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## **EDITORIAL**

The West African Journal of Physical and Health Education (WAJOPHE) is an interdisciplinary journal that publishes articles, research findings and position papers in physical and health education, recreation, sports and dance. The journal was initially the innovation or brainchild of the Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Today, it serves as a forum where scholars in education, exercise, sports, recreation, dance, and other health professionals contribute towards the full development of man and his environment, especially with regard to the entire West African subregion.

Among the articles in *Volume 11* are: waste management practices of industrial establishments as correlates of health status of people; exercise as a pathway to the prevention and management of postural health problems; role of exercise and diet in the management of childhood obesity; organisation and administration as predictors of effective healthcare delivery service; instructional materials as determinant of effective teaching and learning process; assessment of the effects of psychosocial variables on preparedness towards implementation of an HIV/AIDS-agricultural intervention programme; effects of parent-child communication on human sexuality and adolescents' sexual behaviour; health consequences of childhood and adolescent overweight and obesity; adolescents' agitation for indigenous sports participation; physical education programmes and academic performance; relationship between stress and anxiety of teachers; socio-demographic variables of sports participation among female teaching staff; and so on.

I want to specially thank all the contributors, for making the publication of this volume possible and worthwhile. I also want to thank the efforts of Professor J.A. Ajala and those of the current head of the Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education, University of Ibadan towards the publication of this and previous volumes.

**B.O. Ogundele**  
*Managing Editor*

**ARTICLES**

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1. **Waste Management Practices of Industrial Establishments as Correlates of Health Status of People of Ibadan, Nigeria**  
O.O. Olubode and B.O. Ogundele..... 1
2. **Exercise: A Pathway to the Prevention and Management of Postural Health Problems**  
E.S. Adeyanju..... 10
3. **The Role of Exercise and Diet in the Management of Childhood Obesity**  
Onyezere John Osondu and Adeyemo Olanrewaju Dele..... 21
4. **Organisation and Administration as Predictors of Effective Healthcare Delivery Service in Oyo State Hospitals, Nigeria**  
Olafimihan H. Olugbemi..... 30
5. **Instructional Materials as Determinant of Effective Teaching and Learning Process in Private Secondary Schools in Lagos State, Nigeria**  
Lucas B. Ojo and D.A. Olaniyan..... 42
6. **An Assessment of the Effects of Psychosocial Variables on Preparedness Towards Implementation of An Hiv/AIDS-agricultural Intervention Programme**  
Ifeoma M. Isiugo-Abanihe and Emem Bassey Inyang..... 53
7. **Effects of Parent-Child Communication on Human Sexuality and Adolescents' Sexual Behaviour**

	Mfrekemfon P. Inyang and Emeka U. Mong.....	67
8.	<b>Health Consequences of Childhood and Adolescent Overweight and Obesity</b> F.I. Okoro.....	73
9.	<b>Adolescents' Agitation for Indigenous Sports Participation: Implications for Sexual Health Education Enhancement in Selected Secondary Schools in Yagba East and West LGA of Kogi State.</b> Olasunkanmi A. Onifade and Sunday O. Owojaiye.....	81
10.	<b>Physical Education Programmes and Academic Performance of Selected Secondary School Students in Kosofe Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria</b> Steve Arogbonlo and Olumide Olusoga Ezomoh.....	90
11.	<b>Relationship Between Stress and Anxiety of Secondary School Teachers in Enugu State</b> Ignatius O. Nwimo.....	98
12.	<b>Socio-demographic Variables of Sports Participation among Female Teaching Staff of Secondary Schools in Akinyele Local Government Area, Oyo State, Nigeria</b> S.O. Babatunde.....	108
13.	<b>The Effectiveness of Concretizing Health Knowledge for Achieving Economic Growth in Nigeria</b> Oniyangi Shuaib Olanrewaju.....	118
14.	<b>The Status of Civil Servants Towards Recreational Participation in Jigawa State</b> Musa Garba Yakasai and Ibrahim Sule.....	127
15.	<b>Adoption of Sports and Exercises for the Prevention and Management of Obesity and Overweight</b>	

