
Current Educational Issues: Problems and Prospects (Issues in Women Education)

By

MARY E. OKONKWO
*Department of Social Studies,
Federal College of Education,
Kano.*

Abstract

Education has been described as an agent of socialization, educating a woman means educating and socializing a nation. An educated nation and socialized nation is fertile ground for development. The current way women education is pursued needs to be reformed to enable women participate effectively and efficiently in all spheres of national life. This paper examined women education in Nigeria, and highlights the burning issues in the education of women in Nigeria. In view of the above, three broad categories of the factors affecting women education/empowerment are presented and discussed. The broad categories of factors presented are economic, structural/cultural and the transformational which impede women education/empowerment. Also, the obstacles that confront women education, the prospects that exist and the way forward for the implementation of programmes that will help as well as promote women education in Nigeria was discussed.

Education has proved to be one of the most important instruments for social reconstruction and socialization. It is a crucial instrument for the development of both the individual and the nation. In the typical traditional setting, emphasis has been heavily placed on the type of education given to children based on gender. For example, boys are given education that would make them play the role of fathers and family breadwinners in future, while girls are trained to become mothers and good house keepers in future. In times past, women's role in society was basically domestic. They were expected to be good house wives and mothers passive sexual objects to be seen and not heard.

The important roles women play in nation building cannot be over-emphasized. Educate a man and you educate an individual, educate a woman and you educate a nation is a common and accepted maxim. The National Policy on Education (2004) defined education as a process which helps to develop the whole man to enable him function effectively in whatever environment he finds himself. This definition does not exclude women. Obanya, (1980) explained education in view of its functionality. To him, education is geared towards an all-round development of an individual which includes intellectual, physical, moral, emotional and social aspects as well as adoption, acquisition of vocational skills and aesthetic sense. Again, education is a human right that should be accorded to all human beings solely by reason of being human. It has been documented that schooling improves productivity, health and reduces negative features of life such as child labour as well as bringing about empowerment. This is why there has been a lot of emphasis particularly in recent times for all citizens of the world to have access to basic education. The world summit for children placed a lot of emphasis on raising the levels of female literacy.

In its broadest sense, “education” is almost synonyms with “socialization”, since both involve the passing on of culture from one person or group of another. The distinguishing feature of education in modern societies, however, is that it has become an institutionalized, formal activity. These societies deliberately organize the educational experience, make it compulsory for people in certain age groups, train specialists to act as educators, and provide locations and equipment for the teaching and learning process. For our present purposes, then, education is the systematic, formalized transmission of knowledge, skills, and values.

Women Education in Nigeria

Education is the never ending process of acquiring knowledge, skills, habits, attitude, and values which will enable those who acquire them to be able to deal with their day-to-day problems in their various societies (Ijeoma, 1992). This embraces all conscious efforts that can be brought under rule and deliberately arranged with the aim of securing some desired result. Therefore whatever helps to make individuals what they are and prevent them from being what they are not supposed to be is education.

Education therefore particularly women education involves self-realization including self awareness and the constant changing of the environment in order to create the type of surroundings that people need for their survival. Education equips and enables individuals to function effectively in any environment he or she finds him or herself. Everybody male or female, young or old, physically fit or handicapped, all need education for optimum survival in society (Ukwungwu, 2005).

Though, there is no provision made for women education either in the National Policy on Education or elsewhere to warrant its separate definition, it is presumed that whatever applies to men equally applies women in terms of all forms of education

provided for the Nigerian nation. However, Afebedeugbe, (1996) explained women education as that education which makes women become aware of themselves and their capacity to exploit their environment.

Women education is aimed at providing opportunities for women to be partners with men in over-all development of the nation. Women education aims at enlightening women to spot out those areas in national development where they can feature very well. Osinuli, (1994) further explained that women education touches on a fundamental disparity which is both ancient and global. Women occupy strategic positions in the family, the home and the nation. Women are the back-bones of men in many homes, sustaining the peace and stability of the nation through sustenance of peace and harmony in their various homes. Women train the children from the cradle to be useful members of the society. Women education aims at economic independence since one who is educated has opportunity of either being employed or being self-employed. According to the United Nations (1993), women constitute a majority of the world's population but they receive a small portion of its opportunities and benefits. Women education therefore, should be given a paramount position in the National Policy on Education for proper education of women gives rise to proper education of children and therefore, education of members of the society.

Maillard (1995) reiterated that education and training in the skills and vocations are the major factors that will lift women into places and positions which were earlier denied them as male preserves. Calplan as quoted in Lund, (1994) agreed with this assertion that education raises self-esteem, achievement of professional goals and enhances standing in the eyes of colleagues and superiors. This paper also reveals that there are more male professionals than female. No wonder Coats as quoted in Lund, (1994) while writing on women's education agitated for subversive and separatist education for women to not only bridge the existing gap, but also to control every behind-the-scene gender bias.

