

# The Challenges of the Girl Child in Stan-Collins Ubaka's *A Cry of Innocence*

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most topical engagements in the contemporary African literature is the girl child issue against the backdrop of gender discourse. Numerous campaigns have been going on securing the rights of the girl child. Obviously, many writers have contributed copiously to the campaign, especially in the Nigerian context. Stan Collins Ubaka in his novel, *A Cry of Innocence* has made a remarkable reference to the circumstances bedeviling the girl child in a typical African setting. Against this background, this paper examines the challenges of the girl child in the Nigerian context with reference to Stan Collins Ubaka's *A cry of Innocence*. The author may have many other themes but this paper approaches the novel from the perspective of gender discourse; while interrogating the challenges confronting the girl child in Nigeria despite the provisions of the child rights act which was enacted in 2003. This study adopts descriptive design and qualitative method in its analysis. The findings reveal the experiences of a girl in a typical African cultural background characterized by myths, suspicion, mistrust and injustice; it is such situations that compel the girl to tell lies, be discriminated against, and feel lonely; commit suicide, experience various abuses, assaults, and psychological trauma. This paper concludes that the parents of the girl child, especially the mother has the primary responsibility of protecting, safeguarding and preserving the dignity and future of the girl child; although the roles of religious institutions and the society are also undermined. According to this paper, if the rights and dignity of the girl child is preserved and protected, she would be able to contribute to the economic, social and political development of her nation in particular and the globe in general.

**Key words:** Girl child, witch, abuse, Child Rights Act, discrimination.

## INTRODUCTION

The girl child is a female human being who will eventually grow into a woman. She is a young woman. According to Ogbemi (1998) cited in Atim (2015), the girl child is a female child below eighteen years of age (Section 277). A girl child is a young daughter of a family who would one day metamorphose into a full woman, and will eventually give birth to another child, male or female. Every girl child has a future and is endowed with a lot of potentials. The biological potentials of the girl child distinguish her from the male child. Her nature and social milieu surrounding her existence spell out her roles and responsibilities in the home and society (Atim, 2015). The girl child in a poor and rural family is used for economic ventures to realize money to be used to sponsor the boy's education and business ventures. This is a form of exploitation. The girl child is seen as economic burden in the family. This is why African parents do not

consider it necessary to train the girl child in school; she is rather married off as early as possible. These are the circumstances surrounding the birth of the girl child. Ramana and Rani (2015) affirmed that girl child life is a constant fight for survival, growth and development from the time she is conceived till she attains 18 years.

## THE RIGHTS OF THE GIRL CHILD IN NIGERIA

Heidemann and Kristin (2019) reported that the girl child discourse came into reality in the 1980s, when some feminist scholars rose to sensitize the public on ways in which girls experience discrimination and oppression. Wade (1982) used the term girl child in his writing to make the society understand specifically that the female children are actual victims of rape. Heidemann and Kristin (2019) further reported that the term, girl child became more prominent when UNICEF proclaimed 1990 *The Year of the Girl Child*. Opara (2015) of *The Guardian Newspaper* reported in the news feature of *Sunday Magazine*, October 11, 2015 that the pains, rights and prospects of the Nigerian girl child was made popular on October 11, 2015, being “The International Day of the Girl Child”. The occasion exposed the value and rights of the girl child, her challenges and the need for the government, pressure groups and individuals to fight for the rights of the girl child. A gender activist, Anuonye (*Alliance for Africa*) observes that denying the girl child legitimate rights in a home affects the child psychologically; it reduces the girl to a state of inferiority and worthlessness. The provisions of the section 11 of the Child Rights Act, 2003 states thus:

1. Every child is entitled to respect of the dignity of his person, and accordingly, no child shall be –
2. subjected to physical, mental or emotional injury, abuse, neglect or maltreatment, including sexual abuse or
3. subjected to torture, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment; or
4. subjected to attacks upon his honor or reputation; or
5. held in slavery or servitude while in the care of a parent, legal guardian or school authority or any person or authority having the care of the child.

