
Women Education: A Solution to Gender Inequality in Decision Making in Nigeria

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Abstract

Women education will go an extra mile in fostering women's participation in decision making fora. The issue of women education has assumed global importance because of women being relegated to the background in decision making by their male counterparts. Women are regarded as the dregs of the society, an entity that should be seen not heard. In Nigeria, a large number of women feel subdued by male dominance in all fields of endeavour to men. This paper therefore focused on how women education could be encouraged to place women alongside their male counterparts in the decision making area, as well as encourage them to improve their self worth: by participating in developmental programmes, community development, and curbing of anti-women socio-cultural imperatives. It therefore recommended that government and non-governmental programmes be structured to boost women educational prowess as well as abolition of socio-cultural practices intended at toning down the image of women while education should be made accessible to women of all ages and class.

Education is a vehicle for transformation. It enhances socio-economic development of a nation. Quality education helps individuals to develop their potentials and adds value to lives. According to Madumere-Obike and Ukala (2012), quality education helps people give meaning to their lives, placing them in the context of human and natural history and creates in them an awareness which should protect them from violence and abusive form of employment. As a matter of fact, everyone has the right to education.

In Nigeria, the practice of inequality is experienced in all facets of life including education. It begins from the home, penetrates the society then to the nation. Inequality is experienced in the key areas like decision making, participation in politics, participation in social activities as well as in education. In Nigeria, women education is facing lots of criticism and challenges. The attitude of most parents towards educating their female children is poor. This can be attributed to factors ranging from cultural norms, religion, socio-economic status of parents, biological disposition and social security to government policy. For instance, in the Nigerian traditional setting, it is believed that the place of a woman is in the kitchen, even when they are educated; they are expected to study courses that are feminine in nature. Such courses include those in health or education industry. A lot of fathers also believe that exposing their girls to western education tends to make them deviate from their cultural value of a lady not being promiscuous and not having good moral standard. With this, many families are afraid of sending their girl child to school for fear that they might get pregnant outside wedlock thereby bringing shame to the family's name. On the other hand, boys especially in low income home may be chosen and sometimes forced to attend school at the expense of the girl even when the girl-child is more talented and more gifted (Madumere-Obike and Ukala 2012). Therefore, to achieve female participation and equal educational right, women need to be liberated, educated, motivated, celebrated and elevated in places where they are more often repressed than respected.

Women Education

Women education is imperative to national development. It improves on their decision making ability. Robert-Okah (2011) observed that women education involves getting the woman to understand, recognize and further the power within her for the improvement of her life and situation. It is a process which is both on-going and dynamic and which enhances their ability to effect changes in those structures, practices and cultural elements which tend to relegate them to subordinate status. Women education will assist women gain more access to information and resources; become more active in the social process, especially participating in decision-making in areas that affect their lives as members of the human community; gain more control over their lives and become autonomous of domination and control by men.

Women education in developing countries require putting in place more structures and affirmative action that are geared towards removing all the social, cultural, economic and religious impediments that stand on the way to women's access to education. Empowerment programmes are usually geared towards addressing the following impediments to women participation in social development:

1. poverty alleviation and control of productive resources;
2. gainful employment;
3. childcare and child rearing;
4. social awareness and conscientization (Robert-Okah, 2011).

Women education in essence, is aimed at equipping women with skills that are basic to their survival in life generally. Dagana (2003) asserted that women education may take varied dimensions to include such activities as individual self-assertion, collective bargaining or ability to challenge existing power relations in the society.

Factors Militating Against Women Education in Decision Making Socio-Cultural Factor

Socio-cultural factor is one of the impediments to women education. The Nigerian culture and tradition places women at the least position in decision making. Women are believed to be relevant only in home management and house keeping, with such responsibilities as fetching water and wood for fuel, cooking, cleaning, farming and perhaps trading as their career.

It is culturally considered that the primary role of a woman is that of a wife and mother; as a result of this, women are subjected to childbearing and training that it becomes difficult for them to be given cultural, social or economic responsibilities/roles to handle. Also, because of the inequality that exists in the home, most women develop negative perception of themselves. Some see themselves as slaves who should not have a say in the family. Moreso, the payment of bride price lead to the idea of ownership of the woman, the exchange of bride price being evidence of a commercial transaction. The bride price symbolizes sale of the girl and ownership by her husband and family. (Oboh, 2009).

