

SOCIO-CULTURAL ISSUES IMPEDING WOMEN/GIRLS EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Education and culture have many things in common. Whatever is learnt from generation to generation and transmitted to the next generation is called education while the way people do their things including education is the shortest description of culture. This goes to say that the culture and education of any country determines its developmental rate. In Nigeria, the educational structure is inter-related with culture. Culture affects the way women participate in social, physical and psychological oriented functions. This paper tries to assess the socio-cultural issues which inhibits women from attaining education in northern Nigeria, strategies for promoting women/girls education and finally gives suggestions on how to ameliorate the socio-cultural strangle hold on women and achieve the desired millennium and sustainable development goals (MDGs) in women education.

Education has accelerated the pace of change in the world. It has provided the foundation for wealth and development and increased improvement on the quality of life. The models of education has powerfully interpreted the natural world while technological inventions has enabled man to extend his capacities to manipulate and control his environment. Therefore, the improvement of education in socio-cultural, economic and political development cannot be overemphasized. For any nation to develop, there must be massive education of the populace irrespective of race, creed or sex. In Nigeria, the story is different. It has been variously noted that women are under represented in education (Williams 1987, Nsofor 2000).

At the African level, similar conferences were also held. These include the Five African Regional Conference on women in 1977, 1979, 1984 and 1994 and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of discrimination against women, 1981. Other conferences where issues bothering on women were raised include the Jomtien World Conference on Education for all by 2000, the world summit for children 1990, the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, the African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the child, the International Conference on Assistance to the African Child 1992 and the Pan African Conference on the Education of Girls with its Ougadougou Declaration, 1993 (Muhammed, 2000).

All the conferences critically examined the age-long injustice and inequalities which women suffer in society and identified the need to raise the status of women. The resolutions, declarations and plans of actions adopted in these conferences were aimed at removing the inhibitions and bottlenecks to women empowerment. Since then, African nations have taken several initiatives which have guided activities towards women empowerment.

This, then, implies that Nigeria in her journey towards development still have a long way to go.

There has been a consensus views among Nigerians that there are certain socio-cultural factors that continue to relegate and depress the enthusiasm of any coming ambitious women especially in northern region. There is need for a serious focus on such factors and a radical redress in order to pave way for the much desired development in Nigeria.

Hitherto, disparities persist both in enrolment rates and in average years of schooling. Though female primary and secondary enrolment rates and average year of female schooling have risen over – time, it has remained lower in sub-Saharan Africa than in other developing regions (World Bank Report 2001).

Under Representation of Women/Girl in Education in Northern Nigeria

The history of education in Nigeria is the history of discriminatory practices against women education. Gender inequality and disparity in education are therefore not recent phenomena. There is an avalanche of research literature that confirms that gender disparity in education has its origin in the discriminatory cultural practices that manifest both directly and in subtle ways. For example, research evidence from the study by Mohammed (2000) shows that the obstacles to the girl-child education are historically, socially and culturally rooted. To buttress this claim, it is observed that in Northern parts of Nigeria, the common practice of forced and early marriage constitute the most significant constraints to women education, while in the Southern parts of Nigeria, socio-economic status and obnoxious cultural practices constitute major obstacles to the girl-child education.

There are clear disparities in enrolment and rate of completion of schooling between males and females. Research report by Moja (2002:78) reveal that:

the progression of women students through schooling system has been low with large dropout rate... for example of students who entered school between 1979/80 and 1991/92 on average only 18.64% girls proceeded to secondary schools, with an average dropout rate of 80.16%. The average dropout rate from secondary school to higher educational institutions was 93.15%.

Although available records reveal that enrolment trend in primary education shows increased access to schooling for both males and females in recent time, there are still noticeable gaps in enrolment as completion rate continues to be in favour of boys in almost all states of the Federation (UNESCO, 2000). Table I shows the national gross enrolments between 1990 and 1995.

Table 1: Cross Primary Enrolment in Percentages from 1990-1995

Year %	Boys %	Girl %	Total %
1990	76.4	59.1	67.7
1991	86.6	69.1	77.1
1992	90.3	71.9	81.1
1993	93.6	74.7	84.1
1994	89.4	83.2	86.5
1995	85.5	74.9	80.6

Source: UNESCO 2000:35

The data in Table I reveal a steady increase in the percentage of enrolment for both sexes; however, there are noticeable inequalities and distortions because of gender disparities in favour of the boys. The overall enrolment figure shows that the girls are trailing behind the boys in the actual enrolment. UNESCO (2000) report of enrolment by state further reveals worse scenario. While female enrolment is close to 50% in most Southern states, in Sokoto and Katsina it is 30% and an average below 40% in other Northern states.

