

GENDER BIAS AND WOMEN EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

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Abstract

This paper is a theoretical appraisal of gender bias and women education. It has looked at the cultural, religious and social factors that hinder women's progress in education. One of the most serious of these factors is the place that is given to the female child in the family. She is considered as one that will eventually go into a husband's house so not much interest is given to her education. She is eventually married out early. Another inhibiting factor is the female child (or woman) herself. She does not assert herself very well and so has very weak self-efficacy, which is a hindrance to her. She, therefore, cannot attain great heights. She drops out at the secondary level. Thus enrolment of women at the tertiary level is very low. The paper suggests that counselling of parents, policy makers and girls themselves will see a turn around of the education of women for greater productivity.

Introduction

Education is basically concerned with the development of the child's personality. It is essential to the process of human development (Orhungur, 1990).

Every society, whether simple or complex, as Fafunwa (1974) has said, has its own system for training and educating its youth. The Greek idea of an educated man, for instance, was one who was mentally and physically well balanced. The Romans, on the other hand, placed emphasis on oratorical and military training. In old Africa, the warrior, the hunter, the nobleman, the man of character or anyone who combined the latter feature with a specific skill was adjudged to be a well-educated and well-integrated citizen of his community.

Education was immediate induction into society and a preparation for adulthood. Education therefore had to be functional. All were taught certain skills, rules of behaviour and moral attitudes to fit them for adult life in their own society.

Today, much of informal education has been replaced by formal education. This formal education calls for literacy. Literacy, generally, is perhaps "the most important single way station of social and economic development, opening for the individual, the door to innovative ideas" (Population Reference Bureau Incorporated, 1975, P5).

The importance of women education in economic, social and political development is recognized internationally (Ogbuagu, 1994). There are indications, however, that in most societies* women's education is given secondary consideration in relation to the education of men. When parents have to make a choice because of financial constraints, it is often the boys that are allowed to continue with school. Ogbuagu (1994), notes that literacy rate in Nigeria is still low, and Nortman (1985) in relation to this low rate, estimates that Nigeria has only 23 percent of her adult females literate as opposed to 46 percent for the males. Unfortunately, as long as women remain illiterate and are subject to discrimination in education and training, the motivation for change so badly needed to improve the quality of life for all will fail, for in most societies, it is the mother who is responsible for the training of her children during the formative years of life.

Cultural, Religions and Social Inhibitions to Women Education

In most parts of the country, sex preference begins right from birth. When a male child is born the kind of reception he is given is more exciting than when a female child is born. The child, therefore, starts to learn that the man is the recognized authority in the home as well as in the community. Ogbuagu (1994) notes that because the male child does not change his name in marriage, he is seen as perpetuating the family name. This becomes culturally so important that a family that does not have a male child thinks it is fated for extinction.

Nigerian culture is one of the cultures that hold such beliefs and the girls are "programmed" before they even know how to write their names. Particularly in the northern part of Nigeria, girls tend to be given out early in marriage and they do not generally have a share in their families inheritance. Because of this "programming" the desire for marriage presents itself very early to the girls. This early desire for marriage, no doubt, affects the academic progress of girls or young women.

They are some religious beliefs and practices that inhibit women's education. The Christians and Moslems emphasize that women have to depend on men and this helps to strengthen discrimination (Ogbuagu, 1994). Peil in Ogbuagu (1994) noted that since women are ideally secluded in the house after marriage, many Muslim parents see little point in sending their daughters to school.

Socially, society has had a very conservative idea of women. Many people, even scholars, have thought or believed that women are biologically inferior to men. Parsons (1959) sees the role of women as largely domestic and limited around the home,

During the pre-independence period, women did primarily farm work and petty-trading. Farm work consisted mainly of subsistence farming and few cash crops such as groundnuts. The post-independent period was a period of awakening or awareness. There began to be emphasis on education and this created great awareness among women. Few parents began to see the need to educate their daughters, though majority of people held back their daughter because they were meant to marry and there was no need spending huge sums of money to train them.

Apart from these cultural, social and religious inhibitions, women themselves exhibit negative estimates of their academic abilities. Many times, the girls feel inadequate and not a match with the boys. They do not assert themselves properly or highly. As a result, they soon feel very inadequate or incapable before setting out on any task. Men on the other hand, feel they can do anything and so have a wide range of choices to make. This, however, does not in any way indicate that men are more able and skilled. In other words, the difference in aspiration lies not in the possession of ability and skill but in the perception of abilities and the use of them.