	A.O. Oloyede Akinsanmi and Opeoluwa Oyedele.....	134
16.	<b>The Role of the Police and Hoteliers in Forestalling Security Lapses Within the Hotel Industry in Benin Metropolis</b> A.O. Okunbor and E.I. Osayande.....	145
17.	<b>Knowledge of Selected Female Secondary School Adolescents on Health Consequences of Genital Cutting</b> Akinloye A. Olalekan.....	157
18.	<b>Maintenance of Sports Facilities and Equipment: The Experience of Nigeria Universities</b> T. Tammy Orunaboka.....	166
19.	<b>Sport Sponsorship of Exxon-Mobil Towards Track and Field Development in Nigeria</b> Kayode O. Omolawon and Folasade R. Airebamen.....	177.
20.	<b>Health Factors in Weight Control among Female Students of the University of Benin: Implications for the Health Profession</b> Donatus A. Aniodo and Opiti Odimchi.....	186
21.	<b>Relationship Between Sports Knowledge, Sports Performance and Academic Ability: An Empirical Evidence From WAEC Physical Education Results in Oyo State</b> J.O. Fehintola.....	193
22.	<b>Review of Current Advances in Sports Coaching Process: A Need for Awareness and Integration in Professional Preparation and Growth of Physical Educators in Nigeria</b> Joshua E. Umeifekwem.....	199

23.	<b>Overload Principle of Sports Training for Optimal Fitness and Sport Performance</b> A.V. Ogunleye and J.A. Esan.....	213
24.	<b>Health Implications of Contraceptives among University Female Undergraduates</b> A.A. Olalekun and A.I. Oyinlola.....	220
25.	<b>Trend and Relevance of Primary Health Care in Ibarapa, Southwestern Nigeria</b> F.A. Okanlawon.....	232
26.	<b>Consumers' Views about Security Management in Events of Selected Sports Associations in the Kano State Sports Council</b> M. Baba Gambari and S. Maitama Yusuf.....	245
27.	<b>The Unknown Burden of the Girl-Child and Intervention Programme Designed to Address This</b> Olufunmilayo O. Folahanm.....	250
28.	<b>Determination of Heavy Metals in Soil Affected by Municipal Solid Wastes</b> Olawale Jacob Taiwo.....	261
29.	<b>Assessment of Acceptability and Appeal of Smoking Cessation Information on the Internet by In-school Adolescents in Urban Areas of Ekiti State</b> J.A. Olanipekun, Pat Oyeniya and Patience Konwea.....	269
30.	<b>Rumour and Literacy in Human Society</b> Oyewo Olusola Oyeyinka.....	280

## The Unknown Burden of the Girl-Child and Intervention Programme Designed to Address This

Olufunmilayo O. Folahanmi<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*This paper discussed the problem of the unknown and unexpected burden of the girl-child, and the intervention programme developed to address it. The burden comprises peoples of all ages (such as the elderly, adult, children); social and economic problems, such as pregnancy (wanted or unwanted, planned or unplanned), street hawking, child trafficking, illiteracy and poverty; and diseases (such as HIV/AIDS, STDs). The purpose of this paper is to create awareness, especially for policymakers, government functionaries and, most importantly, the girl-child, so that appropriate legislative actions are taken and so that the girl child can make informed decision about her sexuality. In the course of the discourse, experiences will be shared, to identify girls who have been 'trapped' in the cycle of 'the unknown burden'. Various research findings have confirmed the reality of this burden; hence, the recommendations include the replication of programmes in many public schools across Nigeria so as to compile baseline data.*

### Introduction

Two important milestones, in the childhood experience of this researcher, necessitated this discourse on the plight of the Nigerian girl-child – one was growing up with an alcoholic father, an experience which was as frustrating and as it was challenging. The other was the re-entry into school after a 3-year break. The benefit of hindsight, for the researcher, makes it safe to conclude

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that it is possible for the girl-child to achieve positive outcomes in the face of risk and adversity. This was confirmed by Kirby and Fraser (1997) in their study on risk and resilience in childhood.

It is true that many people who have excelled certain challenging areas of human endeavours always have some experience to share. Also, those who failed in such areas share certain experience, in the bid to explain their predicaments. Hence, people usually need to overcome challenges and obstacles in life to achieve success. We are told that to be promoted in any academic endeavour, one must pass a test or examination. Thus, the ability to overcome obstacles is also the ability to move forward or progress. Service professionals, therefore, attempt to identify obstacles to human success in life, in order to take these away or to empower man to anticipate and/or become conscious of the obstacles and thus be strengthened to overcome them.