Akolokwu and Nwauzi (2019) classified the rights of the child into four, namely rights to survival, rights to development, rights to protection and rights to participate in matters that concern him. The Nigerian government domesticated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by endorsing the Child rights Act, 2003 (Nwozor and Okhillu, 2022; Assim, 2020). It is noteworthy that despite the elaborate provisions of the rights of the child inherent in the Act, the Nigerian child particularly, the girl is still denied these privileges. Olatunji, (2020) blames the marginalization and deterrence of the Nigerian girl child from attaining proper education on the patriarchal system inherent in the cultural and religious norms, especially, that of Northern Nigeria. According to Ogunniyi (2018), Northern Nigerian states resist the provisions of the Child Right Act because of its non-conformity to their cultural and religious norms, which permits girl child betrothal and marriage and illiteracy, In addition, the obnoxious practice of female genital mutilation and child labor oppose the practicability of the Child Rights Act. ‘The Nigerian girl-child has been limited in many ways by dominant religious and traditional beliefs, especially that of Islam’ (Osondu-Otti, 2015, p. 206). Besides, Ugwu (2021, P.62) has traced the problem of violation of girl-child and women right to poverty and illiteracy in Nigerian society.

In reality, the girl child is entitled to the provisions of the Child Right Acts, however, these rights are not fully implemented; otherwise the status of the girl would have been elevated and her challenges mitigated. Izzi (2019) observes that the impact of these rights is not felt in Nigeria because of our loyalty to our cultural and religious beliefs. In examining the acts, it is observed that majority of Nigerian parents, guardians and teachers who by virtue of the space they occupy in the society have the primary responsibility of propagating these Child Rights Acts are even the ones violating the acts, instead. Consequently, the girl child is inadvertently exposed to torture, deprivation and discrimination by her biological parents, in most cases, the mother. If the girl is not accused of being a witch, she is sexually molested by her father or

accused of having sexual relationships with other men. The reverse is the case with the male child: he is never suspected of being a witch, even when he commits worse crimes than the girl, and he is never accused of being promiscuous no matter the number of girls he sleeps with in a day or even impregnates. The culture and society has placed negative influence on the girl child. Parents are the first custodians of the girl child, and therefore have the primary responsibility of protecting the girl. In the opinion of Izzi (2005), parents should be careful in handling their female children in order to avoid exposing the girl child to danger; notwithstanding, the protection of the girl child is responsibility of everyone in the society.

## THE CHALLENGES OF THE GIRL CHILD IN NIGERIA

The opinion of some Nigerian activists on the girl child issue has been reported in the national newspapers. For instance, Opara (2015) reported in the *Sunday Magazine of Guardian* that The Executive Director, Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC), Dr Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi recognized some of the issues confronting the Nigerian girl child as poor sanitation, early marriage, early child birth and shortage of female teachers, safety and security in schools. The reporter further claims that Afolabi suggested that the role of government should be that of engaging adequate number of female teachers in schools, introducing sexual education, providing incentives for girls to complete primary and secondary education. In the same *Sunday Magazine*, the contribution of Mrs. Lousia Ono Eikhomum -The Executive Director of the *Echoes of Women in Africa*— on the right of the girl child was highlighted. She was reported to have observed that the girl child's discrimination emanates from the home, because the African culture makes the boy to appear superior and more desirable and important than the girl in the family. The girl child is consequently confronted with problems such as gender based violence; peer group pressure and low esteem.

Moreso, in response to the current campaign, Olaoluwa (2018), in an interview in *Daily Times Newspaper*, identified ignorance as a major challenge of the Nigerian girl child. She perceives that young girls are vulnerable to sexual assaults because they lack adequate knowledge of their sexual and reproductive health rights. This shows that the level of education among the female children is very poor. There is a dire need for the government and the society to take the education of the girl child down to the grass root level. The campaign on the rights of the girl child and self defense should be enhanced. This awareness should be done at the community and family levels so as to get all the stakeholders involved.

Many gender activists have recognized some common factors militating against the development and well being of the Girl child. An instance of this is in the report of Opara (2015) in *Sunday Magazine of Guardian*, where Evelyn Agoziem, the Executive Director, Centre for Corrections and Human Development identified the challenges of the girl child in Nigeria as gender discrimination, gender-based labor division, child labor, female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage, denial of formal education and sexual abuse. The girls are poorly informed about sexual health. In some cases, the girl child is abducted and forced to early marriage. The girl child is also the major victim of child trafficking: she is used as house maid and slave for selfish economic gains against the future of the girl. Some of these challenges are enabled by the existing social norms, harmful, discriminatory and degrading cultural practices, poverty and illiteracy.