The low female enrolment at school and poor rate of completion could be due to the presence of some or a combination of the socio-economic and cultural factors highlighted earlier. If the quality of women is to improve so that women can take up their rightful position in the society, then there is a basic need to ensure higher initial enrolment of girls by removing all obstacles and impediments posed by inequitable access to education.

Table 2: Enrolment Distribution of Girls and Boys in WAEC Statistics 96-99

Year	Total no. enrolled	Male	Female	% of female enrolment	Ratio of male/female
1996	523499	303273	220226	42.1	1:4
1997	134058	87044	470014	35.1	1:9
1998	79086	62361	17325	21.7	3:6
1999	391802	215237	176565	45.1	1:2

Source: Baja & Bozimo (1989) in Nsofor (2000)

Analysis from the figures above which shows under representation of female signals a serious problem. This is because secondary education is the bed rock which the tertiary education is based and if women are not well represented at this level, one then wonders what happens next.

In response to this, Bolarin (1998) remarked that the dearth of girls at the secondary school level leads to acute shortage of female that gain access to university level.

Some cultures defined “women” as after thoughts, appendages to men and entities only good to play second fiddles (Cole, 1998). Women perhaps, because of their biological disposition of bearing and rearing children, were regarded as second class citizens in wage earning jobs and serious decision making process (Bajah and Okafor, 1998). Bozimo (1991) reported that girls are found to be less forthcoming, less enthusiastic and hardly ready to take initiative and leadership in education. Cole (1998) criticized the selection pattern of 170 men and less than 20 women as members of vision 2010 committee. The low participation of women in education has brought down the pace of national development.

Perhaps, a presentation of female illiteracy situation in Nigeria will give a better understanding of the damage done so far. Nigeria is ranked as one of the LOW illiteracy countries of the world with a literacy rate of 54. 19% (UNESCO, 2000). In numerical terms, it means that over 50 million Nigerians are illiterates. Of this number, the women account for 30 million (UNESCO, 2000 report). Further breakdown of this figure reveals that the illiteracy rate among women in Nigeria as distributed by age bracket (UNESCO 2000) are as follows:

Age group	No of illiterates
15-29	13.6 million
30-59	14.8 million
60 years and above	1.6 million
Total	30 million

Source: UNESCO, 2000:14

The reported situation is alarming and reveals that majority of women in Nigeria are functioning only at half steam as it were. They are almost completely marginalized and prevented from participating in development efforts. This situation calls for a reappraisal of gender issues with a view to re-channelling the education system towards the elimination of existing bottlenecks and hindrances in the growth and development of women.

Some Socio-cultural Issues that Inhibit Women's/girls Education are:

There are wide range of factors identified by researchers influencing women level of representation in education. It becomes pertinent that women should realize their capabilities and map out strategies to actualize them. However, Ikeobioha (2006) states that some socio-cultural issues influencing the level of participation of women in education have been characterized by the following:

a. Poverty: Deeply rooted to poverty are unequal chances of women in getting education. Many Nigerians operate below the poverty line; hence they cannot afford the cost of sending their children to school (Akomolafe 2005). Where opportunity presents itself, the male child is usually considered first, even where such a child is less academically inclined. These factors mostly account for poor enrolment of female children and poor completion rate at school, in spite of the institutionalization of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme. Majority of parents in Nigeria cannot reasonably afford the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter to their children. It is not surprising that the universal free basic education is en-going. Many Nigerian families still engage their children in street hawking, wheelbarrow pushing in the market and contract their children as house-helpers. Under these circumstances, most parents, especially single parent have no other option than to allow their children (especially girls) engage in unimaginable occupations including prostitution.

b. Community-Role: Anaekwe (2001) contends that Child-rearing practices in parts of Nigeria contribute to what girls/women become in life. He continued:

“We hear parents using some words that segregate children personality. For instance, independent, strong, courageous, capable, serious etc are commonly used to describe boys behaviour while soft, fragile, weak, lazy, dependent are used in qualifying girls behaviour. In the home, boys are also encouraged to engage in activities that kindle fondness spirit in education. They play footballs, catapult, fly kites, make bows and arrows, wrestle or engage in tug-of-war while girls congregate in the play ground playing uneducational games like ten-ten, dancing, cooking and curdling simulated babies which are not logical and education.

