

CULTURAL BARRIERS TO GENDER EQUITY IN NIGERIA: AN OBSTACLE FOR ACHIEVING EDUCATION FOR ALL

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Abstract

This paper examines the Cultural Barriers to Gender Equity in Nigeria and how it has affected education for all. It discussed fully female education as a matter of equity, social and economic trends in gender and poverty. Critical issues that will empower women were addressed and they include: increasing women's access to control over and benefit from productive assets, enabling women to have more say in community affairs and at higher political levels, increased access to rural infrastructure and services, gaining the support of men for women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming. Benefits of women education were highlighted. Strategies for change were mentioned. Conclusion was drawn and recommendations were made.

Education in its various forms has become increasingly recognized as a basic tool and means for liberation, empowerment and development (Freire, 1973). This Freire,1973 perspective of education seeks to avail learning opportunities to all people regardless of gender. The gender has been signed out as the most urgent priority recognized by the World Declaration Education for All (Fordham, 1991, in Keregore, 1995). The division of the human race into males and females is as old as humanity itself. Virtually in all cultures of the world, there has been a vivid recognition of the male-female dichotomy. Some of the difficulties facing young girls in education lend themselves to relatively simple solutions, at least in principle. However, some of the greatest obstacles to equity are located not in financial or material constraints, but in the minds of parents. Disadvantage begins in the home in many societies, customary practices and attitudes result in female education being assigned a lower value than that of male. Patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence are two such practices. For parents, they can mean that the benefits of their investment in a daughter's education will be transferred to the husbands household on her marriage, since she will leave the parental home. There is a popular expression in south east Nigeria which says that "educating a daughter is like watering another man's garden" summarizing in stark terms a widespread attitude that ascribes a low value to girls education. In some cases investing in the education of girls is seen not as a basic right or as a source of high returns, but as a potential liability.

The human costs of the crisis in education are beyond estimation. There is an unmistakable correlation between child deaths and education status of parents especially mothers. In Nigeria children of educated mothers are twice as likely to survive to their fifth birthday as are children of uneducated mothers. In a world where 12 million children die each year, no cause merits more urgent action than girls' education. Yet the gender gap in educational opportunity is closing far too slowly especially in some Northern States of Nigeria. Five years ago, the world's governments set themselves the target of reducing child death rates by two-thirds before 2015. That target will be missed without a concerted effort to close the gender gap in education (UNICEF, 1993).

Finally, in primary schools, enrolment of girls is generally lower than boys. The persistent gender gap in education reflects cultural norms, early child bearing and limited employment opportunities for women as well as traditional expectations of girls' larger contribution to household work.

Statement of the Problem

The cultural practice of early marriage places another major restriction of educational opportunity. In the Northern part of Nigeria, girls start to marry at the age of eight, by which stage few have even start school. The onset of puberty creates further problems as many parents envisage fears of pregnancy outside marriage as the reason for keeping pubescent girls at home. Such fears associated with shame and simple parental concern surface most strongly when pubescent girls have to walk long distances to school. Economic pressures often interact with cultural practices to disadvantage girls still further. In some Northern parts of Nigeria, it has been observed that parents stop sending their daughters to school for fear of losing a dowry in the event of unwanted pregnancy. They also pressurize their daughters to marry early in order to secure bride-wealth sooner than later.

Because girls in many of the poorest countries start primary school late, early marriage and pregnancy can cut short their education. School systems fail to take into account the consequences of early marriage. In Nigerian case 5 percent of the girls who do not proceed to the secondary level are usually expelled on account of pregnancy (UNICEF,1993). Changing attitudes to early marriage and dowry systems and developing more flexible attitudes towards pregnant teenagers who have not completed their education are key ingredients for reform.

Perception of the value, role, and abilities of young girls are brought into the classroom. Girls are often expected to conform to the values and norms of the male dominated society in which little or no encouragement is provided for them to develop their own aspirations (Brett, 1991; Lips, 1988). Gender differences are often reinforced by teachers. Surveys of teachers' attitudes in a variety of settings in Nigeria consistently show that most people believe girls to be less able than boys, especially in mathematics and science. Classroom surveys show that in many schools less time is spent in asking questions to girls and involving them in school activities (Keregero, 1991). Negative self-images inevitably follow, with adverse implications for performance in school tests. Biased textbooks reinforced the vicious circle, typically presenting young boys and men as adventurous, inquisitive and dominant, with girls portrayed as passives, admiring, and equipped only to play traditional roles (Nuiss, 1992; Henz, 1992).