According to Osaat (2011), the woman is not allowed to participate in her paternal or maternal affairs even in her marital family affair. The woman is always referred to as 'just a woman', if she tries to make any contribution that may concern the development of her family. Infact she is seen as the dreg of the society, one that should only be seen and not heard. Under much consideration can a woman be allowed to partake in decision making if she is educated, and that will be on only flimsy issues. At her husband's death, the female is always subjected to difficult times while the male is not questioned or tortured at the loss of the wife. There is also high preference for

male children who are regarded as heir to family properties. The male child is often times allowed to partake in decision making affecting the entire family while his mother and other female children are excluded. This makes the male child to assume authority over his senior sisters and some times over his mother but the female child according to Osaat (2011), assumes the place of servitude, which of course she learns from the mother. In the society this continues as the males are allowed to take up leadership and political roles while the females are seen as only fit for motherhood and as such cannot take positive decisions. Women's decisions are always regarded as 'non-sense'.

Women are highly marginalized and these leads to loss of self confidence hence women education should be fostered right from their parental homes. A girl child should be celebrated right from birth then diffused through into the society. There should be gender equity in decision making right from the family, women should be given the opportunity to participate in the decision affecting their families and children, they should not be treated with disdain; there should be no occasion where members of the society looks at the woman as being too feeble to take positive decision. With marriage or not, a female child should be seen as a great asset not only to the family but the society at large.

Religious Factor

Another major factor that impedes women education in decision making is religion. Looking closely at the place of women in the two major religions of the world – Christianity and Islam from the point of view of the rights of women in their Holy books, the attitude of their founders towards women reveals that there is discrimination against women with respect to decision making. Although, Christianity and the Bible come with a message of freedom, liberation from bondage, some Churches and their members still place women in a position where they should neither be heard nor seen.

Solomon (2010) established that Bible-believing Christians and Churches have ignorantly misinterpreted or intentionally misused the scripture to justify a prejudiced view of women. Sadly, many Christian women defend these views either because they are intimidated by male dominated religious system that claims that God's favour rests only on men or because they have swallowed the male opinion that women are second-class citizens in Christ's kingdom or worst still, have refused to create time to study the Bible to themselves due to house-chores.

On the contrary, Solomon (2010) Jesus Christ has modeled a revolutionary new paradigm of women emancipation by affirming women as co-heirs of God's grace and proving in so many ways that in the kingdom of God, there is no gender hierarchy. Unfortunately, the Church throughout the centuries has not adopted this perspective of

gender equality. Patriarchal attitudes in early Church fathers led to the theology that women were put on earth simply to serve in the home, oblige the husband at his demands, bear children and not to have a say or be a part of the family decisions, the Church should consent to Galatians 3:28 which says: 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male nor female, for you are one in Christ Jesus'. The Church really needs to arise and accept this teaching of Christ and place women rightly in decision making as this will give room for women to be heard and their views respected. Hence, if such education begins from the Church, then it will definitely permeate families and the society.

Islamic religion also places the man in a place of authority over the woman in all respects. Solomon (2010) observed that the many opportunities denied women under Islamic law from giving equal testimony in court, to having the right to exclude other wives from their marital bed, is a very clear proof that women are of lesser value than men in Islam. Muslim women are not even free to marry outside their faith without being killed by their own families. Islamic law also specifies that when a woman is murdered by a man, her family is owed only half as much 'blood money' as they would be if she had been a man. Islamic religious rules and obligations place undue sanctions on women. For instance, a man retains custody of his children in the case of his wife's death; a non-Muslim woman will automatically lose custody of her children in the event of her husband's death. She is forced to convert to Islam or marries a male relative within his family. Even the rights of Muslim mothers are subject to her husband's family.

All these sanctions place the women in a tight corner where they are not allowed to decide for themselves nor their families; they are seen as slaves as documented in the Holy Quran: Sura 2:228, Sura 4:176. Muslim women are sex objects for men (Sura 2:223). The Quran in Sura (4:34) also permits wife battery by the husband (Solomon, 2010). All these laws also makes the Muslim women see themselves as being too inferior to decide for themselves talk less of their children and families. Hence, there is a dire need to involve the women in family and societal decision making as this will foster and enhance national development.

Strategies for Eradicating Gender Inequality in Education

1. Developmental Programmes

Equating women with men in decision making arena is one issue that can never be over-flogged. Despite all agitation put forward by researchers, lecturers, writers, speakers, thinkers, visionaries, strategists, workers and socialites. The men still remain undaunted in issues of women equality.

Women education as crucial as it is, it is highly beneficial and contributes to over all development of the nation either in terms of promoting of health care or generation of income, social welfare and security, the role of women cannot be over emphasized, Nduigwomen (2004) stated that women education generally lags behind men education because women are believed to be subservient who only end up in marriage and kitchen. In some part of the country if not all, women education was regarded as a waste of money, time, effort and resources by her family as a woman will end up in a another man's house thus relegating the woman to the background.