The perpetrators of violence against girls lie within the culture and social norms of the society. Osondu-Otti (2015) argues, "The Nigerian girl-child has been limited in many ways by culture. This paper therefore investigates the cultural limitations on the Nigerian girl-child, which not only infringes on her human rights, but also hinders her development". These drivers of violence include violent discipline on the girls and women, social status of sexes in the family and cultural beliefs about witchcraft among others. Because the girl is ignorant of her rights and how to enforce them, she becomes a victim. In addition, in an essay, 'Rights of the Girl Child', Haarr (*Global Women Issues: Women in the World Today*, p.188) notes that in many cultures and societies especially in Africa, the girl child is at the high risk of sexual abuse, discrimination based on sex, parental sex selection, exploitation, and other harmful cultural practices, which militate against her survival and realization of her potentials.

The discrimination against the girl child has resulted in the poor enrolment of the girl child in schools. BBC (2017) reports that Nigeria has ‘largest number of children out-of-school’ in the world’. Nigerian parents prefer to send their male children to school, while the girls are married off or are used for other domestic purposes. A 2014 national survey has revealed 70% of children in Africa have experienced multiple violence incidents before turning 18, with 23 million young brides, making Nigeria the highest number of child brides in Africa. The global challenge of Female Genital Mutilation and Cutting (FGM/C) is prevalent in Nigeria. Nigeria has the third-highest absolute number of females and girls undergone FGM/C, with 19.9 million undergone globally, with the intention of preventing promiscuity, preparing girls for marriage, and upholding tradition. (Situation of women and children in Nigeria | UNICEF Nigeria)

## **UNITED NATIONS INTERVENTIONS ON GIRL CHILD RIGHTS IN NIGERIA**

However, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child provides that the government shall take all appropriate measures to protect the child from harmful social and cultural practices affecting the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child (ACRWC, Art. 21).

The right to education as a human right is governed by international human rights instruments and United Nations Conventions, including UNESCO’s specialized agencies.

Right to Education as human right has its legal basis in the International Human right Instruments and as a matter of policy, education as human right is regulated by various United Nations Conventions via its specialized agencies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Oladipo (2020) reports that the convention recognizes the right of the child to education; and a view of achieving equal opportunity to available education which must be free to all sexes (40).

UNICEF has engaged in various interventions through their joint programming approach with other United Nations agencies in promoting the rights of every child in Nigeria, particularly the most excluded, by providing quality health, nutrition, water, sanitation, education, and protection services. (Nigeria Country Programme 2023-2027)

UNICEF Nigeria prioritizes child protection, civil registration laws, positive social norms, legislative frameworks, and ending FGM/C. They support social workforce, community-based child protection structures, integrated case management services, and specialized justice systems. (UNICEF Nigeria, 2023).

Insecurity in Nigeria’s North East geopolitical zone has destabilized the effort of the government in ensuring the girl child has access to education. An intervention to this challenge is UNICEF’s cash transfer program. The program improved household welfare in the states of Niger and Sokoto and reduced financial barriers to girls’ enrollment and attendance at school (UNICEF Annual Report, 2017, p.72). This initiative resulted in an average increase of 30.2 girls in targeted school in Niger and Sokoto. The cash transfer scheme and other program such as the rehabilitation of classrooms, establishment of temporary learning spaces and community-based school enrolment campaign funded by UNICEF made it possible for average girl enrollment of girls in the focal states to increase by a net 30.9 percent. Good practices from the initiative were replicated by the Global Partnership for Education, state governments, and other organizations. By actively participating in 418 girls for girls groups, 9,036 girls improved in their attitudes toward education, contributing to a rise in the number of girls enrolled in school (UNICEF, 2017).

In bridging the gap of gender equality, UNICEF Nigeria prioritized the enhancement of gender responsiveness across its programs in 2017, adhering to the global Gender Action Plan 2014-2018 and the gender review recommendations of 2015. In response to a capacity deficit in program delivery, gender awareness workshops (including program gender-gap evaluations) were held in the field offices in Port Harcourt, Enugu, and Lagos (UNICEF Nigeria/2017/Abubaka).

