

Gender Equality, Education and Sustainable Development in Nigeria: An Assessment

Aturu J. O. (Mrs)
Home Economics Department
Federal College of Education Okene,
Kogi - State.
joachimaturu@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper examines the role of gender and growth in Nigeria as the role of education in the building competencies for Nigeria as elsewhere cannot be overemphasized. This is why education is considered a right since it is essential awareness expansion for the enhancement of all human rights and liberties. In the respect, the right to education is at the rock-bottom of all human rights. The inequality and discrimination the female gender suffers a major infringement of the rights of women and girls and therefore a major challenge to the development process. The problem oriented approach is adopted in this paper in assessing government policies and interventions since posterity is severely compromised as a result of none or poor quality education in Nigeria. The giant of Africa still has a large army of children walking the length and breadth of the country in search of food, chanting the names of great heroes that there were without any hope of becoming any. It further argues that to encourage gender equality and uniformity in learning, Nigeria must aim her struggles not merely towards education itself, but also towards society's cultural and utilitarian framework. Reforms are needed in the educational sector so that it no longer creates or permits the existence of separate standards and opportunities for males and females. The importance and need for gender equality as having the objective of enhancing women's participation in the socio-political and economic developments around them has also been discussed. The paper concludes that the socio-cultural imperatives must be properly located and dealt with else the issue of education and gender equality in Nigeria would remain mere soothing words.

Introduction

In many parts of the world, there still exist discrepancies between the sexes in relation to education, employment, financial opportunities, resources, ownership of property, monetary returns for their work, and opportunities to influence decision making at the level of the family and society (Mikkola and Miles (2007). Traditional education in Nigeria and in Africa in general shaped children into becoming functional members of their societies. It also placed emphasis on mannerisms, respect for elders, role orientation but not discrimination. Members of the society enjoyed freedom within the limits permitted by custom. In most instances, there was no strict role stratification. Examples of African women who distinguished themselves in the as leaders of Queendoms such as Queen Amina of Zaira (Ngara & Ayabam, 2013), and the legendary Queen Sheba of Ethiopia (2chronicles 9.), military heroines etc. are too legion to mention here.

Pre-colonial traditional education provided definition and identity within the ambience of African cultures. Westernization and particularly colonial educational polices watered down the purposes of traditional education in African societies. The British colonialists have altered the dynamic social structures in Nigeria societies and reinforced

indigenous gender hierarchies which pushed women to the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Today, most Nigerian societies have consigned women to domestic tasks, satisfying the sexual needs of men, working in the fields, carrying loads, tending babies and preparing food. This development negatively affected women for example, the president of the federal republic of Nigeria recently declared that his wife, who epitomizes the Nigerian women belong only to the kitchen, living room and the other room (BBC News, 2016). This deep seated prejudice and discrimination against women is entrenched within the social, cultural and political structures of most African societies.

It is a fact that a couple of decades ago, societies were stratified based on bloodline, wealth measured in the size of one's farm produce, family size etc. however, today the stratification is based on education. In spite of the role of education and its undeniable role in closing the gender gap globally, access to it for women and particularly the girl child in Nigeria is denied under different guises including religious beliefs etc. As a remedy, the compulsory, free Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act was passed into law in 2004 and represents government strategy to fight illiteracy and provide basic education opportunities to all children in Nigeria. However, the questions of "how compulsory, how free, how universal and how basic" that effort is? can be left for another discussion. Although, in spite of so much propaganda and huge budgetary allocations in that direction, there is very little to show for it.

Globally, male education rate is believed to be 67% while that of females, is about 44% (GOP 2009). The United Nations millennium Development Goal (MDG) aimed to promote gender equality and empower women using education as its target and the measure of gender disparity in education as its indicator of progress. The United Nations had hoped to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2015. For various reasons including lacks of political will, non-cooperation by various government and socio-cultural beliefs of most Nigerian societies, this dream is distant in realization (Aja- Okorie, 2013, p.273).

A year after the target date, Nigeria is still far from realizing this objective and the hope of bridging the gender gap in primary and secondary education looks increasingly hopeless as a result of several factors including insurgency. Social upheavals resulting in demographic challenges, ethnic and economic conflicts.

