



“The Girl Child:

***Reaching out and Raising Opportunities for Health:
Empowerment and Education”.***

16th Biennial

Abimbola Awoliyi

Memorial Lecture

Prof. (Mrs.) Nnenna N. Oti

INTRODUCTION

My joy knows no bounds as I humbly stand, before a very distinguished audience of ladies and gentlemen from all walks of life, representatives of governments, institutions, organizations and most importantly members of the Medical Women's Association of Nigeria on whose invitation I am here.

This day is even the more special for me, because I stand before you not just as another woman, but the proud mother of a final year medical student and a special needs daughter whose life and future has been truncated by a devastating disease and has been home-ridden for more than ten years. This broadens the scope of my experiences of reaching out and giving opportunities to the next generation of girls and young women, whole and handicapped alike.

My mission here today is very simple and straight forward. This is not another Beijing!!! We are not here to vilify our husbands, brothers, sons and male colleagues, make them uncomfortable and insecure or worse even, give them a guilty conscience! We are here instead stretching out our loving arms, calling for their full support and cooperation to achieve our goals. We salute every man, who is "man enough" to accept women as equal human beings, who is not afraid to be "overtaken" or "overshadowed" by women. There is enough space for all of us! More seriously, we are here to engage in a meaningful dialogue on the "girls/women" question, to corporately encourage and exhort one another, to move the gender debate to the next level. The real challenge, ladies and gentlemen, is how do we create a better world for all? We are here to look for answers and solutions by inspiring ourselves to do more.

My mother's story...

Never again... should a female child be denied access to education, health facilities and means to a decent livelihood. Never again!

It is important to acknowledge that things have been changing for the better for women in Nigeria and globally (Nigerian governments at the Federal and States levels are appointing increasing numbers of women into high positions, and initiating gender friendly programs and policies). It may not be going at the pace we want, but we are making progress.

The theme of this years' biennial conference **"The Girl Child: Reaching Out and Raising Opportunities for Health, Empowerment and Education"** , is **apt as it seeks** to use the gender perspective lens to evaluate the girl child in the **context of health, empowerment and education**, powerful indicators of the position and direction of the **gender train** in Nigeria. Gender disparities exist in almost all areas of human development, **why? They are driven** by poverty, and the strongholds of religion, norms, and culture. The motto of my Alma Mata states: "To Restore the Dignity of Man" but I stand here to declare that **together we will** "restore the dignity of boys and girls, the dignity of men and women, the dignity of all mankind!"

I shall end my introductory remarks by saying a few things about Dr. Abimbola Awoliyi, the first female Nigerian Medical Doctor. Born late 1910, she qualified as MD in 1936 from Dublin, Ireland. She made first class honors, winning a medal in medicine and making a distinction in anatomy. In time she became a physician, surgeon, gynecologist, obstetrician, child health specialist and midwife! She is our own Nigerian "Marie Curie!" she was also an outstanding philanthropist and a religious woman, a trail blazer and an icon for what women can accomplish if given equal opportunities and resources! I almost forgot she was also a farmer like me! What an amazing woman! How did she do it? Ladies how do we do it? God's abundant grace and favour!!! Best of all she was a mother to all! She may be gone, but yet her star still illumines our world, the prism of her life scatters light into the many beautiful colors of the rainbow. Her example will continue to inspire the girls and women of today and tomorrow. Dear Dr., your legacies live on!

SOME PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS

- The only life worth living is a life of service to humanity
- No force on earth can stop a woman who believes she can
- The only difference between an ordinary woman and an extra ordinary woman is the belief that she is extraordinary
- Everything is achievable
- Your life is a seed sown for the next generation to harvest
- Those who do society the greatest harm are not the few evil men/women, but the silent majority!! Silent no more!!
- Don't linger at closed doors! Look up and walk through the next open door beckoning on you! Whatever it takes...just move on!
- Love is the most potent currency in the world, use it lavishly.
- Bless at least one person each day
- We are tallest when we reach down to lift another up.

SOME IMPORTANT GENDER STATISTICS

a. Global

- Women form 50% of the world's population (approximately).
- Women receive only 10% of the world's salaries.
- 66% of all illiterate adults are women.
- 75% of the world's starving people are women and children.
- Women make up just about 10% of representatives in National Governments/Assemblies.
- Women own only 1% of the world's titled lands.
- 20% of all primary school age girls do not attend school.
- Women age 15 to 45 are more likely to be maimed or be killed by violent acts from a man, than from cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war combined.

b. Nigeria.