UNICEF has also organized gender sensitization workshops to strengthen the capacity of high level women advocates groups, addressing gender inequality in girls' school enrolment and retention, and female participation in the education management sector. Consequently, two states are developing laws on increasing participation of women in education decision-making (7).

The UNICEF-United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) joint program on female genital mutilation and cutting abandonment and ending child marriage resulted in 3,468,720 individuals in 953 communities making public declarations in support of the program (8). Although, UNICEF has made huge contributions in addressing the challenges faced by the Nigerian girl-child, in accessing education, protection and child rights (Nwozor1 and Okhillu, 2022:6), The challenges are still teething due to non-compliance of the local institutions in implementing the provisions of the Acts. It has been established that Nigerian girl child is vulnerable to a wide range of abuses and harmful traditional practices. The national legal framework for child protection is the Child Rights Act 2003, but to date, only 23 of 36 states have adopted the Act. Implementation is patchy with many local authority bodies unaware of their duties under the law ( **UNICEF Nigeria/2017/Abubakar**). On this backdrop, the critical analysis of the text in focus hinges on the Child Rights Act.

## **SYNOPSIS OF A *CRY OF INNOCENCE***

*A Cry of Innocence* is a novel that reveals the tragic consequences suffered by the falsely accused and serves as a stark reminder of society's responsibility to the truth. The writer addresses African belief and mythology regarding the existence of witchcraft. He is concerned with the tragedy of witch hunts. The novel reveals some of the ills inherent in African Culture and a correction of the ills that superstition has introduced to African Identity. The prose is a fiction set in the Eastern part of Nigeria. The principal character Ijeoma, a young teenage girl, loved by her parents is suddenly and falsely accused by her parents of being a witch. The allegation is instigated by the death of Ijeoma's class mate and neighbor, Adaugo. Shortly before dying, Adaugo confesses that Ijeoma is a witch. Ijeoma's mother is informed about this revelation. Ijeoma's parents insist that Ijeoma should confess that she is a witch, although, on several occasions, Ijeoma refutes the allegation. It is the gender inequality inherent in the superstition in African mythology that makes Ijeoma and probably any other girl child and not a boy child to be suspected and accused of being a witch. "The Nigerian girlchild continues to experience different kinds of discrimination, and challenges due to the fact that 'she is a girl'" (Osondu-Otti, 2015).

Ijeoma's life becomes so much threatened that she reluctantly accepts the accusation that she is a witch, thinking that that will relieve her of the impending turbulence. Ijeoma is compelled to tell lies because of the mistrust of the people she trusts most. The lies Ijeoma tells are coined from the movies she watches on the television. This also exposes the dangers of unguided media to the juvenile. The parents of Ijeoma accept the lies and feel that the life of the members of their family is in danger; they maltreat Ijeoma and threaten to kill her. She runs away from the house in order to avoid the upcoming danger. The news of Ijeoma being a witch has fast circulated throughout the neighborhood so much that people avoid her; even little children call her witch at the slightest provocation. Ijeoma runs away from home and begins to wander from one place to the other. She faces so many dangers and obstacles which are not seemingly for a girl child.

Ijeoma's commitment to her religious faith enables her to overcome her obstacles. This depicts the role of the parents in the proper upbringing of the girl child. (Proverbs 22:6). The parents brought her up in the way of God. Inadvertently, religion has an undeniable role in molding a child and in inculcating in her necessary values. Ubaka condemns the society's attitude towards the girl child. The author highlights several abuses which the girl child encounters. On many occasions, Ijeoma escapes rape. She encounters a woman selling food in the market, who falsely accuses her of stealing her money. This allegation of stealing eventually results to a police arrest. Ijeoma is arrested by the police and detained in the cell, which is a violent

punishment for such a minor. Sister Helen comes to bail her out and takes her home. On reaching home, Sister Helen's husband becomes skeptical of Ijeoma. He refuses to allow any of his children to associate with her and insists that Ijeoma leaves the house. In reaction to this, Sister Helen ejects Ijeoma from by midnight. Ijeoma is thrown into the street to face the hazards of midnight. Consequently, Ijeoma runs into kidnappers and rapists. Luckily, the policemen on patrol rescue her and eventually take her to her parents.