Conceptual Clarifications

Gender equality: more often used than defined, gender equality suggests a situation where males and females have equal opportunities to realize their full human rights with capacity to contribute to and benefit from everything their societies avail or possess. This suggests that there must be openness, parity and equity in every aspect of life especially equality in education (USAID. 2009). Though Nigeria has a national gender policy, there still exists significant gaps in all areas especially education, empowerment and decision making.

Gender equality on the other hand which is fundamentally related to sustainable development and globally accepted as a necessity for the promotion of human rights must take into consideration, the physical and biological differences between the sexes, both of them must have the same opportunities in the course of their preparation.

Gender disparity: this is found almost all over the world. In Nigeria, women are not enjoying educational, mental, professional and social, status equal to their male counterparts. The situation is worst in rural areas with northern Nigeria taking the lead. Here,

women face different types of violence and enjoy fewer facilities including education (Hannatu, 2016).

Gender parity: According to UNESCO (2003) is attained when the same proportion of boys and girls relative age groups enter the education system, achieve set goals and advance through the different life cycles.

Education is one of the most effective development investment countries and their donor partners can make. Adequate investments in education facilitate the achievement of related development goals and increases the probability that progress will be sustained (United States Agency for international Development USAID 2008). Education builds the human capital that is needed for economic growth and also produces significant improvement in health, nutrition, life expectancy, and countries with an educated citizenry are more likely to be democratic and politically stable.

In Nigeria, government at all levels pay lip service about creating a better environment for girls in education. However, barriers to learning persist and gender inequality continues to flourish, (USAID, 2008). Education which should be core in addressing gender based discrimination against women and girls has sadly not been prioritized and thus the widening gap between the sexes in Nigeria. According to USAID and the World Bank, 57% of the 72 million primary school aged children who do not attend school are females. Additionally, girls are 4% percent less likely than boys to complete primary schools. In every income bracket, there are more female children than male who are not attending school. Generally, girls in the poorest 20% of household have the lowest chance of getting an education (Gender Statistics, 2010).

If females in Nigeria are told that all their education will end “in the kitchen and the other room”, this can have devastating consequences on the female learners because, “after all that is where it ends”. Access to education must therefore not constitute the ultimate target for parents and school administrators. Focusing on it alone can affect the twin issues of quality and relevance.

Gender disparity is even more pronounced and widens at the tertiary levels. The girls that survive the primary and secondary levels decrease in number by the interplay of same factors. Sometimes their parents feel they had enough and should get married or learn some trade etc.

When girls are forced to give way to the boys, that structures male supremacy and patriarchy, Gender therefore becomes the source of power and basis for inequality, Okoli (2007).

The Right to Education in Nigeria

Education, according to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), reflects a rich relationship between gender equality and the right to education. CEDAW article 10 explicitly enshrines the right to equality in education.

The Nigeria Universal Basic Education Act of 2004

This act includes a wide range of programmes designed to ensure free Basic Education for nine years to all Nigerian children, with an explicit focus on girls and gender equality. In furtherance to this, government and non-governmental organizations committed to gender equality in basic education ensured that a Gender Basic Education Policy was enacted. This has metamorphosed into Girls’ Education Program in Northern Nigeria.

However, translating this aspiration into practice has proved extremely challenging (FME, 2007).

Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)

As pointed out by CESCR, Education enhances knowledge and development of the mental, character and emotional well-being of humans. It is the path to skills acquisition, knowledge and understanding since the right to education epitomizes the indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights” (GCB, 2012: 3). The right to education “has been variously classified as an economic right, a social right and a cultural right. It is also a civil right and a political right, since it is central to the full and effective realization of those rights as well.

It is largely recognized that education is about much more than the individual who is learning. It is an investment in the future of a community or society. It is appreciated by many that both male and females should have equal access to education which inevitably leads to a greater sense of equality and self-belief. The impact of female education has also been seen to transmit down to the future generations. Health wise, an educated woman is more likely to know what a contraceptive is and how to use it responsibly and safely. According to UNICEF, as few as 20% of women in Northern Nigeria have attended schools (Brindley, 2012). It is against this backdrop that UNESCO (2002) has suggested that women who constitute a high percentage of the population in Nigeria must have access to quality education to be able to contribute their quota to the development of the country. This is because sustainable human development cannot take place if half of the human race (the womenfolk) remains ignorant, marginalized and discriminated against with attendant consequences.