The Burning Issues in Women Education

The following paragraph presents a picture of position of women in developing societies looking at the evidence in various aspect of life cutting across culture, religion, health, work, education, income or economic positions, decisions-making, etc that remain crucial for human existence. In both Asia and Africa as Osmani (1998) argued for instance, the societies are regarded as classic patriarchal societies that reflect the subordinate status of women. Johnson (2005:5) stated that 'a society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being male dominated; male identified and male centered. It is also organized around an obsession with controls and involves as one of its key aspects, the oppression of women'.

The age-long notion of inferiority and other negative attributes associated with women seem to be going down as many constructive programmes such as Family Support Programmes, Skill-Acquisition Programmes (SAP), Women Empowerment

Movement and National Council for Women Societies (NCWS) etc are made available to women. But what will these programmes achieve in the lives of many women where issues such as high illiteracy rate, cultural barriers, discrimination against women in the areas of employment, types and levels of education abounds.

The following issues must be addressed and managed properly for any meaningful progress to be made in the area of women education.

High Illiteracy Rate

Illiteracy in general, has been described as a cog-in-the-wheel of national development. Callwood, (1990:33) stated that people who are illiterate are derogatively described as chained in prison, disabled, caged and blinded victims experiencing only death in life. These are the images often associated with women.

Dashi (2004) further explained that high rate of illiteracy among women in developing nations especially Africa is occasioned by the erroneous stereo- type preference given to male education over their female counterparts. In some parts of Nigeria for example, girls are given chance for education and such chances are cut short as soon as they reach 'marriageable' age which is usually thirteen to fifteen years. Sadly, most girls sacrifice their secondary school education on the alter of early marriage only to realize that the primary education they received is very inadequate to enable them carry out efficiently and effectively their expected roles as mothers or carry out any job outside the home environment.

Cultural Barriers

Certain roles are designed along gender line such that children are trained from infancy to assume roles expected of them, women education has emphasized household activities like child rearing, food preparation, clothing and household work. Thus, a woman is passive, subjective and remains under a man and is unable to exercise her rights and capabilities.

Some societies also believe that it is an abomination to train a woman. Such societies feel that a woman's place should be in the home, caring for and rearing the children. In some low-income families, parents prefer to spend their hard-earned resources on boys than to spending them on girls' education. Some believe that once a female is educated, she will be difficult to control and could become loose and immoral. Some families regard women education as a waste of resource since they are often considered other people's property. Such families prefer giving their daughters in marriage to spending money on their education. Financial constraints have also led many young women into obscure relationships which expose them to the risk of pregnancies, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases thus leading to dropout of school.

The traditional society considers woman as a second-class citizen. Responsibilities such as child bearing and home management, assisting in farm work

and fishing pods are the roles assigned to women by the traditional society and culture. The primary assignment given to women by culture is to bear and rear children, cook food and take care of the home. Adeyanju, (1995) however explained that many women have started shaking off the shackles of the bonds of cultural roles and beliefs about what they are supposed to be and how to achieve heights in those areas regarded as men prerogatives. In other words, women have seen education as a way out of the more or less global stigma against womanhood as well as an opportunity for self fulfillment. But inspite of this awareness and enlightenment of women, the roles assigned to women by tradition and culture still over-shadows other roles they wish to play in the society so as to contribute their quota in the national development.

There is also this negative belief by some men that the more educated a woman is, the less useful she would be at home hence, some men feel reluctant in getting married to highly educated women. Such men are of the opinion that highly educated women would not be submissive to their husbands at home. Because of these, educated women are not easily married in some areas and in order not to remain unmarried, they might prefer marriage to education. This wrong idea should be discouraged since education makes a person to function more effectively and efficiently.

Transformational Factors

Stressing the significance of awareness and consciousness in relation to women empowerment, Oduaran and Okukpon (1997) had argued that for women to play productive roles they should have the opportunity to understand the factors that create the subordination and discrimination they suffer from.

In addition, education may be a route to empowerment (Kabeer, 2005). However, its access by women also remains curtailed in societies characterized by extreme gender inequality. According to Kabeer (2005:17) 'Women's role in society is defined purely in terms of reproductive terms, education is seen in terms of equipping girls to be better wives and mothers, or increasing their chances of getting a suitable husband.' Different attitudes towards males and females by teachers in Africa on the basis that males need careers and females need husbands have been reported as an obstacle (Kabeer, 2005). Moreover, school curriculum portrays girls as passive, modest and shy, while boys are seen as assertive, brave and ambitious.

Religious Factors

Religious teaching generally in Nigeria especially both Christianity and Islam emphasize teachings that encourage women to be taught more on areas that make them good mothers and wives and to be submissive to their husbands.