Quality of education is another problem. Poor households make enormous efforts to provide their children with educational opportunities. But where costs are high and the perceived benefits are low, there is little incentive to allocate the households meager resources to education. In cultures where a lower value is ascribed to girls' education, financial pressures on families are likely to mean that female children will be the last into school and the first out in the event of hardship (Ressell, 1994; UNICEF, 1993).

Gender issues and socio-cultural beliefs and practices, inhibit access to education and there are wide disparities in the educational standards and learning achievements between men and women. Families prefer the education of the boys to girls (Mackenzie, 1993).

Balancing Gender Differences in Economic Development for Equity

Transformation for gender equality envisages the empowerment of women, requiring conditions that enable women to exercise their autonomy; it also envisages a process of self empowerment, in which women begin to re-examine their lives critically and collectively. While the former involves the facilitation of women's access to and control over resources, the latter emphasizes women's agency in seeking greater access and control. Measures of gender equality therefore require an assessment of the degree to which resources have been redistributed; whether state policy has facilitated women's

autonomy; and the extent to which unequal gender relations have been transformed. As such, they reflect changes in both ideology and the institutions that mediate access and control. According to Gurumurthy, A. (1998:4) Women's Status includes:

- Access to and control over private assets and resources
- Access to public resources
- Control over their labour and income
- Control over their bodies
- Control over physical mobility
- Access to and control over political spaces
- Access to and control over intangible resources-information, influence, etc.
- Position in law and access to legal structures and redress.

Control over productive resources such as land, equipment and housing is crucial to basic security. While poverty and precariousness are characteristics of poor men as well as women, traditional gender based subordination deprives almost all women, regardless of class, and across communities, of control over assets, making them extremely vulnerable. Formal and customary laws tend to limit their right to inheritance-an important means of acquiring private assets.

Social trends in Gender and Poverty

Gender – based poverty is a major feature of the African scene, one that is strongly connected to the high incidence of child poverty, and has adverse implications for the care of the elderly. The position of female headed households with no economically active male is the most severe. The lack of able bodied male labor is a key characteristic of many of the poorest Africans. However, women who manage households for absent males can also be badly hit, especially if the males do not send regular money, perhaps as a consequence of starting as second family (Anugwom,2001).

Economic Trends in Gender and Poverty

Some argue there is a feminization of poverty in Africa, contributed to by factors such as limited skills and knowledge, unfriendly market structures that concentrate women in lower paying and time consuming work and restrict their access to capital and credit, traditional family structures perpetuating gender inequity through patriarchal norms of property ownership an inheritance, discrimination in the public domain, non-recognition of the value of women's work, the permanence of debt, weak and unequal trade and economic reforms, and the rise of fundamentalism of a religious, ethnic or military kind.

Sijuade (2008) observed that economic, demographic, political trends are changing the rural landscape and affecting activities carried out by women. Agriculture is increasingly vertically integrated, coordinated and responsive to market forces. Policies of economic liberalization and privatization aim to create a macro economic environment favoring economic growth. However the gains from growth can be unequally distributed, and rural women can number among the losers since they are ill equipped to benefit from the introduction of changes in agricultural processes and the rural education and training, less time to devote to productive resources and less command over important resources such as land and capital(Soubotina,2004). In some parts of Africa, the sexual division of labour precludes women from growing crops for sale, although women remain responsible for the bulk of agricultural labour. But this does not mean that men are unproductive; they operate in social space from which women are normally excluded and are essential for production and distribution to function (Kabeer and Whitehead 1999). The gender bias is deeply rooted, it is not only ignorance of English or illiteracy that excludes women from these roles but also social norms concerning appropriate roles.

Ogbenna (2007) expressed the view that women also have less incentive with regard to control over income from their labour as well as economic assets, to respond to economic signals. For example,

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modernization and mechanization can improve farm productivity and income, but they can also reduce the need for manual labour and therefore reduce options in rural communities. In poor households, the impact of technical change on men and women is frequently different, depending on whose tasks are mechanized, how workloads are affected and who loses opportunities for paid work. To sum up one can state that poor women are confronted with three main obstacles:

- Discriminatory laws, policies and practices that impede their access to productive resources (Land, Water) and institutional support (Training, Credit, Services).
- Women's exclusion or marginal participation in organizations or in representation in public and political institutions.
- Low investments in women's economic, managerial and technical capability.

