

WOMEN EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT. A CASE OF AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The importance of women education is undisputable, but in Akwa Ibom State, certain people believe that it is a waste of time and resources. However, the pointer to social and technological development and advancement of any society depend on the educational development of the populace. It therefore means that if a nation wishes to progress, such a nation must educate both genders. Thus the role of women in national development with particular reference to Akwa Ibom State cannot be over emphasized. It is a tool for sustainable national development. This paper examined some of the contributory factors hindering women enrolment into higher institutions of learning. One research question was formulated to guide this study. The study sample consisted of two thousand four hundred and eighty women selected from various socio-political women organizations from the thirty-one Local Government Areas of the state. These women respondents were those who had read up to senior secondary three. Many of them with at least five credit passes including Mathematics and English Language minimum qualification for admission into any programme of study at the tertiary institution. The checklist tagged "Women Education Questionnaire (WEC)" had two sections A and B with five and eleven test statements respectively. The data obtained were coded and analyzed using simple percentage. The findings of the study revealed that job expectation, skill preference, marriage preference, attitude of spouses, gender stereotype, lack of funds, phobia for school, issues from children, flare, role model and coping were contributory factors to low enrolment of women into higher institutions of learning. Conclusions were drawn and recommendations made based on the findings of this study.

It is a widely accepted fact that the main pointer to social and technological development of any nation is the level of educational development and attainment of its citizens. The role that education plays in the improvement of the equality of lives of the people, acceptance of economic growth, harnessing of human intellect and potentials, realization of political stability, appreciation of tolerance and the institution of peace and unity cannot be quantified.

Over the years, Nigeria has expressed serious commitment to education with special attention and emphasis on education of women. Women educational attainment is still low, as records have shown that fewer girls go to school than boys. The gender gap is said to be widened as girls move up the formal education ladder (Obanya, 2007). As estimated by Obanya, fifty percent (50%) of Nigeria's population is made up of women and girls. This is to say that over 70 million Nigerians are women and girls. Thus, for Nigeria to experience meaningful, and sustainable development, this large female population cannot be ignored. It appears the real issues have not been properly and appropriately addressed. One area or factor that seems not to have been explored is the issue of gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are referred to a collection of commonly held beliefs or opinions about behaviours and activities considered by society as appropriate for male and female. Thus according to Perry and Pauletti (2011) gender stereotypes are people's beliefs about how the sexes differ (descriptive stereotype) or should differ (prescriptive stereotype). Gender stereotypes refer to socio-cultural beliefs and practices, which tend to limit or hinder the women's right to education.

Education is the process through which individuals acquire adequate and appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and behaviour necessary to function optimally as a citizen (Okon, 2014). Knowledge, skills and self-confidence acquired would help such individuals to be competitive in the world that requires them to be more productive economically, politically and socially. In other words, education is viewed as a gateway to social, political and economic development of a nation. It is also the belief that no nation can develop without proper formal education of its citizenry since education is regarded as the bedrock of all facets of development of a country (Anho, 2011). Archibong and Okon (2011) opined that education is one of the most important factors that facilitate and foster effective attainment of social, political, and economic strengths for national development. Education is a crucial sector in any developing nation like Nigeria. Being a major investment in human capital development, it plays an essential role in long term productivity and growth of the populace.

Based on these facts, the benefits from educated women in Akwa Ibom State in particular, and Nigeria in general, as co-partners in the project of national development cannot be overemphasized. Nigeria needs contributions from well meaning individuals for national development; gender notwithstanding. The desire of all Nigerians is to place this country in the right position in the committee of Nations and this could be achieved through education.

The importance of education in the opinion of Ikpe (2005) is that it creates opportunities and choices for the individuals, offering chances to improve standard of living while creating citizens or populace who are skillful, sensible, reasonable, well-informed and equipped to help Nigeria achieve economic and social prosperity. Education is good for intellectual development, decency, literacy, virtue as well as

knowledge. In addition, education should produce individuals who would use their intelligence to benefit others as well as themselves, so as to build a better world.

In Akwa Ibom State today, the women folk have made some impacts in businesses, politics, banking, education among others, but the number is still negligible. Women education is one of the most effective and efficient ways of ending poverty in developing nations like Nigeria. Many more women are still being limited and this has placed them on the disadvantaged position and status. To say the least, all is still not yet well with Nigerian women as far as education is concerned. This explains why we continue to talk about health problem, educational, economic, political, social, and cultural empowerment of women. Timothy (2014) asserted that in addition to all these, women have been dehumanized and traumatized, thus reducing them to abject poverty. The implication of this is that to these women poverty means not only scarcity and want, but also denial of rights, opportunities, limited and to be seen but not heard. In all these too, poverty means powerlessness, no education, voiceless, lack of representation, lack of freedom and enslavement (Unagha, 2006). Many women encounter or face these challenges.

However, access of women to educational development programmes as opined by Kagitiabias, Goksen and Golgoz (2005) is considered as one of the main factors for women empowerment and national development. Ifedili and Ifedili (2012) asserted that Nigerian women are hindered by gender stereotype, which has made them vulnerable to effectively join the workforce and contribute meaningfully and positively to the economic, political and social national development.

The meaning of national development has been given by several authors based on their backgrounds. National development could be viewed from economic, political, social and cultural angles. In whatever way one views it, it portrays positive change and development in the socioeconomic and political situations of a particular society. According to Timothy (2014), development is a process of economic social, political and cultural changes engineered in a given society by the efforts of all stakeholders both internal and external. Osokoya (2008) viewed national development as the advancement of a country's human and material resources. Osokoya went further to stress that, education is perhaps the only means of preparing individuals for full participation in national development. In other words, education is the only channel through which national development could be linked. Thus education is the only means by which national development could be achieved.