Bozimo (1991) has shown in his studies that these boys' activities promote education learning and thus giving gap over the girls.

c. Marriage: Early marriage is a depressing phenomenon for women education in northern Nigeria. Girls who go into marriage early deny themselves of the opportunity of education. Boys are therefore more available for education since they are not affected by early marriage phenomenon (Okebukola, 1994). This cultural practice serves as a set-back for women in education.

d. Obnoxious Widowhood practices: There are some unhealthy and obnoxious widowhood practices which have subjected some widows to inhuman and unhygienic

conditions. These include wearing the same cloth over the entire mourning period, sitting and sleeping on bare floor for days or weeks. Equally, if she is suspected or accused of having knowledge of the cause of the husband's death, she is compelled to drink part of the water used for washing of the corpse in order to prove her innocence. Generally, according to Osuji and Gayus (2004), the situation of women particularly those living in rural and developing countries in Africa have been deteriorating steadily despite regional improvements.

e. Cultural context: The need for sustaining girls' interest in education is very important. They should be encouraged to understand that education is a human activity and ideas are affected by the social and cultural contexts in which they are developed. Active involvement of boys to experimental activities make girls "shy away" from education resulting in less inclination to participate in education Okoye (2001).

Sex discrimination

Traditionally, Anaekwe (2001) notes that men and women do not attract equal status. A male child is valued more than a female child; most marriages break up or turn polygamous because of the absence of a male child. The absence of a male child means the absence of an heir to sustain the family lineage. Again, in some communities, a man who has no male child is considered to be impotent. Consequently, in order to prove his potency, he has to marry more wives. In most communities, it is only male children that have the right to inheritance to land. Even married women do not have any right to inherit a piece of land. Omoleke and Bisiriyu (2009) posit that in most cultures, there is a myth that women brought suffering, sorrow and agony into the world. Hence, she is a woe to man.

Religious discrimination

Gender, according to Agbro (2005) is the positioning of women and men in society. Inequality arises whereby the roles of women are not equally valued like those of their male counterpart. In pagan worship, women are not allowed to enter some shrines or sleep with their husbands in some occasions because they believe that women are (necessary) evil that can weaken the effectiveness of the males' charm or the power of the shrine. In some churches, women are not allowed to pray or address the congregation, though they proclaim that women and men are equal in the sight of God. Similarly, in the mosque, women are restricted to certain areas of the mosque. Ikwuegbu (2005) posits that in Islamic religion, the Quran stipulates that there is no distinction between man and women. In practice, Islam relegates women to the background by keeping them in purdah. If women are not exposed, it will be difficult for them to keep abreast of societal happenings; hence they cannot equally make useful contribution to issues affecting them.

Economic discrimination

In a strong agrarian society such as Nigeria, women work so hard in the farm land but traditions deprive them from being landlords, both in the family where they are born or married into. Women, especially in rural arrears, hardly have access to financial resources in order to access loans from communal purse; they are specifically required to bring a male surety. In some communities, women cannot spend their income at will, without the consent of their husband, or a male member of the family, if widowed, though they earned that money themselves. Consequently, Okoye (2001) opines that women in Nigeria have always been relegated to the background as traditions and customs of many ethnic groups clearly rob them of their rights and privileges.

Health discrimination

A childless wife has no permanent place in her husband's house. In most cases, women are blamed for being the cause of childlessness in homes. Even in this 21st century and the technological breakthroughs in the medical field, some husbands refuse to go for medical examinations and counselling. Instead, they prefer to hide under traditions and lay the blame of infertility and the sex of the baby, if a baby is a girl, on their wives Aluko (2009).

Legal discrimination

Women are not allowed to sign bail bond for any accused person. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Section 42 (2), states that "no citizen of Nigeria shall be subjected to any disability or deprivation merely by reason of the circumstances of his birth". In spite of this statutory right enshrined in the constitution, Anaekwe (2001) posits that women are still discriminated against. The fact still remains that the status and condition of Nigeria women are far from being satisfactory.