To reverse this negative process, governments and development agencies are increasingly focusing on programs to empower women. However, programs designed to alleviate the conditions of poverty through increasing the capacity of women have often been unsuccessful, providing minimal benefits and adding new responsibilities to already overworked women. In rural households where girls are fully engaged in helping to take care of younger siblings and in the transport of water and fuel wood, families cannot afford to relinquish this important contribution that the girl child is making to help the family survive; without addressing these concerns, attempts to expand girls' education will be frustrated. Similarly, literacy programs have also been touted as vehicles to empower women, but literacy of itself can do little to help women and families with their immediate needs. Consequently, it would seem naïve to ask women to spend their limited time attending literacy classes without finding ways to lessen their burden. These examples reinforce the message of this report that poverty must be tackled on several fronts. The empowerment of women cannot be achieved without representation. But the debate on gender takes place predominantly in urban centers and institutions of higher learning where poor rural women have little or no opportunity to express themselves. Are urban women's concerns representative?. Even results from participatory poverty assessments carried out in rural area are often unrepresentative because the voices heard are often those of local elites and not so poor men who have more time available to contribute to such exercises. Both urban and rural women need to participate in decisions that affect their livelihoods. Women are unlikely to improve their levels of well being while they are still marginalization and excluded from decision making processes. Gender Inequality Perpetuates and Deepens Poverty (United Nations, 2008).

Despite the essential economic and caregiving role they perform, women have significantly less access to financial, physical and social assets than men do; fewer opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills and less voice in public decision making. Women own less than 2% of all land, and receive only 5% of extension services worldwide. (FAO, 2002). It is estimated that women in Africa receive less than 10% of all credit going to small farmers and mere 1% of the total credit going to the agricultural sector (UNDP, 1995). Overall, the neglect of women's needs and rights undermines the potential of entire communities to grow and develop. Poverty is therefore deeply rooted in the glaring imbalance between what women do and what they have – in terms of both assets and rights. As women's status increases, so do the benefits to society. Studies have shown for instance that the major contributing factor to improved child nutrition is women's socio-economic status, particularly their educational levels. (IFAD, 2003:5). In addition, the countries that have closed the gender gap in education the fastest have experienced the fastest economic growth. Other studies carried out by Allen, (1987) and UNICE,(1991) have concluded that when women farmers have direct access to knowledge and technologies, crop yields increase significantly. A World Bank review found that 74% of 54 completed agricultural projects with gender related action were rated satisfactory for overall outcome, compared with 65% for the 81 projects with no gender related action. Murphy (1997). An often quoted study estimated that a specific project focus on gender increased agricultural productivity and output by more than 20%. (World Bank, 2009). Data also reveal that HIV infection rates are higher where gender gaps in literacy are larger (World Bank, 2009).

Benefits of Women Education

The multiple benefits of female education are cumulative, in that they become mutually reinforcing over time, with the advantages, transmitted across generations. It is not just likely to be more productive and healthier with attendant benefits from poverty reduction. They are also more likely to educate their own children. Here to educate their own children. Here too the benefits of material education are particularly strong. With educate mothers far more likely than uneducated mothers to send their daughters to school.

Education enhances the ability of women to control their fertility; lower population growth will also generate advantages for education. Slower growth in the school-age population will reduce pressure on the education system, and enable the government to increase spending per pupil and provide a better quality education. It follows that investing in girls education today is one of the most effective strategies for progressing towards universal primary education in the women with formal education are much more likely to use reliable family planning methods, delay marriage and child bearing, and have fewer and healthier babies than women with no formal education. It is estimated that one year of female schooling reduces fertility by 10 percent. The effect is particularly pronounced for secondary schooling.

Lowers infant and child mortality rates, women with some formal education are more likely to seek medical care, ensure their children are immunized, be better informed about their children's nutritional requirements and adopt improved sanitation practices. As a result, their infants and children have higher survival rates and tend to be healthier and better nourished.

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Lowers maternal mortality rates, women with formal educational tend have better knowledge about health care practices, are less likely to become pregnant at a very young age, tend to have fewer, better-spaced pregnancies, and seek pre and post-natal care. It is estimate that an additional year of schooling for 1,000 women helps prevent two maternal deaths.

Protect against HIV/AIDS infection. Girl's education ranks among the most powerful tools for reducing girls, vulnerability. It slows and reduces the spread of HIV/AIDS by contributing to female economic independence, delayed marriage, family planning, out work outside the home as well as greater information about the disease and how to prevent it.

Increase women's labour force participation rates and earnings, education has been proven to increase income for wage earners and increase productivity for employers, yielding benefits for the community and society.

Creates intergenerational education benefits, mothers' education is a significant variable affecting children education attainment and opportunities. A mother with a few years of formal education is considerably more likely to send her children to school. In many countries each additional year of formal education completed by a mother translates into her children remaining in school for an additional one-third to one-half year. Generally education for girls raises the average age at marriage and in the medium to long-term slows population growth.

