

Educating the Girl-child: An Imperative for Our Time

Kaka was doing really well in P7, her final year of primary education at St. Daniel Comboni Primary School in Sudan. In her subject tests, she often got the highest scores, especially for Maths, English, and Science, and her good performance in the June “mock” examinations augured well for the end of the year. Her father was the Principal of the school and was certainly proud of her. By September, however, the teachers noticed that she was frequently absent, and her homework and class performance were deteriorating. She wouldn't say what was wrong. Not even her father knew what was happening.

After much persuasion and time, Kaka revealed that she had been cursed by a witchdoctor, and she was no longer able to think properly or study effectively. Three boys from her class had paid for the local witchdoctor to put a curse on her. Reluctantly, they admitted they were jealous of her abilities and that they did not want to be shown up by her in their final exams. Nor did they want her to succeed and go on to study in secondary school the following year.

It wasn't easy to convince Kaka that the curse was lifted and she should still sit the exams. Her subsequent performance was disappointing. Although she passed and went on to secondary school, her passion and personality were never the same again.

This simple example of girl-child education in a developing country highlights just one of many issues that confront and constrain girls to achieve their full potential. The mere fact that Kaka and her peers actually had any schooling at all throughout more than two decades of civil war plaguing Sudan was one of the biggest – if not the biggest – issue facing these young people and their families. The lack of trained teachers, textbooks, classrooms, and even the bombing of one of their schools by the government in Khartoum in 2000, did not prevent these small Nuban communities from giving their children, despite all kinds of obstacles, the opportunity and hope for a better and more peaceful future. Being a girl-child, however, was a major issue, one that sometimes seemed insurmountable.

Although there is a growing awareness among the people in the Nuba Mountains about the inequalities and violations of women's and girls' rights, history and culture often helped ensure that the education of girls in the Nuba Mountains was not a high priority on anyone's agenda. Only about 20% of school-age children actually attend school, and at the lower levels of education, there is an equal ratio of boys and girls in classes. But when the girls hit puberty, a significant drop-off occurs because girls are often given in marriage or made to stay at home to carry out onerous domestic duties:¹ e.g., walking hours each day to the borehole and waiting their turn in the long queue to collect the potable water, carrying heavy loads of mangoes and vegetables on their heads over long distances, often with a baby strapped to their back, to sell their goods at the local market, walking further into the bush or up the mountains to collect firewood because of increasing deforestation, and helping in the planting and harvesting of food during the wet season so that there is enough to last the whole year. These are just some of the tasks that women and girls undertake in Sudan and many other parts of Africa. Another researcher states that the normal course of life for a female Sudanese teenager is that she is more likely to give birth than to finish primary school.² It is important to see that this comment is not demeaning of motherhood, but it is a criticism of the lost opportunity for the full development of potential for young girls.

While many of the young women willingly leave school and marry, there is a significant proportion who need help in order to stay in the upper primary levels and desperately want to attend secondary

school. These intelligent, capable, and resourceful young women want to train for occupations as nurses and teachers in their developing towns, and they know that marriage and motherhood could come a bit later for them, if only their families and their culture would support them.

An affirmative girls' education program was initiated in the Sudanese refugee camps of Adjumani district in north Uganda in 2003, and was adapted for use in the Nuba Mountains in 2006. It involved numerous strategies to facilitate the promotion and retention of girls in education, doing such things as:

- subsidizing girls' school fees;
- paying for girls' uniforms;
- providing girls with underwear and with sanitary pads so that they do not absent themselves when menstruating;
- conducting workshops and training specifically for female students and their female teachers; and
- raising awareness through programs for the general community about the benefits for the whole community of educating girls.

In the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, it was quickly realised how essential it was to provide hostel accommodation for the female students who wanted to go on to secondary school once they had passed their primary school exams. Why? Because if the girls went home each day after school, they were bound to perform domestic duties rather than have the same freedom as their brothers to study and prepare their homework for the next day. Parents insisted that a secure and managed hostel was the only way for advocates to gain consent from parents, especially fathers, for their daughters to continue their education. Thus it was that subsidized feeding programs in various areas also began attracting attention and interest.

As a result of these very effective strategies, in one area in the Nuba Mountains the numbers of girls going on to secondary school grew from 11 girls in the first year to 23 in the second, to a total of 51 girls in 2009. The 32-bed hostel that had been built was overflowing with girls going to school!

Despite this small success in South Sudan, there continues to be a resistance to girl-child education. Some communities regard it with suspicion, fearing that such education will corrupt the morals of their daughters and change the deeply-rooted traditions relating to marriage and dowry. Thus, it is crucial to attend to these fears. Gender and development approaches recognise the need to consider the rights of both males and females, and while poverty, on the whole around the world, has "the face of a woman,"³ respect for all peoples' gender, class, and ethnicity demands that the consequences of our programs be carefully considered.

Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland in 1831, made the education and training of underprivileged women and girls a priority in her day. She knew that educating and caring for women and girls resulted in the possibility of a better education for their children and the overall good of society. There is a growing awareness that gender equality, especially through education, is transformative and world-changing. And there is no doubt that it needs to continue and be actively supported today, and into the future, not only by Sisters of Mercy, but by all people in our world.

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Notes

¹ Tim Brown's research indicates that only 1% of girls finish primary school. See "Education Crisis in South Sudan," in *Forced Migration Review* (2006), <<http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR24/FMR2431.pdf>>.

² K Breitenborn, "Gender Biases in Sudanese Education," posted by *Internal Voices* in *Labels*: 12th edition, 2011 <<http://internal-voices.blogspot.com/2011/03/v-behaviorurldefaultvmlo.html>>.

³ See World Bank, 2001, *Engendering development through gender equality in rights, resources, and voice*, Oxford University Press, New York, <http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/main?pagePK=64193027&piPK=64187937&theSitePK=523679&menuPK=64187510&searchMenuPK=64187283&siteName=WDS&entityID=000094946_01020805393496> <http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/main?pagePK=64193027&piPK=64187937&theSitePK=523679&menuPK=64187510&searchMenuPK=64187283&siteName=WDS&entityID=000094946_01020805393496> >.