Strategies for Promoting Women/Girls Access to Education in Nigeria

Access to education implies the equalization of educational opportunities for all citizens, irrespective of geographical zones and socio-economic background. improved access to education therefore should be premised on the following:

- Eliminating social inequalities in educational provision;
- Eliminating inequalities and imbalance between zones in Nigeria as found in North-South, Urban-rural and rural-rural.
- Rationalizing the use of scarce available educational resources most efficiently;
- Providing equality of access to schooling in the face of changing quantity and quality of education;
- Ensuring equitable distribution of students, personnel, funds, physical facilities and curriculum;
- Ensuring that the replacement, redistribution of resources and the curriculum content of education meet the emerging needs of society (Agabi, 1999; Fabunmi, 2004).

Access also implies making it possible for everyone who is entitled to education to receive it. This means that any obstacle that prevents anyone from taking advantage of the opportunity should be removed (Adewale, Ajayi and Enikanoselu, 2006).

The Wave of Change

Aluko (2009) asserts that if men will not yield to the pressure of women's cry for change of some traditional beliefs that are no longer helping the society in the presence of the global awareness and realization of the need for effective integration of women, time will come when the tradition will go into extinction. As the saying goes, nothing good comes so easily, the quest for effective integration will not be achieved so easily, until when the women have come to discover the level of their degradation and resolve to change it. According to Kerr (1993) and Aluko (2009) respectively, the contemporary development calls for resolute and purposeful action. As a result, unless women take their own destiny into their own hands, all attempts will ultimately be controlled by political powers which already use both culture and religion as weapons. This is why the doctrine of gender equality is being spread worldwide but its implementation and enforcement is defective. This calls for change.

Conclusion

Experience in the past two decades has shown that women/girls participation in education has been abysmal low. In this paper, many reasons have been adduced for the downward trend. The socio-cultural dimension of the problems has become a myth to the extent that girls have consciously or unconsciously accepted education as a male domain. The Federal Government has no doubt taken bold steps to nip this problem in the bud, but like an albatross, the problem still persists today albeit at an appreciable level of education is sine-qua-non to national growth and development. Women/girl should therefore be encouraged to embrace education if they have to be relevant in the life of the nation and finally liberates themselves from the shackles of poverty.

A nation is doomed if women who constitute more than half of the national population are illiterates. In fact, illiteracy breeds poverty, disease, hunger and ignorance. In the contemporary age, an illiterate person is considered circumscribed in playing his/her potential roles in socio-political and economic development of his country. Socio-cultural issue is a global problem and therefore requires global efforts for solution.

Recommendations

Evidence from the extant literature seems to suggest that there are some socio-cultural problems affecting women's education. In homes, girls are not given the same task as boys. In schools, teachers do not provide equal opportunities for girls to participate in educational activities like their male counterparts. Teachers continue to

stress the difference between boys and girls, by elaborating more on boys responses than girls responses in classroom discussions.

In the society/community, cultural and religious practices, which are influenced by beliefs, values and myths, continue to promote gender discrimination. The Nigerian Constitution, which prescribes policies that guide all our individual and communal endeavours, is not gender sensitive. All these highlighted issues portend grave consequences for girl/women and the Nigerian society. To arrest this trend, the following measures should be taken:

1. All structural, cultural and policy provisions that serve as impediments preventing girl/women from getting to leadership positions and decision-making process should be removed.
2. The campaign for birth control or family planning should be intensified to reduce individual family size. This will help the family in solving problems and have due attention to education of all sexes instead of choice.
3. Special bursaries and scholarship should be given to girl/women who show outstanding performance in education as an incentive.
4. The Federal Government should come up with a law that strictly condemns the withdrawal of girl from school for marriage.
5. Women as mothers should start at homes to educate the girl-child on the relevance of education.
6. Challenge and encourage non-literate women to participate in all life activities. It will be appropriate if ignorance is stamped out among women.
7. Educate and mobilize the girl-child, women through family meetings, churches, mosques, to persuade the girl-child to go to school.
8. Review administrative and fiscal policies that restrict opportunities for the girl-child schooling.
9. Utilizing electronic print media to give prominence to education for the girl-child.
10. A female who misbehaved while in school should be made to continue her education after giving birth.
11. Both Federal, State, Local Government as well as philanthropists, voluntary organizations should award scholarship to girls to reduce the financial problem of the parents.

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