The parents in a bid to get Ijeoma delivered from witchcraft take her to a church for deliverance, the pastor places her on process of deliverance which involves putting her in chains, flogging, beating and starving her for days;. She finally escapes from that church and finds her way to the Catholic Church. The author condemns the activities of fake religious leaders in contributing to societal problems. It is in the Catholic church that the girl receives attention and love. The head of the church, Reverend Father Dibia, takes care of her, and rehabilitates her. It is during this period that the truth about the witchcraft allegation is unraveled. The parents realize that Ijeoma is not a witch; she is completely innocent of their accusation. Ironically, Ijeoma's parents attest that there is another Ijeoma in their neighborhood that the dead girl referred to as a witch and that the girl has actually confessed. Finally, Ijeoma is reunited to her family. This article hereby examines the challenges of the Nigerian girl child as illustrated in *A Cry of Innocence*. The following are some of the challenges of the Nigerian girl child portrayed in the text.

### **The Girl Child is Vulnerable**

The author, Ubaka presents the girl child as being vulnerable. The girl child is susceptible to various attacks; she cannot help herself or deliver herself from her attackers. She scarcely gets help from people around her. Ijeoma is accused of being a witch by her parents. The people that should defend her became her accusers. If the parents brand her a witch, then, what can strangers do? Other people cannot believe her innocence, because her parents are the closest people to her. People in her neighborhood cannot rescue her. Ijeoma's mother affirms: "Yes because I only discovered today that you are a strange child" (p.9).

### **The Girl Child is Assaulted on Daily Basis.**

The author illustrates how the dignity of the girl child is dragged to the mud. The parents of Ijeoma assaulted her. The mother beat her and inflicted injuries on her so also her father. Ijeoma reports:

...what came next: the caustic sting of a slap on my cheek. Another

heavy blow landed on my head and then on my back and stomach...

Mum chanted as she unleashed terror on my body... my head hit

The knob in the process, and I fell back, hitting my buttocks on the floor...

my eyes were overflowing with tears at this point. I felt a sharp pain

on my head and realized there was a swelling...I wailed uncontrollably

and angrily. I felt wetness around my lower region and realized I had

wet myself (p.19).

The woman selling food in the market assaults Ijeoma by accusing her of stealing her handbag, the woman slaps, beats the helpless girl and send her to the police cell. That kind of punishment was too much for a girl child. Ijeoma's mother and other women that should feel the pains of the girl are even the ones that initiate her maltreatment and abuses, exposing her to worse dangers out there. At the first church Ijeoma's dad takes

her to for deliverance, her rosary, which is her only consolation at traumatic times, is cut and her hair is pulled. Ijeoma laments:

When I tried to dodge the saliva they bathed me with, a hand pulled at my hair and dragged me back. I felt the pain and screamed...The only thing I could do at that instance was to lie down on the floor.

A feeling of hunger mixed with tiredness added to the headache that started after my hair has been pulled the pain on my body, tiredness and violent headache suspended my night sleep. I kept rolling on the floor for what seemed like an eternity ... (Collins-Ubaka,pp.74-76).

The second prophet that Ijeoma's father consults for deliverance, assaults Ijeoma by lying and claiming that Ijeoma is a queen in a coven; to that effect, he recommends deliverance rituals which involves whipping, bathing the girl naked and keeping her hungry for days. The prophet actually whips her, and inflicts several injuries on her and even chains her like a dog. 'When dad finally left the temple premises, the prophet took me to another room and began the ritual immediately...' (p.80). This maltreatment and assault entails a lot of torture and a violation of the rights of the child.

### **The Girl Child Experiences Rejection**

Ubaka-Collins resents the way many parents react to their children's offence. Because the child is a girl, there is a limit to the punishment given to her. Ijeoma is rejected and turned to a vagabond. When Ijeoma eventually confesses under coercion that she is a witch, her father used a cutlass to chase her out of the compound like a thief. She runs away into the bush and she is abandoned: the parents never bother about her where about that night (p.27). She wanders from one place to the other, even in the market place. She is homeless. She is rejected by madam -the restaurant seller- who falsely accused her of stealing and sends her to the police cell. Even Sister Helen, her God mother believes that she is a witch and for fear of being harmed by the witch girl throws her out on the street at midnight. The parents caused her problem, if they could stigmatize and reject their daughter; a stranger is not expected to do otherwise. Ubaka blames Ijeoma's parents for her troubles. They are supposed to investigate and confirm the rumor before acting on it. The author condemns abandoning of the girl child and exposing her to hazards. Sister Helen expresses thus: "Moreover, I am not pleased with your parents for throwing you out on the streets for something they have not confirmed is true. Even if it was, for Christ's sake, you are their child. (p.50). Ijeoma's biological parents denied and rejected her publicly. (p.88). It is outrageous for any parents to disown their child because of such a frivolous issue as mere suspicion.