In Islamic religion, there is extreme case of Pudah system where women are secluded and the opportunity of giving them formal education becomes very difficult. This condition does not encourage at least basic education for the women.

Prospects of Women Education

Fortunately, inspite of problems facing women education programmes, many organizations at the grassroots, national and international levels are devising new initiatives aimed at expanding women opportunities. Here in Nigeria in the recent times, non-governmental and international agencies have risen to the challenge to save women education from total collapse. Some activities have been put in place to salvage women education. Prominent among them is the establishment of National Association of Women in Science, Technology and Mathematics (NAWSTEM). Through this association, many female students have been encouraged to go into science-based courses which in time past, were exclusive to men. Also, the Federal Ministry of Education created Science, Technology and Mathematics (STM) awards for deserving science students. This exercise exerted a big influence and encouragement on women education as it led to healthy competitions among female students.

Again, the Skill Acquisition Programs (SAP) is another way of providing marketable skills and need for employment initiated by the government. Skill acquisition which is the act of acquiring practical ability and knowledge with less emphasis on theoretical training develops trainees' ability and perception of certain skills required in different trades (Diigbo, 1989). Also entrepreneurship education into the school curriculum will be of great help to women.

Furthermore, wives of presidents of Nigeria at different points in their reigns have raised hope for women by gearing their main activities towards women empowerment. For instance, the Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW) programme founded by Maryam Babangida with its main objective as empowerment of rural women socially, economically and politically (Nwonwu, 2002). The Family Support Programme (FSP) and later Family Economic Advancement Program (FEAP) initiated by Mrs. Mariam Abacha and established by the federal government of Nigeria in 1988 and so many others.

Also, the creation of women education unit in 1986 in the Federal Ministry of Education with the sole aim of creating public awareness of the need of women education is an encouraging step taken by the government.

Way Forward

For implementation of women education programme to receive attention and reasonable consideration, it requires that various stakeholders in education should be involved and partnership with one another. To really get women education improved the following points are recommended:

- 1. Parents**

All families should consider girl-child education as a matter of priority. Women who are adults and missed formal education should take advantage of the literacy programmes being mounted by government because there is no age limit in education.

In certain families, women education is highly disregarded. Most girl children are denied education in preference to male children. Some parents send their female children as house-helps to other families in order to raise money to pay for the education of the male children. Awareness campaign should be given to parents as to the benefit of the education to the girl-child. Mothers have a powerful role to play in particular in counseling their daughters on cultural values of sexuality and reproductive health issues.

2. Government

Government should take to the grassroots all programmes aimed at enhancing economic empowerment of women and or families. Government should use her various media/ organs to sensitize the public, parents and women in general on the value of education especially school drop-outs and ex-pregnant girls as this can empower them to be self reliant and so contribute to their family and nation building. The government should ensure universal and equal access of primary education by all children and eliminate the existing gap between girls and boys. There should be legislation against the withdrawal of girls from school for marriage. They should develop training programmes and materials for teachers and educators, raising awareness about their own role in the educational process, with the view to providing them with effective strategies for gender sensitive teaching. The government, employers and trade unions should enact and enforce laws and develop work place policies against gender-discrimination in the labour market, in hiring and promotion and in the extension of employment benefits and social security.

The mass media of all types and channels should be mobilized to address the realities of gender equality, gender imbalance and the need to bridge gender-gap. Those leadership positions dominated by male incumbents should be gradually include female, it is necessary that gender integration be introduced into every human organization especially the educational system.

Also the writer recommends that gender bias and that of the negative chain of women under representation especially in education be broken. The major need for this calls for rationalization of gender difference in the selection and recruitment of management staff for education. Women of contemporary civilized societies are quickly bringing to bare the fact that humanity has entered a period where certain

beliefs and options of yester-years are no longer workable and realistic. In essence, the Nigerian society as well as her institutions should practically acknowledge that systematic efficiency is outside a single sex dominion.

Stereotyped ideologies, tactful discriminations against women irrespective of statutory recognition for gender equality; different beliefs and assumptions held by men and women about themselves and for one another be tackled in a most objective manner.

Girls of today are the women of tomorrow. The skills, ideas and energy of girls are vital for full attainment of the goals of equality, development and peace. For a girl to develop her full potential, she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment where her needs for survival, protection and development are met and her equal rights safeguarded. If women are to be equal partners with men, now is the time to recognize the human dignity and worth of the girl child and to ensure her human rights and fundamental freedom.

Conclusion

Women education has always raised dust in various quarters as it is seen as a challenge to men chauvinism and in some places especially in Africa, a misplaced priority. This is because for some men folk, women education is supposed to start and end in the Kitchen. As a result, women education is been clouded by so many problems.

Women education is a potent tool for re-directing and re-focusing the national economy for sustainability. Now is the time to match policy statements and programmes concerning women education with action.

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