- Nigeria ranks 118 of 134 countries in the Gender Equality Index
- Only 15% of women have a bank account
- Only 4% of females complete secondary school in Northern zones
- Most 15-24 year old women in Nigeria think it is reasonable for a husband to beat his wife if she burns the food, refuses sex or goes out without his permission.
- Nearly half of unmarried women in parts of southern Nigeria have experienced physical violence. In the Nigerian university system where I belong the ratio of male to female professor is 10:1
- Nigeria's house of representatives has 360 members, of these only 25 are women
- Only about 4% of Local Government Councilors are women
- Nigeria has one of the lowest rates of female entrepreneurship (only about 2% of patent holders)

SOME FUNDAMENTAL GENDER ISSUES

Gender dichotomy is as old as the human race, for God from the beginning made them male and female. Women are different from men biologically, but should they be "shut out" from segments of society because of their different nature?

To create a just and fair world for all - males and females, the large gender gaps that still exist in basic human rights, in resource allocation and control, in access to educational opportunities and political voice pervasive around the world must be addressed. There is a lot of misconception about gender and gender-based issues and a general tendency for the male-gender to regard all gender issues as meaning "women issues." But gender is not all about women or sex.

Gender refers to socially constructed roles and socially learned behaviors and expectations associated with females and males. Women and men are different biologically - but all cultures interpret and elaborate these innate biological differences into a set of social expectations about what behaviors and activities are appropriate and what rights, resources and power they possess. These expectations vary considerably among societies, but in nearly all societies, the primary care for children is a woman's job while military service and defense issues are a man's job. When we talk about gender equality, what do we really mean? Simply; equality under the law, equality of opportunities and reward systems, equality in access to capital and productive resources and equality of voice.

A personal side note - I never want to see the day when in the name of gender equality or equity, feminism or sexism, there will be as many women in prison as men, crime rates will be the same among sexes, or pregnant women, or women with babies strapped behind will be carrying guns and killing innocent people. Far be that from us. Women are the best of God's creation, we are noble and sublime, we preserve life. We don't take life!

I am therefore very proud to associate myself with the motto of the Medical Women's Association of Nigeria "Heal with the spirit of a mother." That is as it should be.

The United Nations Charter of 1945 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 established the first official worldwide recognition of women's equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex. The initial focus was on women's reproductive roles, access to contraception, food and nutrition and health care. Today it has expanded to give women equal voice, respectability, dignity and opportunities on all spheres of human activity, particularly in the public domain of formal work institutions, politics, leadership and governance. By the 1980's, gender mainstreaming, gender analysis, budgeting, gender policy as an integral part of development strategies had come to stay.

Today, the lens through which humanity sees and evaluates the world, it is not just a "mankind lens" but a "mankind" and "womankind" lens! The "Gender equality lens" seeks to create a fair world for all humans kind knowing that injustice against one is injustice against all.

THE CHALLENGES FACING THE 21st CENTURY GIRL/WOMAN.

The bulk of the information on this section of the paper comes from the following documents: (a) Engendering Development: A world Bank Policy Research Report (2001), (b) Gender in Nigeria Report 2012, a joint British Council Nigeria/UKAID publication, and Nigeria Millennium Development Goals Report, from 2005.

My main objective is to highlight and create greater awareness on a range of issues girls around the world face today. The status of girls throughout history is closely related to the status of women in any culture. Where women enjoy a more equal status with men, girls benefit from greater attention to their unique needs. Outside genetics the nurturing provided by parents is the singular most influential factor on how girls develop.

In agreement with the theme of the conference, I shall discuss in detail three major challenges affecting the contemporary Nigerian girl/young maiden namely, Education, Empowerment and Health and related issues.

1. EDUCATION:

Without access to education, we would not all be here today celebrating our icon Dr. Abimbola Awoliyi. Education is the master key that unlocks barriers and ushers all disadvantaged groups including women into the blissful world of limitless opportunities, empowerment, fulfilment, employment, participation, voice and legacies. Through education women also contribute to the economy and national development. Investing into girls education is investing into Nigeria's future that will ultimately lead to a better Nigeria in every sphere of life, such as increase family incomes, better care of children, improved workforce productivity to a more stable and peace Nigeria.

Girls formal education has traditionally been considered far less important than that of boys in all cultures. The doors of formal education were first opened to women in Europe in the 18th century. Emphasis was on basic literacy (the ability to read and write) and not the acquisition of professional knowledge or skills.