The Relevance of Women Education

International organizations, especially the United Nations, regard education as a fundamental and basic human right. Ogbuagu (1994) also states that education and training are not only basic human rights, but also key factors for social progress and in reducing the gaps between socio-economic groups and between sexes.

The fact that women need to be educated very well cannot be over-emphasized. Ibim Princewill, a one time Governor of Cross River State noted that the status of women needed to be enhanced by seriously pursuing women's education as-it will help speed up the country's development efforts. It is no wonder that women are beginning to get involved in development programmes. Women education cannot, therefore, be taken for granted.

The need of educating women is becoming more and more overwhelming and government has recognized woman's education as one of the major problem areas requiring urgent attention. One appreciates this recognition but realizes that it is not matched with efforts that are made. The enrolment of women in school, particularly tertiary institutions, leaves much to be desired. The enrolment of girls in the primary and secondary levels has improved significantly but the number falls drastically when you come to the University or other tertiary institutions.

In 1996/97 session for instance, in primary schools in Makurdi metropolis, girls accounted for about 56% as against 44% for boys. In the secondary schools it is a ratio of 1 girl to 2 boys. When you get to the University, for instance in Benue State University, out of about 500 students that were admitted in the 1995/96 session, there were only 120 girls. (Source: SPED office and BSU Academic records). This drop in female intake is disturbing. It will however, be recalled that many of the girls marry after secondary school and may only return to academics at the permission of their husbands. There is global evidence that sex-differentials exist in education in favour of the males (Ogbuagu, 1994). Peil in Ogbuagu (1994) also indicates that in all countries, the men receive more education than women. She argues that, particularly at the higher educational level, the girls lag behind. No wonder Ibim Princewill also noted that the rate of women's educational development differs significantly from that of their men-folk. Thus women-folk throughout Nigeria have been placed in a disadvantaged position when compared with their men-folk.

Women are the most effective means for the transmission of cultural values to the youth. A mother stays with the child most of the time during his/her formative years. A mother that is not-educated cannot, therefore, help the child in today's society. The adage "if you educate a woman, you educate a nation" cannot be more appropriate than now. Whatever, therefore, it takes the nation to make education available to women cannot be too much.

Years back, the substantive decisions in married life regarding life-style, location, career priorities, and major acquisitions were the prerogative of husbands. There has, however, been a shift towards a moral equal voice in the family for wives. This is especially true if the wife is an income producer, educated or assertive. Economic, social and psychological realities thereby, affect the age-old tradition of male dominance in the household. The privileges of being educated must be harnessed-for the development of family and society.

The education of women must be taken seriously considering their role as mothers of world leaders. It is the educated women that can help to rear a generation that can have positive impact on the society by inculcating acceptable values in their children.

A woman has played many roles in various societies throughout history. She had been a wife, a mother, a farmer, a labourer, a business executive, a teacher, or a volunteer worker. Most women have combined two or more of these roles. The woman, therefore, cannot be left to be illiterate if society is to see progress. The educated mother or woman has a wonderful opportunity to have positive influence on society through posterity.

Implications for Counselling

One discovers that there is no deliberate policy of discrimination against women as far as education is concerned. Both girls and boys are exposed to the same curriculum, some out modeled habits, thoughts and ideas about women-folk notwithstanding. Counsellors can, therefore, help to educate parents to give equal opportunities to their children. Inhibitions imposed by significant others should be removed and the girl child encouraged to excel in her pursuit of education so that she can occupy a meaningful place in society.

Counsellors must endeavour to help schoolgirls, who are our women tomorrow, to resist all attempts by society to consider them "sex" objects. This resistance will help them to attain high levels of education before they are married out.

The Counsellors can also help teachers to appreciate their role as life-moulders and encourage their female students to put in their best in school. This will encourage parents to invest in their daughters more. Female teachers can be role models to schoolgirls.

The girls, who are our future women, must be helped to strengthen their self-efficacy as this will help them to work hard. In Europe, European women have developed greater access to fields of study traditionally confined to men, such as pharmacy and dentistry. Nigerian women are not exceptions.

Conclusion

This paper has theoretically appraised the issue of women education, It is discovered from material available that government has not deliberately stood against the education of women. There are, however, cultural, religious, social and personal beliefs that inhibit women in regard to education. Considering the importance of women education, one will suggest that government should make deliberate policies and enforce such, to give women greater opportunities to attain heights in education.

Women themselves must set standards for themselves and explore every possible resource within them to attain such goals. Society is changing and the woman cannot afford to remain in one place. Women have been making efforts to get into some classified male professions like pharmacy, medicine, engineering etc. But more efforts are needed.

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