Education and Gender Equality in Nigeria

Education in Nigeria must be such that recipients or beneficiaries have full access to every opportunity that is offered. Beneficiaries of education or the chances that it offers should not be determined by ones sex, economic status or social background but by his/ her capabilities, talents and hard work. Not only is Nigeria increasingly becoming incapable of securing the future of her young people through the input of education. The educational philosophy which is based on the “Provision of equal access to educational opportunity for all citizens of the country at primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal school system”, is seriously compromised. In addition, the casual references to it have become mere soothing words on the lips of those charged with the responsibility of ensuring its implementation. Besides, access to education is becoming increasingly difficult to source and its quality has continued to be compromised. Formal education broadens experience and also gives access to new resources and skills. To a very large extent, it is to be understood that education is the main tool for imparting skills and attitudes relevant for the contribution of the individual concerned to national development (Jaja, 2013, P.19).

Shaheed (1995) has also argued that women’s involvement in Nigeria is expected to significantly influence the achievement of the MDG’s in Sub-Saharan Africa because of its sheer size and the role it plays continental affairs. The suggestion that nearly one in every four women in sub-saharan Africa is Nigerian leaves the so-call giant of Africa with huge responsibility of ensuring quality education for the African women and by implication bridging the great divide of gender inequality. Unfortunately, Nigeria has not fared well in this regard and the situation seems to be worsening as a result of the devastating consequences of insurgency which has drastically multiplied the army of children, Mostly

females out of school.

Achieving Growth in Women Education

The educational attainment of women is without doubt, the most fundamental prerequisite for empowering women in all spheres of society, for without education of comparable quality and content given to boys and men, and relevant to existing knowledge and real needs, women are unable to access well-paid, formal sectors jobs, participate in, and be represented in government and gain political influence, voice and space in their communities.

While it is true that a few parrot cries are heard across Nigeria emphasizing the need for gender equality, women continue to face various challenges inhibiting their access education (UDHR 1948). Members of the national assembly, top government functionaries and the traditional elites seem to be competing in taking children brides across large sections of the country and particularly in the Northern region where men hid under religion to commit

Crimes against female children. Though participation of women in policy making is vital, their involvement in policy interventions aimed at sustainability does not automatically translated into greater gender equality, particularly when the structural foundations of gender inequality remain unchanged (Kabeer and Natali, 2013). The best thing that can accelerate gender equality in Nigeria is quality education (Humphreys & Crawford 2014).

As more and more women are educated, the health, economy and social standard of the nation improves for instance, a study undertaken by the United Nations in conjunction with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on women development pointed out that women's education plays important role in reducing infant mortality, increasing life expectancy of future generation and improve child rearing and development (Ballara 1992). Education leads to more knowledge and understanding of hygiene, child and mother nutrition (especially during pregnancy), control and prevention of diseases, general health practices and child care. It enables mothers to improve their own health as well as that of their infants, their family and community. The implication here is that a healthy nation must be made up of healthy and enlightened women.

The various legislations and interventions, as good are they are will not automatically translate into results without political will on the part of government to enforce those laws. In a society that is still largely governed by the force of culture and religious sentiments, with a legal framework and system that was designed to support criminality against the females, the road to gender equality is still wavering with severe challenges.

Persistent Imbalance and Factors Militating Against Women Education in Nigeria

There are a number of factors militating against women education in Nigeria. These include; religious beliefs, poverty and socio-cultural beliefs.

Religious Factor: Under the guise of religion, young girls are denied education and forced into early marriages. Often times they are handed over to people old enough to be their parents. The belief that female children must never see their menstrual circle in their parents' house drives this practice. They are therefore denied education and herded into marriages. Such religious and cultural beliefs support the subservient status of women. Though religion permeates every fabric of our national life, and though women remain the largest consumers

of religion, they are often very badly served. Young (1994) has argued that, religion is one of the greatest barriers to the education of women. Male children are also preferred to the female ones because they were expected to inherit their fathers and perpetuate family names. It has not been easy to sanction the perpetrators of this crime in Nigeria because of religious beliefs of some people. The Nigerian constitution and legal system itself was designed to protect this practice. It is against this backdrop that the disinterest in educating female children is located. Gender inequality has persisted for so long that it has sank its roots deep into the homes of Nigerian society. Religion plays a leading role in entrenching gender inequality in Nigeria. Aishatu (2016), has argued that the practice of Purdah, symbolized by the veil alienates Muslim women from the public and reduces them to complete subordination.