### **Objectives of this Discourse**

1. To create awareness on the unknown and unexpected burden of the girl-child,
2. To identify the girl-child that has been *trapped* in the cycle of this 'unknown burden,'
3. To prevent the girl-child who is in school but is susceptible to the 'unknown burden,'
4. To help develop skills, strengthen those who have been identified, so that they can overcome various challenges/obstacles.
5. To sensitise others who contribute unintentionally to this 'unknown burden'.
6. Encourage government to take legislative actions to reduce/prevent this 'unknown burden'.

### **Literature Review**

The girl-child has some hopes and aspirations about the future and career. But more often than not, certain 'unknown and unexpected burden' hinders her from accomplishing her dreams. She also experiences various developmental and psychosocial dysfunctions, such as biological impairment, behavioural

disorder, emotional problems and learning disabilities, usually on the basis of her sex. Furthermore, she experiences painful puberty period and poverty-induced maltreatments, such as physical or sexual abuse (Ejikeme, 2000; Erinosh, 2005). These experiences are somehow confusing and stressful, and while she attempts to understand her predicament, she could get pregnant in the process. For the girl-child, pregnancy alters, to a great extent, the course of life. Therefore, Bakare (1993) lamented that the adolescent girl experiences acute stress and conflict as physiological changes combine with psychological and societal actors, which apparently make the adolescent period particularly critical for her.

#### **Factors Predisposing the Girl-Child to the 'Unknown Burden'**

Many factors predispose the girl-child to the unknown and unexpected burden. Some of them as reported by Ejikeme (2000) and Erinosh (2005) are described as harmful cultural and traditional practices. Such practices include: forced early marriage, child marriage, child sexual abuse, girl-prostitution or commercial sexual exploitation of girls, sexual harassment of the girl-child, use of the girl-child by a handicapped adult as a guide during street begging, exploitative girl-child labour, abduction and trafficking of female children, female genital mutilation and many others too numerous to mention.

This list is not exhaustive because it has been limited to those practices that affect the reproductive rights of the girl-child which ultimately places the 'unknown burden' on her.

The fact that the girl-child is exposed to unhealthy sexual practices cannot be over stretched. There are staggering statistics to drive the point home. Papalia and Olds (1988) explain that sexual activity is prevalent and fast becoming a typical part of contemporary teenage experience in the United States with the consequences of pregnancy, school dropout and drift into life long dependency.

Zastro (1988) also says that teenage pregnancy occurs at an alarming rate and that more than one million teenage girls become pregnant each year in America. Teenage girls comprise

roughly 25% of the population of child bearing and they account for 45% of all births outside marriage, Fatayi-Williams (1996) paints a bleak picture on the status of the girl-child in Africa that when they drop out of school due to pregnancy they end up as house helps or hawkers or petty traders or prostitutes or being married off as under-age brides, some of who are subsequently banished to a life of misery from age 11 if they are unlucky to be victims of vesico-vagina fistulae (VVF).

The social and health consequences of early coitus or early marriage for the girl-child are very serious for the individual girl-child, her family and her country. First, it contributes to high level of fertility which translates to high population for the country if nothing is done to curb it; high infant and maternal mortality rates.

It is in the light of the problems highlighted above which this author has conceptualized as an 'unknown burden' for the girl-child that will make it necessary to examine the concept of risk and resilience in childhood. It has been found out that some individuals are able to achieve positive outcomes in the face of risks. For others who are not able, the principle of client's strength and client empowerment are useful therapeutic strategies which is highly recommended for those who have been trapped in the quagmire of the 'unknown burden'.

### **Risk and Resilience in Childhood**

Risk factors defined by Kirby and Fraser (1977) as any influences that increase the probability or onset, digression to a more serious state of maintenance of a problem condition that affect children. It was found out in a study that perinatal trauma functions as an early biological risk factor for later academic difficulties. Academic difficulties may result into school failure which in turn represents a risk factor for juvenile delinquency. Association with other juvenile delinquents could lead to perpetuating aggression and other conduct disorders in children. This explanation of risk factors encompasses biological, dispositional contextual conditions that elevate the probability of negative future outcomes for children. Other conditions described

in Kirby and Fraser (1977) are risk traits, contextual effects, stressful effects, cumulative stress, risk processes and risk chains. On the concept of resilience, many scholars and researchers have consistently found out that some children who faced stressful, high risk situations fared well in life. For example, research showed that some children who were born prematurely and low birth weights succeeded in school as well as in social settings. Other children who were victims of abuse or neglect were found to be quite successful in developing positive, productive and intimate relationship with others later in life. Data from such studies indicate about one third of any population of at risk children experience a negative outcome while two thirds appear to survive risk experiences with major developmental disruptions. Hence, the term resilience has been used to described children who achieve positive outcomes in the face of risk.