1.1 Educational Challenges

Of the 101 million illiterate youths in the world, more than half are girls. The investment in educating girls may go further than any other spending in global development. Education is recognized by the United Nations as a fundamental human right and the key to unlocking potentials and gaining access to wealth through the development of intellectual capacity and skills acquisition. Education breaks the backbone of poverty and deprivation.

The African Situation: In Africa women generally lack equal access to education. Girls' access to education is influenced by traditional considerations and attitudes. Girls are usually the first to be pulled out of school when a family is poor or suffers devastating loss/tragedy.

The Nigerian Scenario: Despite high profile visibility, media sensationalism, policy guidelines, and other initiatives and incentives such as free education for girls in some states, girl's education in Nigeria is faced with series of challenges. These include:

- early marriages
- teenage pregnancy
- poverty peer pressure
- low literacy levels of mothers
- low value placed on female education among others.

In the northern parts of the country, religion plays a major role.

The key issues in education include access/enrolment;"retention/drop out rate and achievement. Girl's formal education has traditionally been considered far less important than that of boys.

Access/Enrolment: This is the right to education. In Nigeria, the following factors limit girl's access:

- child labor
- poverty and lack of sponsorship
- truancy
- broken homes
- engaging children as house helps
- early marriage

Girls' equal access to education has been achieved in some countries, but there are significant disparities in majority. There are regional and country gaps. Girls account for 60% of children out of school in Arab countries and 66% of non-attendees in south and west Asia. However, more girls than boys attend school in the Americas and Western Europe.

Table 1 shows enrolment disparities in Nigeria as at 2005

Table 1 2005 Enrollment by Gender from pre-primary to secondary school (%)

	Pre Primary	Primary	Secondary
Male	51	55	56
Female	49	49	44
Total	100	100	100

Source: Federal Ministry of Education data 2005.

The 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Goals 2 and 3, are specifically designed to promote equal access to education for girls and to eliminate gender disparities at both primary and secondary schools level. It is hoped that someday soon, the whole world will achieve parity in access to education for both sexes.

Retention/Dropout: Some of the factors that make it difficult to retain girls in school, particularly in rural areas where social and cultural patterns combine to make it difficult for girls to complete their schooling have already been identified (Southeast Nigeria is the only zone in the country where males have higher dropout rates relative to girls). Reasons identified include preference for trading, quest for money, street trading, wrong perception of education etc.).

Nigeria is one of several countries listed by United Nations with very high and unacceptable rates of girl school dropout.

Achievement: Exit evidence from examination bodies like NECO, WAEC, JAMB etc. tend to suggest poorer performance of females relative to males in mathematics and the sciences. However, results on overall performance on all subjects combined, is mixed, as performance is confounded by several complex factors. The most significant factor that impacts the performance of girls in schools, several studies has shown is the educational status of their mothers and motivation from fathers and teachers.

National higher education strategies and policies in Nigeria tend to emphasis only gender enrollment parity as though this is an end by itself. At best it is an important step. Gender analysis in tertiary institutions should address what are women studying? How are they learning?

I shall end this section on education with the classic and inspiring example of the legend, the physicist, the chemist, the two time Nobel prize winner, a peace-maker and founder of radiology and x-rays, Marie Curie (1867 -1934). She defied all odds, risked her life severally and became the only woman in history to win two noble prizes. Curie's ground breaking work led to radiation therapy for diseases like cancer. She was not allowed into any formal school system in her native Poland. She was home-schooled by her father. She attended an "underground university", and later migrated to Paris where she worked, and sponsored herself to obtain a Ph. D in physics. The rest they say is history.

2. EMPOWERMENT

- a. **The Concept:** The term empowerment embraces a myriad of concepts ranging from deep spiritual awakening, taking control over ones affairs, financial sufficiency

and independence, to enlarging ones scope of influence through political voice and leverage. From the ideological perspective, **empowerment** encompasses any revival of consciousness that enables you to become **the best you can be**, tapping into your talents, releasing your creative potential and **authentic self**. It is coming to the awareness that you are a full and complete person, deserving of respect and dignity and equal to everybody else.

Empowerment gives access to a means of decent livelihood and having a say on how you are governed, it is the process of developing skills and knowledge for self-sufficiency.

b. Economic Empowerment.

Quote: "forget China, India and the internet: Economic growth is driven by women."
The Economist April 15 2006.

Economic empowerment is about equipping women to compete favorably in the markets: key market factors are access to land, labour, products and finances. Access to these leads to rapid and sustained increases in women's productivity and incomes. Action plans should provide level playing fields and equal access for women to these essential economic drivers.