### **The Girl Child Experiences Loneliness**

Ijeoma is suddenly separated from her family: no member of the family, not even her neighbors wants her around. She feels sorrowful at the thought of being separated from her siblings and this gives her a lot of concern.

### **The Girl Child is Exposed to Lying.**

Ijeoma is forced into lying. Since the mother refuses to believe the truth that Ijeoma is professing, and insists that Ijeoma is a witch. The trouble becomes too much for the young girl to bear, she is therefore

compelled to give the mother, the answer that she wants from her. She reluctantly accepts that she is a witch, hoping that, the mother would stop troubling her afterwards; this rather, truncated her trauma. Ijeoma forms her lies from the movies she watches on the television. Therefore, the girl child should not be allowed to watch television unguided. Parents, particularly the mothers should learn to trust the girl child. People in the society should not base their judgments on mere speculations.

### **The girl child experiences Psychological trauma**

The horrible experiences of the girl child create in her a psychological trauma. Ijeoma life is traumatized. She lives in constant fear, shame and dishonor. She develops emotional imbalance seeing her mother -that loves her- turn to hate and beat her mercilessly. She cannot imagine her father taking the cutlass to chase her like a thief. She is turned to a vagabond; experiences homelessness, loneliness, sleepless nights, insect bites. She lives in trepidation, “I started shivering with shock and took to my heels...I stood on shaky feet” (pp.34-35). She is exposed to the scorching sun and hunger, wandering around in the market place. Ijeoma is traumatized. Ijeoma wanders away for three days, assaulted, hungry and tired.(pp.60-61). “I imagined how unfortunate I had been and how everything kept adding up to my misfortune”. Ijeoma is devastated when her parents denied not knowing her. She feels disgusted when Father Dibia mentioned to her that he met her parents the previous night, “those words were like the blow of a sledgehammer on my head... the mere thought of them filled me with sorrow” (pp. 90-91).

### **The Girl Child is Abused**

Ijeoma's rejection turned her to a vagabond, which further exposed her to a lot of abuses. She narrowly escapes sexual assault from Akpan, whom her soul detests. Ijeoma is kidnapped by unknown men as she is driven out of her Godmother's house at midnight. They attempt to rape and kill her but they are accosted by the policemen on roadblock.

### **The Girl Child is Often Confronted with the Thought of Suicide**

Many young girls are in danger of committing suicide, because they feel lonely and hated by people around them, especially, when they encounter discrimination and child abuse. This issue is apparently depicted in *A Cry of Innocence*. Ijeoma feels an intense pain in her heart for being hated and rejected by people, so she is hunted with the thought of committing suicide. She complains: “I hated everybody, myself and life in general. What else can be living for if life itself hated me? I regretted not dying in the womb. I caused the day of my birth...Yes, I will kill myself”. Ijeoma attempted suicide several times but could not succeed. She regrets not killing herself (Ubaka 2014, pp. 35 & 45).

### **The Girl Child Suffers Social Stigma.**

Ubaka (2014) reveals how Ijeoma is given a strange and derogatory name that isolates her from other members of the society. If she is not called a witch, she is called a harlot. Ijeoma is branded a witch by the society. She is always called a witch; even her fellow children call her witch and avoid her (p.26). The mother accuses her of being responsible for Okwukwe's illness. It is incredible that Akpan whose attempt to rape Ijeoma is faulted is the one branding Ijeoma 'the witch girl' and cooking all manner of stories to cover his guilt. Akpan responded to the landlord: “It was Ijeoma, the witch girl...Have you forgotten the witch girl? Teacher's daughter... As soon as I opened the door, she turned into a cat. That was why I screamed ...I was scared, I thought I would die” (p.34). Akpan lied against Ijeoma, this situation is very ironical. Imagine a man that is worse than a witch calling an innocent girl a witch.

