

THE EFFECT OF ANXIETY ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE GIRL-CHILD

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ABSTRACT

Exploitation of the girl-child by parents, guidance, and other care-givers have constitute a major source of anxiety for her. This paper discusses the various ego defense mechanism employ by the girl-child to cope with the threats of anxiety. The implication of such reactions for mental and social well-being of the girl-child was also highlighted and the responsibility of parents, counselors, government and the society as a whole in protecting the girl-child emotionally and socially was also stressed.

INTRODUCTION

In every society the girl-child has roles she is expected to play and the extent to which she fulfils this role expectations within the society provides an indication of her state of mental health.

Traditionally the girl-child assumes responsibility or learning the role expectations. Economically she is regarded as an economic asset, as such, she is right from an early age gradually integrated into performing various tasks within the family house-hold. According to Maduewesi (2005)

“All the early experiences mediated by mothers and fathers serves as foundation on which subsequent learning are built and they endure through life affecting future behavior of good or bad” Biologically, the girl-child is regarded as an instrument of procreation and child rearing as a result of which her education is considered an economic waste. This is one of the major reasons why the overall girls school attendance still lag severally behind that of their male counter-parts. In recent years, measures have

girl-child by those who are supposed to provide for her especially parents, guardians, teachers and other members of the wider society have been recognized as a major problem for the girl-child. This type of attitude is palpably destructive with the disastrous consequences of condemning the child to life-long poverty, misery, depression, sickness, illiteracy, social dysfunction and sometimes death.

Research findings have indicated that children who lack guidance, consistent control and support needed for successful development are at increased risk for a wide range of problems such as drug-abuse, stealing, disobedience at home and school and overt aggression (Stice & Barrera 1995). The girl-child by virtue of her creation, if not properly taken care of, may end up becoming a nuisance in the society. Schwinhaut and Werkart (1990) have confirmed enriched childhood experience to meet social expectation, advance approximate advancement in school, avoidance of trouble and having high aspiration for themselves.

The current greed for wealth by parents/guardians coupled with the desire to gather property through other means taken their tolls on the girl-child particularly in relation to the funding of her education which is considered as a waste not a resource. To Taylor (2004) the girl-child is denied education because she is considered a poor investment for the future since she is destined to marry outside the family. Many teenage girls find themselves in "dysfunctional families" families that do not meet children's need and which in fact, may do them serious harm (Amato, 1990, Mckenry, Kotch & Browve 1991).

Of concern is also the fact that girl-child is turned into a bread winner, many of them serve as domestic servants, street hawkers and other activities that negatively affects their health and education. Child victims of trafficking are often exploited for commercial sex, including prostitution, pornography and sex tourism, hotel or restaurant work (National Human Trafficking Resource Center, 2001).

An even more disturbing form of maltreatment is sexual abuse or activities forced on the girl-child. Common defence mechanisms among the victims of sexual abuse are depression, withdrawal, running away from home and substance abuse (Morrow & Serell, 1989).

Child marriage itself can lead to destitute poverty of women through divorce, separation and abandonment. Very often, the only option for the girl child in situation of extreme mental stress is to run away. In most cases they end up in brothels or likely to end up being trafficked.

Most devastating is the lack of policy favoring the poor, political instability, lack of gender policy, weak planning, monitoring and evaluation of the existing policy.

THE GIRL-CHILD REACTION TO THE THREAT OF ANXIETY

The reaction of the girl-child to these threats may vary in relation to their perception of the problem. In the words of Freud cited in Oladele (1989) the way in which a person approaches a problem situation reflects the manner in which he has learned to cope with the conflicting demands of the three-parts of his personality or due to their beliefs that they have no control over their own outcomes "learned helplessness" (Seligman, 1975). The girl-child may adopt any of the three common ego defense mechanism i.e. regression, repression and displacement to reduce the unpleasant feelings of tension or worry.

Regression:

One of the most common defense mechanism employ by the girl-child is regression. By regression the girl-child simply retreats to a form of behavior typical of a younger person. The girl-child for example may slip back to dependence on her parents (learned helplessness) as a means of avoiding dealing with reality such a reaction may make the girl-child to become pervasive. If the girl-child allows irrational beliefs to shape her thought, she is at serious risk for experiencing psychological problems (Ellis, 1987).