- Access to land: in much of Sub-saharan Africa, women have no direct land rights. This is a major constrain to the set of economic choices available to women and their ability to participate on equal terms with men in agriculture, access to finances and loans, or even real estates to establish industries.
- Resources: Limited professional and functional education (particularly in science, mathematics, and technology, the SMTs) excludes women from high skill professions and jobs. Women constitute only about 2% of patent owners and entrepreneurs. They dominate the informal, low paying market sector and agriculture (60 -80% of the unskilled labour force). Female run enterprises are small in scale. This is why over 70% of the world's poor and hungry are women.

In the formal labour market, despite recent increases in women's educational attainment, women typically earn less than men with same education and experience. Women are often limited to certain occupations and are largely excluded from top management positions.

c. Political Voice and Influence:

Unequal rights, traditional, cultural and religious constraints, economic disadvantages all translate to limited influence in domestic and public decision making processes and under representation in local and national parliaments accounting for less than 10% in most countries including Nigeria. This 10% barrier in voice and resource control is a glass ceiling that (joining hands together, supporting each other and pulling each other up, galvanizing ourselves into pressure groups, running sensitization programs etc.) must be broken. It can be broken. It will be broken. The 30% Beijing guideline remains largely unattained but still I make bold to ask what is wrong with 50% representation at all levels?

3. Health and Related Issues.

In addressing this section, let me quickly say I feel grossly incompetent to speak on health issues before an audience of medical doctors and consultants! Accept my apologies in advance. All the same as scholar and advocate of women's rights and wellbeing (I guess I am not looking bad for 50+ woman!), I can attempt a reasonable expose from the point of view of a gender activist! According to World Health Organisation, the main determinants of health include the social, economic and physical environment and a person's individual characteristics and behaviours. The long list of factors includes education and literacy levels, gender and culture.

I shall only highlight a few peculiar health challenges of girls and women.

a. Maternal Mortality:

Nigeria has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality in the world. One Nigerian woman dies in child birth every ten minutes! The national maternal mortality rate of 545 deaths per 100,000 live births is double the global figure and in some states of the north it is much more.

Reasons for these high figures include, but are not limited to, poverty, lack of access to health care facilities and family planning, religion, culture, traditions and limited education. The strong link between a woman's educational level and improved income, with enhanced healthcare and children's wellbeing has been established by several research reports.

As with education, Nigeria has many excellent policy initiatives not matched by acceptable levels of implementation. Millennium Development Goal No. 5 seeks to improve maternal health by reducing maternal deaths and improving access to reproductive health care by 2015. Some progress has been made, but the current levels remain unacceptable. Levels are highest in rural areas and the Northeast zone of the country.

b. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM):

Key Facts

- Female genital mutilation (FGM) includes procedures **that intentionally** alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical **reasons**
- The procedure has no health benefits for girls and women
- Procedure can cause severe bleeding and problems **urinating, cysts, infections, infertility, and complications in childbirth, even increased risks of newborn deaths**
- About 140 million girls/women worldwide are currently living **with the consequences** of FGM
- FGM is mostly carried out on young girls between infancy and age 15.
- In Africa an estimated 92 million girls, 10 years old and above have undergone FGM
- FGM is a violation of the human rights of girls and women.

Since 1997, great efforts have been made to counteract FGM through research work within rural communities and change in public policy.

Progress is been made at both International and local levels. In most countries, the prevalence of FGM has decreased, and an increasing number of parents support ending this evil practice.

c). HIV/AIDS: This is the major health challenge facing adolescent girls today. Women are now 60% of PLWHIV in Sub-Saharan Africa. Girls are 2 to 5 times more likely to become infected than boys. Rape and sexual abuse of adolescent girls are the main reasons for this, in addition to the nature of the female reproductive organ.

c. Violence/Sexual Abuse/Sexual Harassment: It was women in Africa who first put the issue of violence against women and girls on the International front burner (agenda). Thousands of children and young girls are sexually and emotionally abused. Factors responsible include:

- Parental negligence (most times these abuses are from fathers, uncles, relatives, neighbours, teachers, pastors, lovers, etc.).
- Poverty,
- Sending young girls out of their homes for any/every reasons (house help syndrome, street hawking etc.).

d. Human Trafficking: This is the new face of modern slavery. In Africa it is driven by poverty and ignorance. Even though it involves women, girls, men and boys, the primary target group is young girls. A United Nations 2005 report states that out of about 800, 000 people being trafficked across borders each year, as many as 80% are women and girls.