Poverty and Socio-Cultural Beliefs: The Nigerian Patriarchal system which is deeply embedded perceives and treats men as superior to women. This is well manifested in the “son preference syndrome” that is prevalent in Nigeria. Male Children in Nigeria often enjoy preferential treatment, like exemption from house chores, accelerated and unlimited access to education, right to property etc. while the girls are barely tolerated and merely seen as “other people's wives”. Some Nigerian cultures equally disinherit wives and daughters. In this regard, religion particularly Islam seems to provide more protection since it does not disinherit the females. Women are, as against the traditional period, denied visibility and quarantined to the chores of home keeping, and child bearing (Ifemeje and Ikpeze (2012). This paper contends that the major problems confronting women education in Nigeria today is not so much in the domain of public and institutional arrangements but in the lingering culture, values and depressed economic status of the Nigerian peoples which tend to sustain gender discrimination in education.

Mgbede (2003), argues that men and women do not have equal access to education; he observes that in some parts of Nigeria, most of the young girls are not given opportunity to go to school because their parents would prefer them married for their bride price. Likewise, Ogada (2001) laments that, in Nigeria women do not have equal access like men to education especially at the tertiary level, a trend attributed to gender discrimination. At the secondary and higher institutions of learning, the system tends to prepare girls for what Bakari (2001: 1), calls soft profession and domestic work. Ogunsola (2004), also observes that girls are discouraged from mathematics and other sciences. Agada (2016), is of the view that, violence against women like assault, rape, battery and other forms of molestation are executed because of the assumed ignorance of the position the women occupy in the home (Olagbegi and Akiyode (2011:1).

According to Hamallai (1986), one half of the population is denied access to education despite the Federal and state laws designed to promote equality in our society. Studies conducted on education and the position of women in Northern Nigeria concluded that early marriages hindered the education of women in that area.

Nigeria is considered a poor nation despite its abundant human and natural resources. The level of poverty is so high that so many people cannot afford to send their children to school. In addition to the cultural issues already discussed, financial difficulty has compelled preference of education for boys over girls. Because education is so expensive that parents do not consider the returns of girl child education as high as that of the boys.

Conclusion

The need for fair hearing on gender issues in Nigeria has been long overdue. This paper has attempted to discuss the relevance of education to the girl child. It has bent

backwards to interrogate expected hindrance of such researches. This paper has contended education remains a key factor in social mobilization, evolution and progress of any given society. It has also been argued in this paper that education changes an individual's capacity to contribute to his/her society's advancement. Educating the girl child in particular to a large extent equips her for future interfaces with the society. The need to ensure parity, equity and gender equality both at home and especially in the educational sector cannot be overemphasized. The problems girls and women face in their attempt to achieve parity with their male counterparts in educational opportunities are real and daunting. Since the problems of cultural bias, negative perception of the value and societal abuse of the girl-child are more pervasive and deeply rooted in the rural areas where the majority of Nigerians live.

Recommendations

Based on issues of gender equality and education, we have recommended the following;

1. Families are advised to always give to their sons same treatment given to their daughters by reintroducing roles among both sexes at the home front.
2. Cultural and unscientific beliefs like the fable that educated women are proud, domineering submissive and therefore incapable of being good wives should be exposed through sensitization campaigns by all stakeholders including women themselves. Instead of remaining a tool in the hands of men, women should think seriously and work towards positive achievements in the society.
3. Enlightenment campaigns need to be mounted and sustained by all tiers of government in rural areas where the majority of Nigerians live.
4. Formal and non-formal educational programmes should be launched in rural areas to make the general public aware of the need to provide women with solid education that meets their needs else they will continue to be left behind.
5. We have suggested also that, religious leaders and teachers must be robustly engaged and use to debunk the myths surrounding the education of women and changing time and dynamics due to cultural and religious reasons, in which women experience multiple forms of discrimination, oppression and violence.
6. Trafficking in young girls as domestic servants and prostitutes, hawking, child marriages and refusal to send children to school should be criminalized by legislation and the agencies of government responsible for enforcement supported and strengthened to ensure compliance.

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