Repression:

This is the most basic of the defense mechanism. The girl-child employing repression simply pushed her painful thought out of consciousness, keeping them unconscious. This form of reaction may lead to depression which generates negative feelings (Beck, 1976; Beck et al, 1979). Individuals suffering from depression often possess negative self-concept negative conceptions of their own trait, abilities, and behavior. As a result, they tend to be highly sensitive to criticism from others (Joiner, Alfano, Metalsky, 1993). Because such persons are more likely to notice and reminder negative information, the feelings of worthlessness strengthens and their thinking can become distorted in important and self defeating ways. Repressed childhood memories can have effect on the lives of adult.

Displacement

In her bid to transform her unacceptable impulse into its opposite, the girl-child may resort to pent-up feelings, usually of hostility in form of heavy smoking or drinking. According to Cooper, M.L, Frone, M.R, Russell, M., and Mudar, P (1995) people take drugs to reduce negative feelings rather than simply to generate positive ones. Similarly, the girl-child may indulge in the use of alcohols to alter her consciousness and induce the feelings of excitement and activation of pleasure. Chronic and excessive alcohol consumption can lead to deficits in many different cognitive abilities, including learning and memory perception-motor skills, visual-spatial processing and problem solving. Evert and Oscar Berman, 1995; Oscar Berman *et al* (1997).

IMPLICATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH

The girl-child's reaction to the threat of anxiety has its psychological consequences. When anxiety persist over time. It seems to exert negative effects on both physical health and psychological well-being of a person. Defense mechanism when over used are ultimately self-deceptive, they create more problems than they solve. Prolonged repression for example to cope with anxiety or guilt my rendered the girl-child handicapped in dealing with reality, interfere with her later development and leads to negative self-esteem.

Since emotional stability is what social adjustment is all about, it is easy to note that the girl-child who actually suffers from faulty or distorted modes of thinking will definitely experience strong emotional reactions which would lead to mental disorder (Ellis, 1989). If the over all social well-being of the girl-child is to be enhanced, then attention has to be focused on providing the girl-child with information that would facilitate her ability to solve problems by expanding her level of awareness and decision making skills.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS, COUNSELLORS, GOVERNMENT AND THE SOCIETY AT LARGE IN PROTRCTING THE GIRL CHILD FROM SOCIAL ABUSE

Since most of the identified causes of anxiety for the girl-child emanates from the homes and the society at large, significant positive changes can only be obtained if certain societal attitudes are changed.

Since vulnerability is fostered by ignorance, sex education at homes, in schools and religious institutions such as the churches and Islamic schools should begins at very tender age.

- i. Reports have shown that the girl-child who receive good care during early childhood is likely to be more productive, healthy and law abiding (UNICEF, 1999). In view of this, Maduewesi (2005) opined that right from the very early state children should be spoken to with love and should be provided with basic needs like food, clothing, shelter, love and play materials because parental deprivation can result in aggressive or withdrawal behavior.
- ii. The teachers and clergy should be made aware of precondition for and the symptoms of sex abuse, so that they could be alerted to help victims early on before it is late, the children themselves should be empowered so that they may be able to stop sexual abuse before it begins.
- iii. The government both at the federal, state and local level must try to counter the adverse effects of poverty so that parents have the resources to form warm, supportive bonds with their children.
- iv. Counseling should be provided to parents to reduce the incidence of child abuse and the harmful effect it produces.
- v. Finally the government should enact and implement laws and policies favoring the poor, the right of the child and mothers.

CONCLUSION

The attitude that consider the girl-child as inferior, weak and in most cases objectified has contributed to a large extent in her being discriminated against. Traditionally, the girl-child is socialize to put herself last, this in-turn undermines her self-esteem and her ability to reach her full potential as a human being.

The eradication of illiteracy, poverty and above all corruption which is the back-bone of these problems is the collective responsibility of every one, parents have an obligation to be receptive to the needs of their children. In collaboration with the school authorities, psychologists, can effect positive changes in the life of the girl-child through sex education and most importantly the federal government both at the state, local level can promote policies favoring the poor and ensuring its compliance.

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