### **Building on the Strength of Girl-Child**

The first principle of the Penn Approach is Client Empowerment. This is in agreement with the proposed intervention programme for the girl-child. The principle explain that as a consequence of the failure of societal arrangements, many clients confront a variety of persistent and acute problems for which they seek assistance. The concept of empowerment integrates political, economic and psychosocial perspectives on human needs in the design and implementation of social services. It reflects a positive view of human growth and development as well as a belief in the capacity of both individuals and the environment to change. The principle of empowerment assumes therefore that social work interventions with poor and oppressed persons, in particular, must also address adverse environment conditions. These changes support development of clients' capacity to cope and change stressors in the environment.

In the same vein, the Strengths' perspective of Baylor University's Social Work programme is based on the premise that all individuals, families and communities have God-given strengths that are particular to their culture, beliefs, interpersonal relationships and natural resources. It is also

believed that the best professional practice with human systems focuses and builds on strengths, capacities and resources rather than emphasizing their limitations. Building on the assets and resources of human systems recognizes that significant change only takes place when persons and social systems are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort.

### **Methodology/Approach**

An educational and enlightenment programme (intervention) specially packaged for the school population and targeted at the girl-child was conducted in school halls of selected public high schools in Ibadan. Questionnaires were distributed as pre-test and post-tests to assess the awareness level of the students on the issue for discussion and to identify students who would need help at end of the programme.

The programme (intervention) was in the form of disgrammatic presentation, practical demonstration, rendition of a local folksong to drive home the message, short talks on puberty, impairments, abuse and maltreatment in childhood plus an exciting question and answer time. Students who were identified as going through any form of the challenges were given appointments for further intervention.

### **Discussion**

The excitement and reaction of the both staff and students to the programme was astonishing and revealing. It confirmed that there is an unmet need in many areas of the students' lives especially that of the girl-child. It was obvious that the problem of the girl-child is real, the situation is peculiar to most girls in the public schools. It is worse for those who do not attend school at all. Unicef (2003) reported that about 6.5 million girls worldwide are kept out of school thus increasing the risks that they will suffer from extreme poverty, maternal mortality or from HIV/AIDS pandemic and even pass those dangers on to their future generations.

For the male students, the presentation exposed the dangers and implication of early coitus with young or under aged girls and

that the male constitute part of the 'unknown burden' for the girl-child. Both male and female are able to discuss and share experiences, they are also able to anticipate and take informed decision about their sexuality. The girl-child also realizes that she meets the needs of others in the society at the expense of her own future thus continually and persistently endangering her life.

From the foregoing, it was obvious that the programme was able to raise the awareness of every participant to the unknown and unexpected burden of the girl-child. It then becomes necessary for the programme to be replicated in other schools and be done from time to time so as to complement sexuality education for the students.

On identifying the girls who have been trapped in the cycle of the burden, structured questionnaires were distributed to all the students after the programme as post-test, the purpose was to identify those who are trapped at any of the points in the cycle of the burden. The researcher and her team had a lot of cases revealed from analyzing the responses. Some girls whose friends had been affected or had dropped out of school were willing to take invitation letters to their friends to see our team. The school personnel also confirmed that many girls drop out of school every year due to pregnancy or other family-related problems. There is no doubt that the ascribed role of the women in life affect other people's well-being. In order for the woman to play this role effectively and efficiently, she has to be adequately equipped right from childhood. This will translate to improved quality of life for all as failure to invest in girls' education puts in jeopardy more development goals than any other single action that could take place.