Gone are the days when parents and communities were training their children to take over their business – mainly farming and home keeping by fathers and mothers respectively; boys aspired to become fishermen and farmers like their fathers while girls aspired to be good housewives and home-makers. Women should embrace the dynamism of time and work towards global changes in the economy. They should avail themselves by participating in all developmental programmes available for the development and emancipation of women into the social strata. They should avail themselves of all the developmental programmes made available to them by government and non-governmental organizations. Government should:

1. launch mass literacy campaign to educate women on their present state and how their dignity can be restored through education.
2. women from educated families should help the uneducated ones by brushing them up through encouragement.
3. the curriculum should have local relevance; like provision of reading, writing, literacy skills and new technology should be provided to suit different settlement.
4. the use of mass media should be encouraged but most importantly should be the establishment of local face to face evening schools to educate the rural women. Oboh (2005) affirmed that literacy training should contribute to higher earnings and improve the living conditions of rural women; thus helping them to escape poverty, marginalization and inferiority complex. As stated by (Obi 1999), literacy skills will create awareness that will expose their ignorance and improve that present; because the means of equalizing, empowering and organizing women to be co-partners with men in decision making arena is literacy skills.

National Gender Policy 2.5.2 (objective 2) in Nigeria is aimed at “Removing all gender based barriers (including tenure, security access to credit and input facing women in agricultural production and enhance visibility productivity, valuation and documentation of women work in the agricultural sector by 2010 (National Gender Policy, 2006).

The policy also has an objective to educate and sensitize all stakeholders on centrality of gender equality and women empowerment to attainment of overall national development with a target of guaranteeing equal access of woman, girls and boys to the formal and informal education and skills development opportunities, through special programmes and initiatives by 2015 (National Gender Policy, 2006). This is an indication that the government of Nigeria acknowledges the role of education, so women should avail themselves by participating in these lofty programmes be they formal or non-formal to develop themselves to equate the men in decision making arena.

2. Community Development

A study of the census result in the country reveals that female constitutes about 50% of the population. The female population is an important factor to reckon with in socio-economic terms. Therefore, basic education for women is justified on ethical and humanitarian grounds as right, good and fair. Education enables people to develop their capacities to live a fulfilling and dignified life. The Beijing conference Declaration in 1995 which Nigeria is a signatory specifically stated that about 30 percent of all political appointments have to be reserved for women by all the state signatories. In support of the Beijing Conference is the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) all upheld the 30 percent women participation in government. Then what happens to the 70 percent? It is reserved for the men, why? This is because women shy away from community responsibilities; they believe it is an exclusive right of the men to decide for them who constitute the largest part of the community.

Women have become an issue of concern as reflected in a number of international conventions on how to improve the poor living conditions of women in the world. Such international conventions like the Universal Declaration of Human Right in 1948, the United Nations Conference in Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against women in 1989, as well as the International Labour Organization's Discriminations on equality of opportunities and treatment for women workers in 1975, all agitating for better life for women, but all to no avail. Self worth and self dignity lies within the woman. There is always a training point in life, a reawakening. Even though nature has placed the woman as a help-mate for the man, and the woman to submit to the husband, it never placed the woman as an underdog.

Women if educated will certainly contribute remarkably in enhancing the level of women's literacy, so educated women should with the wealth of their educational attainment, rise up, design programmes that will bring them to the lime light. Women education will also help in enhancing the social status of women in Nigeria, in the like of Prof. (Mrs) Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Mrs O. K. Ezekwesili, Prof. Dora Akiunjili, all

the female Professors and lecturers, media practitioners. Infact all the female professionals should stand up and take their rightful place in community development.

Women professionals should partner and establish more Non-governmental Organizations which will help recreate the less privileged and infact the rural women by empowering them financially as this will emancipate them in their various community development projects. Hence, Aruma (2006) opined that partnering to promote literacy for empowerment is now obvious in order to enable people to realize their potentials in the society. The less privileged women or uneducated women should be encouraged to embrace the ongoing adult education programmes for “knowledge is power”.

Female professionals should kick against the Beijing (1995) 30 percent political participation in politics. They should agitate for 50 percent to place women alongside the male, as contained in the Federal Republic of Nigeria constitution (1999). Finally women should support their fellow women in leadership in order to sustain gender equity.

Conclusion

Education of women is very vital to national development. The biggest challenge in promoting women participation in education in Nigeria and Africa as a whole is how to change the societal female perception in a male-dominated. Women education is suppose to be one of the vocal points of the Nigerian government effort if a literate society is envisaged.

Recommendations

The government should have a deliberate and practical policy that will encourage women to develop interest in education. This can be done through provision of scholarships, free textbooks, uniforms, lunch, etc. There is need for more girls' schools; this will enable the girls to develop their potentialities without the boys' dominance.

There is also need for comprehensive enlightenment public programmes (especially for those in the rural areas) about the ills of our culturally held views about girl-child education. They should know that women education is very important because when you educate a man, you educate an individual, but when you educate a female, you educate the nation.

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