Most unfortunately, Nigeria is listed among countries not doing enough to check this menace that is a disgrace to all of humanity.

Almost every country in the world is affected by trafficking, whether as a country of origin, transit or destination of victims, UNODC, as guardian of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and the Protocols thereto, assist states in their efforts to implement the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons.

This is a global problem that requires global response. What can I do you may ask? Create awareness and help disadvantaged young women and families. Mother Teresa famously said "we change the world one person at a time". That's my message to us today. Do something. Become a voice of positive change.

e. Child Marriage: A child is married every three seconds. Child marriage steals the innocence of millions of girls worldwide and often condemns them to lives of poverty, ignorance and poor health. It is one of the biggest obstacles to development and emancipation of women.

About 10 million girls under 18 are married off every year globally, often without her consent and sometimes to a much older man. The hot spots are Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

The negative impact on the future of the victim is a real tragedy and includes:

- poverty and poor health
- ruined lives
- early death in child-bearing (caused by immature reproduction organs - how can children give birth to children?)
- disabilities, particularly fistula
- truncated education and a lost future !

According to the United Nations, over 40% of African women are married under the age of 18. In Niger, Chad and Mali, the figure is as high as 70%. None of the 8 MDGs can be achieved, without addressing the challenges of child marriage.

The real/total cost to society of child marriage **will never be known** - **about a bright** future that never was-lost dreams, lost potentials, lost everything.

f. Honour Killings: in my opinion this is the worst form of **child abuse** - when female children are violently killed by their own families for refusing "**arranged marriages**" or when they are raped, engage in premarital sex or even when perceived to be **improperly** dressed. Yes this is still happening in the 21st century!!

6. THE VOICE OF HOPE - THE 21 * CENTURY WOMAN...

- She will have a voice, and her voice will count!
- She will be all put together, confident, compassionate, standing tall.
- She will be a career woman and home maker.
- She will be strong, purposeful, with a sense of mission and destiny.
- Full of dignity and impact. A world changer, her presence will be felt and will leave a powerful legacy.
- She will be courageous and daring, no stopping her. The sky will be her limit.
- You will find her at the top of every profession as CEO, Vice Chancellor, Senator, Minister, Legislator, Governor, even President! Why not?
- But best of all she will be a super mum! 1 Bringing forth children and raising godly seed will remain our supreme gift to humanity and nothing will ever replace or take the joy of motherhood. The smile of a baby and the magic words "welcome mum" "I love you mum" "you are the best mum" will remain our highest reward! '(the only words on Margaret Thatcher's British flag draped coffin were, "we love you mum" from her children!)

7. FINAL THOUGHTS/CONCLUDING REMARKS

Mr. Chairman sir, very distinguished audience, ladies and gentlemen and fellow pilgrims on the journey of life, I stand before you today as a passionate, proactive, progressive, totally committed, consummate, gender activist! That is my life!!

Imbalances between women and men in most walks of life will stay with us for a while. It is clear that new approaches, new strategies and new methods are needed to reach the final goal of gender equality. Men often ask the question "what do women want? Very simple, we want what men have always had:

... equal rights, equal opportunities, equal access, equal resources, equal voice and equal representation!

- Away with all forms of discriminatory practices against women!
- Away with violence against women!

- Away with sexual harassment against women!
- Away with FGM!
- Away with raping!
- Away with child marriages!
- Away with human trafficking!
- Away with all retrogressive cultures and norms that put women down!
- Away with all notions of women as second class citizens and sex symbols!

I end on the high note of President Barak Obama's book titled, *The Audacity of Hope: 'I have hope in hope itself ...a new day is dawning - nay it is here with us'*¹.

I see something spectacular on the west horizon! It is the sun...sinking...into oblivion! Going down with it are all the forces that have put women down! All forms of prejudice, bias against women, yokes of bondage, slavery, and abuses. Best of all, as I turn to the east, I see a new sun rising...

Hope is rising...

Confidence is rising

Faith is rising,

Rising, and

Rising majestically, ...

I also hear a whisper, can you hear it with me? It is the voice of the legacies of:

Dr. Abimbola

Marie Curie

Mother Teresa

Malala...

Urging us all... go girls go! !

It is the collective achievements of our grandmothers, mothers, us, our daughters and granddaughters, it will become the melody of the universe:

...ECLUALATLASTU

God bless the Medical Women's Association of Nigeria,

God Bless Akwa Ibom State,

God bless Nigeria,

God bless women everywhere in the world.

Thank you! Thank you! ! thank you!!!

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