#### **Problems Associated with unappeased curiosity about sex:**

Adolescents have been identified as being at elevated risk for HIV infection. Aggleton (1995). Similarly, Bluestein and Starling (1994) also states that rates of sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies are especially high among this age group. This is so because of various factors which include peer pressure, curiosity, socio-economic factors and ignorance makes many of

them get involved in sex at early age. Unappeased curiosity about sex has a lot of problems associated with it. One of such is early sexual activity by adolescents which may lead to unintended pregnancy. Another equally grievous one is abortion which many may see as the only option out of the shame of being pregnant at an early age. The girl-child is particularly prone and exposed to exploitation by older members of the community who can lure her into having unprotected sexual contact for financial gain or just for fun.

At present, the Federal Government of Nigeria in collaboration with all the state governments have the Family Life and Health Education (FLHE) programme. This is a planned process of education that fosters the acquisition of factual information, formation of positive attitudes, beliefs and values as well as development of skills to cope with the biological, psychological, socio-cultural and spiritual aspects of human living.

Another programme that is currently working in this area is the one being carried out by the Association for Reproductive and Family Health (ARFH) in collaboration with the state government tagged Life Planning Education (LPE). This programme had been taken to different secondary schools, both in urban and rural areas and it covers topics related to adolescence sexuality and HIV/AIDS.

In view of the many efforts made by government, NGOs and other agencies, report still indicate deplorable condition for the girl-child across many states in Nigeria.

There is no gainsaying the fact that great dangers lie ahead if the girl-child is left on her own, she may be trapped into a cycle of poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and dependency, thereby unwittingly increasing the already high population of Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

The following suggestions are offered:

- The girls, especially those who are vulnerable or at risk of any of the items of the burden need mentors apart from their

parents or teachers who will guide them through the stormy period of their lives.

- Social workers need to adopt a reconciliatory approach during intervention with couples, families in crises as a breakdown of the home or the family system will worsen the situation for the girl-child.
- Education up to secondary school should not only be made compulsory by governments, but it should be ensured for the girl-child by all.
- Programmes/efforts to identify girls who are going through one crises or the other should be put in place to allow for *effective referrals and timely interventions*.
- Replication of the programme in all the states in Nigeria and other parts of Africa.
- Efforts should be made to reach the girls who are out of school and are going through some of the challenges already highlighted.

The Nairobi-Forward-Looking-Strategies for the Advancement of Women (1985) has more than 30 recommendations on education. It is now 25 years after the meeting in Nairobi. Some of the recommendations are paraphrased and include as a reminder:

Paragraphs 163-173 of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies have been paraphrased and recommendations.

1. Strengthen the participation of women at all levels of education policy and in formulating, implementing programs and projects.
2. Revised and adapt women's education to the realities of the developing world.
3. Direct new and existing services to women as intellectuals, policy makers, decision makers ... and beneficiaries ref. UNESCO convention against discrimination in Education 1960.
4. Adopt measures to increase equal access to science and technology education.



5. Evaluate progress made by the poorest women in urban and rural areas.
6. Government and international organization e.g. UNESCO to eliminate high rate of illiteracy by the year 2000.
7. Establish targets and adopt appropriate measures for item 6.
8. Overcome special obstacles that have led to higher illiteracy rates among women.
9. Promote functional literacy especially on health, nutrition and viable economic skills and opportunities.
10. Initiate and intensify legal literacy in low income urban and rural areas.
11. Address high absenteeism and drop-out rate of girls in the educational system.
12. Create incentives to ensure women's equal access to education.
13. Apply their education in work or career context e.g. ICT.
14. Encourage and finance adult education programs for women whose education was interrupted by family responsibilities or financial or early pregnant.
15. Scholarship grants equally distributed to boys and girls.
16. Boarding facilities to be available to them too.
17. Eliminate all discriminatory gender stereotypes in education.
18. Expand curricular to include studies on women's contribution to development.
19. Develop new scholarship and a body of knowledge on women's studies from the perspectives of women.
20. Reformulate the current models.
21. Promote and apply women's studies outside formal institutions.
22. Encourage and counsel girls to study science and technical education so as to develop their aptitude for decision-making and leadership.
23. Improve employment and promotion prospects for both men and women through flexible work and work related activities.
24. Diversify women's vocational education and training.
25. Vocational training centres should be opened to girls and women instead of continuing a segregated training system.

26. Integrated training with direct linkage to employment should be created and implemented to avoid wastage.
27. Shared responsibility among the sexes should be taught in schools in child rearing and household maintenance.

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