The Implications of MDGs on Education and Gender Equality on Violence Against Women in African Societies

African countries have generally responded positively to MDGs mandates through their concerted efforts and innovations of strategic plans and executions for the realization of the goals for human and national developments. One of the indicators of these concern and pragmatic efforts is the practical recognition of the missing link; the role of women vis-à-vis gender equality in the developmental process. Linked to MDGs are the instigations of: The African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) adopted in 1981, The ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) of 2001, The Women Right Protocol of 2003, etc. and the pursuit of gender sensitive policies both at national and international levels that productively create opportunities for women empowerment and development. These are laudable and eloquent testimonies in combating the obvious marginalization and social injustice against women in the developmental scheme through limited access to existing opportunities in virtually all sectors of the socio-political and economic setting. With those attempts, women are gradually realizing their potentials and values, while coming into public fore.

The reports on the development status of the eight targeted time-bound MDGs have actually been generally successful in yielded significant positive and progressive results worldwide particularly in African countries where they were obviously lagging behind especially in the areas of education, gender equality and women empowerment as well as improving both maternal and child health. The growing need of gender equality in the developmental process has enabled the involvement and empowerment of women in various socio-economic sectors as well as the enrolment of substantial percentage of them in schools at all levels.

The MDGs have so far helped a good percentage of African women:

- To get educated and be properly introduced into the wider world
- To enhance their understanding of the society in order to contribute better to its development
- To expand their horizon for decision making
- To be gainfully employed and financially secured
- To sentence hunger, violence, abuse, etc.
- To live and encourage fulfilled and peaceful life
- To respect and uphold their human dignity
- To be happily married and feel fulfilled
- To negotiate for safer sex and maintain healthy relationships
- To be able to alter inhuman traditional norms in relation to sex
- To promote healthy behaviours and health of both husband and children
- To live without fear of coercion and violence
- To manage and control their destiny

V. The Limitations of full Implementation of MDGs on Education and Gender Equality in African World

The 2015 MDGs deadline is gone. The development results so far disclose that the tendency of meeting up adequately with the desired goals in almost all the African countries is very low, despite the accelerated developments made. Besides, with particular regard to education, the social ills do not seem to reduce significantly in the same proportion with the school enrolment. This reveals that the UN intent is not just to get everybody enrolled in school but to be given quality and integral education that transforms the individual for a better life. The educational structure should therefore be such that disposes the minds of the citizens for healthier life patterns. As Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda rightly noted, “actions will only bear fruit when we know ourselves and what we need and then articulate our visions clearly”. Education can only be efficient when the system has a clear vision of the peoples’ need in view.

Since education empowers one to control and manage one’s own destiny in favour to human dignity, the educand should not be considered as a vessel to be filled up but a candle to be kindled for a natural, harmonious and progressive unfolding of himself; his potentials, interests, motivations, beliefs, ideals, habits, powers, visions and horizon according to his natural endowment so that he becomes the best he can in knowledge and character. Education therefore should help the citizens to direct their behaviours towards good by shaping the state of their minds as the psychological doyen, William James rightly observed. However, some challenges militate against the achievement of the desired goals of education and consequently the expected maximum empowerment of women and gender equality. They include:

Socio-Cultural Challenges

- Patriarchal society: The distribution of power between men and women in African setting has always been in favour of men.
- Male child preference
- Domesticity of women
- Early marriage and pregnancy
- Lack of Will Power to accept responsibility from the part of women
- Reluctance and resistance to change
- Rigid traditional rules

Poor Educational Structure

- The current educational system seems to favour those who are intellectually stronger
- Primary education is not always enough for a meaningful life
- Inadequate quality personnel
- Poor implementation of the existing policies

Recommendations for Post- 2015 DMGs Goals

Following the difficulties encountered in the implementation of the given policies so far, the Post-2015 MDGs calls for proper re-evaluation of the adopted strategies for the targeted goals, and a new development agenda as it affects the African world in general and the individual nations in particular based on their most pressing needs and the desired future. However, it is obvious that much remains to be done to keep the African world on track to meet the goals especially that of universal education, gender equality and women empowerment for eradication of social ills especially violence against the women folk. Hence, I make the following recommendations,

Education with good moral character: inevitable for sustainable development

Man is an integral being. Good education must incorporate good conducts otherwise it will tantamount to ruining the mind. Therefore, it is necessary to:

- Upgrade quality education with Sound Conscience
- Encourage vocational education for self- initiating projects
- Promote innovations and foster skills
- Support healthy Lifestyle
- Encourage response-able behaviours

Respect For life: Peaceful Convivum

Every one is a 'created good' (beauty) that is. A peaceful creature naturally seeks to live in accordance to his good nature for the realization of his profound being. As a sacred being, man's true existence should be a peaceful one that promotes human dignity through:

- Collective existential responsibility for the promotion of human dignity
- The spirit of true and sincere brotherliness
- Respect and care for one another having emanated from one and the same creative source
- Protection of women, minority and vulnerable groups by:
 - Creating functional empowerment programme for rural women
 - Eliminating harmful traditional practices
 - Involving them in decision making
 - Engaging them in public services
 - Availing them right to properties and inheritance
 - Combating all forms of abuse
 - Exterminating impossible standards for women
 - Getting supports from fellow women
 - Encouraging women to self-empowerment (challenge the ideals set for them by the society)

Empowerment and Employment of All

Unemployment has been a teething problem world-wide but more especially in Africa. This accounts grossly why a good number of people who live below the poverty line are on the rise. *The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2009*, UN) revealed that about 57 percent of those who work earn less than one dollar a day. Besides, the social ills against women prevail steadily as the unemployment rate increases. It becomes therefore very essential that men, youths and even women be gainfully engaged to unleash their energy positively and be seriously involved, informed and empowered in the developmental process as their voice can drive enormous changes, while they advocate for and create solutions that better their living conditions.

Social and Health Supports

Social aids for the unemployed, physically challenged as well as widows are required. Effective health services which include qualitative and quantitative health personnels, equipments and efficient medications are of great necessity.

Efficient Sexual Education

Sexual education helps to identify sexual gestures and feelings and how to resist pressure, to learn about the nature of sexual violence, the risks of pregnancy and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) as well as the risk of sexual exploitation; to recognize them when they occur, protect themselves as much as possible and identify available sources of support.⁹ As was highlighted by UNESCO (2009), the fundamental aim of equipping children and young people with sexual education is to avail them the knowledge, skills and values to make responsible choices about their social relationships in a world affected by HIV. Therefore, lack of open discussions in relation to sexuality especially at the time when it is most needed may as Gordon rightly stated, "contribute to creating and sustaining vulnerability to coercion, abuse and exploitation. Effective sexual education is essential in order to redress the balance."¹⁰

Good Governance and Security

Good governance promises liberty, security, justice, equality, as well as equitable, responsible and fair distribution of resources for the interest of the common good and preservation of the citizens.

VI. Conclusion

The increasing social, political and economic ills, heightened corruption, steep moral decadence, survival of the fittest, oppression of the poor, marginalization of women and so on especially in Africa necessitated discussions on education, gender equality and the empowerment of women in various socio-economic sectors. Laudable and eloquent testimonies have unveiled themselves in combating the obvious marginalization and social injustice against women in virtually all sectors of the socio-political and economic setting, thanks to MDGs. Women are gradually realizing their potentials and values, while coming into public fore particularly in African countries where they were obviously lagging behind. However, a lot need to be done still towards the eradication of the violence for the promotions and sustenance of good living conditions and human dignity.

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