Education enables people to improve their social cultural and economic situation and strengthens sustainable development. For every individual, education also has a value in its own right because education broadens people's horizons an helps them to live healthier more financially secure and more fulfilling lives. This is why experts use data on literacy, for example, as important indicators of the quality of life in a country.

Strategies for Change

Changing household attitudes and practices is an obvious starting point. High-level political campaign, supported by local leaders can help to improve parental awareness of the value of education

and restrict early marriage. But this requires a political commitment at the highest level of governments such as commitment is often sorely lacking. Earlier enrolment is also vital, in order to maximize the pre-puberty years spent in education. Education system in Nigeria where early pregnancies are a fact of life need to provide support to young girls rather than punitive sanctions in the form of summary expulsion.

Women teachers can provide a role model for girls a source of security for parents and a more sympathetic ear for young girls going through difficult time in their lives. In Nigeria, with gender gaps at school there is a close correlation between the presence of female teachers and the attendance of girls in classrooms.

Cost reduction is another strategy for reducing gender inequity. Because the education of girls is ~~insufficiently valued and the opportunity costs of girls labour are high, household demand for girls' education tends to be weaker the cost of education for girls and boys are similar, but girls' education is deemed less important, economic pressures will affect young girls most immediately. Reducing the costs of education can reduce the incentive for households to keep children out of school.~~

Conclusion

The gap between what exists today and the targets associated with the MDGs is great Governments, donors and civil society will have to significantly scale up investments, target them better and coordinate efforts more effectively in order to improve women's access to productive resources and essential services and to expand their role in public decision making. For their part, women and their organizations will need to acquire greater ability to mobilize themselves and to advocate – at village, state and national levels – for their own rights and those of their families. Gaining the support of men and political leaders will also be critical, should these conditions become a reality, the overall impact of reducing poverty worldwide would be enormous, bringing us closer to achieving the Millennium Development Goals for effective sustainable development.

Since it is established that women are at the heart of development, it is very important for governance to be urgently engendered, reminding us of the UN dictum that 'without engendering development, development itself is endangered.' Kevane's (2004:2) succinct summary of the plight of a large number of women and girls in Africa shows the amount of work that remains to be done to make governance and development more gendered. Kevane notes that women continue to face unequal educational opportunities; less inheritance and ownership of assets; discrimination in employment and occupations; violence at home and in public spaces; and limited political representation. These conditions result in diminished welfare and a reduced capacity to fulfil life aspirations. Much has changed since the first 1975. United Nations Conference on the Decade for Women. The World has moved from seeing women as victims, to viewing them as integral actors in transformation and change.

Recommendations

For gender inequalities to be reduced, the following are recommended for every society.

- Government or non-governmental organizations to encourage programs. These programs should view women as producers of economic development.
- Should introduce income generation activities oriented programs. These programs should see women as reducers of poverty through the production of economic goals.
- Programs for economic development should seek to develop or enhance productive roles for greater interaction in a cash economy. They should include teaching new skills or upgrading existing ones to produce marketable goods and services to be sold at market place with intention of making a profit.
- Women to have access to health care, education, services to of all kinds, credit. Jobs and participation in public life.
- Relevant information related to land policy and acquisition should be given to every member of the society. This will make women to know their right on land ownership.

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- Women to have exposure to new subjects of studies such as small business management, appropriate technology, leadership, health and basic home repairs.
- Reduced gender-linked disparities. Unequal opportunities for girls could be redressed by recruiting and training local female teachers, eliminating the male bias in curricular and related materials, providing bursaries for girls' education and locating schools closer to the communities they serve.
- Elimination of gender bias in curricular.
- Recruitment of more female teachers
- Organizing more gender-sensitive training for male teachers.
- Redesign of text-books to accommodate girls.
- Provision of adequate sanitation facilities can make a difference.
- Building of girls schools within the communities they reside in
- Schools also need to be more responsive to local realities.
- Teenage pregnancy has to be accommodated within the school system and not be punished by exclusion that is re-integrating the girls back to school after delivery.
- Social attitudes need to be changed through public information and public campaign to develop more positive attitudes to girls education.
- Incentive for girls' education in the form of bursaries, free school meals and accelerated withdrawal of fees for girls students.
- Government to encourage the formation of civil right group associations for protecting equal opportunities and educational rights of the young girls.
- Parents be encouraged to give equal attention to their children both male and female.
- Remedial courses be organized for female drop-outs from schools.
- Provision of monitoring teams.
- Provision of an effective follow up services.

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