Ijeoma cannot relate with her mates again for fear of being called a witch girl. The report of Uncle Chukwudi that his prophet reveals that Ijeoma is a witch and that he should sever any contact with her



aggravated the girl's trauma. "His words exploded like a bomb in my head and I felt a cold run through my spine" (pp.65-66). Ijeoma's dad reports to the first pastor they visit that she is a witch, instead of saying that he suspects that she is a witch. At a time Ijeoma becomes used to the brand. "At this point I was past caring what anybody called me or thought about me. I was already used to being called a witch" (p.79).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for parents to learn to trust their children and not to punish them unnecessarily. They need to express their parental love by protecting their daughters with everything that they have instead of subjecting them to every level of degradation and humiliation. Ijeoma's parents disowned their daughter at the slightest provocation. The parents, the religious organizations, the government and the general society should join forces to fight against the culture and societal norms which militate against the rights, dignity and future of the Nigerian girl child, so that she can attain her full potentials as an individual. The author condemns the discrimination and abuse meted on the girl child. He decries the harmful practices of the cultural norms such as witchcraft and gender bias which resist the full implementation of the rights of the girl child.

There is need for the re-orientation of the Nigerian women. Nigerian women who act as vectors obnoxious patriarchal culture to propagate the subjugation and the sufferings of the girl child should be educated on the girl child rights and the potentials of the girl child. They should also be made to be aware of their responsibility towards enhancing the welfare of their girls instead of contributing to their challenges.

Criminalizing the girl child act and getting offenders punished is recommended. Whoever that is found guilty of the act should be prosecuted so as to serve as a deterrent to others. Akolokwu and Nwauzi (2019:1) underscore the role of law and the judiciary in enforcing the law in cases of violations.

The government needs to put more effort to get more girls in schools because education is the key to development and growth of any nation. Afolabi observes that Nigeria has the highest statistics of out of school children, especially the northern region (Opara 2015). It is therefore important that the government of Nigeria provides adequate conditions that will enable the girl child to attain her full potentials. The importance of education in the life of a girl child cannot be over-emphasized. The little enlightenment which Ijeoma received from the church, school and family norms enable her to have guiding principles that help her tackle and overcome her challenges. It is therefore evident that girl child education contributes in no measure to the realization of the full potentials of the Nigerian girl child.

It is necessary that the Nigerian government aligns with the UNICEF's child protection program which aims at providing preventive and response intervention for children who are victims of rape, violence, abuse and exploitation. The program works across multiple levels and sectors to generate and analyze evidence for legal reform and increased public financing for vulnerable children.

The family of any child should give the child proper training from the onset. She should be thought her potentials, challenges, rights, self defense and fear of God. As observed by Aikhomum in Opara (2015), the family should provide required atmosphere needed to improve and protect the dignity of the girl child, harness her potentials to the maximum; this will in turn enable her contribute to the development of our nation. It is the responsibility of the family to improve and protect the self esteem of the girl child instead of undermining her great potentials as against all odds. The girl and the boy should be given the same opportunity in the family as against the norms of Nigerian cultures (Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba) (Opara, 2015).

The Beijing platform for Action (1995) recommends enhanced development and training, improvement of girls' status and elimination of economic exploitation; so that she may participate in the economic, political and social roles in her society. Obviously, A Nigerian girl today is a Nigerian woman tomorrow, Hence, the United Nations General Assembly Convention in 1989 recommends the basic rights of the girl child which

include elimination of all forms of discrimination based on sex, elimination of abuse of girls and full protection of their rights (Haarr, p.188).

The concern of Ubaka (2014) is how the women, who are expected to be at the forefront of the struggle for protecting the girl child and promoting her dignity are, instead the wheels used by the culture and society to propagate the agony and torments of the girl child, thereby, making it easier for the drivers of violence against the girl child to succeed. The success of the girl child has a great impact to the economic advancement of any nation. The reason is that a well brought-up and educated girl child contributes to the economic empowerment of her society instead of being a liability. Against the barbaric Nigerian culture, the girl child should be regarded and treated as important as the male child.

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