Development as viewed by Okon (2014), in any human society is a many-sided process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well being. To Ekpo (2010), no matter how much is said about the virtue of seeking knowledge or the love of learning, the primary function of education in any country is that of preparing people for occupational roles for national development. Almost all occupational roles demand some literacy and some kinds of specialized training for meaningful contributions

toward national development. Timothy (2014) viewed development in terms of human potentials and capabilities in the context of relations with other social groups. Timothy further emphasized that development means greater understanding of social, political and economic process, enhanced, competence to understand the situation, solve problems of human existence associated with day-to-day living, extension of manual skills, greater control over economic resources, restoration, respect for human dignity, self-respect/control and equal right.

Human development involves most basic capabilities and competencies to live along healthy lives, to be knowledgeable about events and situations around, to have access to both human and material resources needed for a decent standard of living, and to be able to participate positively and meaningfully in the community. Thus gender stereotype relate strongly to differences between women and men in education in particular, health, labour, political participation, decision making, access to and power over finances (Timothy, 2014). Therefore, national development is viewed as a multi-dimensional process involving transformation and improvement of the economic, social and political situations of a country.

By the opinion of Olomukoro (2012) literacy is not just the ability to read and write, but also include the ability to use both printed and written information to function in a society in order to achieve one's goals in life and to develop one's knowledge and potentials. Olomukoro observed that to be literate is not just to master the skills of reading, writing and computing with figures, but also entails the ability to use those skills effectively and efficiently for communication in all facets and spheres of one's life such as social, cultural economic and political endeavours. Literacy is a fundamental skill which empowers women to take control of their own lives, to engage directly with authority and to access the wider world of learning. Researches indicate that there is a direct, positive correlation between women's education and increasing children's chances of surviving so that they, in turn, become healthier and better educated.

To further establish the link between education and development, Imhabekhai and Olomukoro (2007) pointed out that literacy is a basic building block or instrument for social transformation and modernization in this 21st century. Education influences the rate of development in Akwa Ibom State in particular and Nigeria in general. Its acquisition or otherwise facilitates or hinders the level of development. Therefore any society which neglects women (considering their vast population) in her human resource development cannot achieve any meaningful development.

Education is the panacea for development. In other words, development cannot take place without education. Ekpo (2010) argued that for development to occur, an educated and enlightened populace is required. Ekpo expressed that the difference between the developed and underdeveloped countries of the world is judged by the rate of literacy among the citizens. Education is the foundation for sustainable national development, the tool for mental decolonization of Nigerians, and Africans and a

propeller for civilization. To buttress Ekpo's expression, Udoidiong (2014) stated that investing in women education carries high gains and benefits. It improves livelihood, reduces inequality, increases productivity and earnings, improves health and nutrition, reduces infant and child mortality rate, reduces maternal rate and favours girl child access to education. When women are educated it is the society that gains. After all the popular adage says, when you educate a woman, you educate the world. Importance of education as an agent of socialization cannot be overemphasized because of the tremendous role it plays in preparing the individuals to render active, useful services to the family and larger society.

It is obvious that education wipes away ignorance, political apathy and encourages mutual understanding and cooperation among various groups of people in the society. It is therefore through the education of women that governments at all tiers achieve their laudable goals and objectives through public enlightenment programmes and campaigns. The most immediate measurable form of economic benefit is being co-partners with their spouses in maintaining and keeping the family going (Udoidiong, 2014).

The empowering ability of women education can translate into political involvement. This contributes positively to the quality of public policies and to democracy. It is obvious that educated people especially are more likely to vote during elections and exhibit tolerant attitudes and maintain democratic values. In addition Egbo (2000) asserted that literate women have been known to contribute to the political stability and peace of Akwa Ibom State, and the nation. Egbo explained that educated women who are involved in politics are able to contribute their knowledge to national unity, transformation, reconstruction, positive change and development.

From this write up, it could be seen that women education can render ineffective the traditional belief that the place of a woman is in the kitchen. It has also revealed that in this 21st century of the computer/digital age, women are a force to reckon with in the political, social, and economic endeavours of the nation. The role of educated women in Akwa Ibom State should go beyond the kitchen and should extend to all spheres of human activities in the development of Akwa Ibom State and indeed Nigeria.

Despite all the above benefits of education to women and the entire nation, enrolment of women into tertiary level of education is not quite impressive. It is against this background that this paper sought to investigate the possible contributing factors to this low enrolment.

Statement of the Problem

Why has the situation of low enrolment of Akwa Ibom State women into tertiary educational institutions persisted despite efforts by the government, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individual awareness campaigns to boost women education over the years?

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to examine the contributory factors to low enrolment of women of Akwa Ibom State into higher institutions. Specifically, this study aimed at investigating the possible contributory factors of low enrolment of Akwa Ibom State women into higher educational institutions.

Research Question

In order to guide this study, this research question was formulated. What are the contributory factors to poor enrolment of Akwa Ibom women into tertiary institutions?

Design of the Study

The research study adopted survey design. It is because survey design aims at determining the nature of the situation as it exists at a particular time of investigation. It is appropriate for this study because it is concerned with ascertaining and establishing status quo factors or pieces of information as at the time of research and presenting such information as they are (Uche, 2013).

Population of the Study

There are thirty one (31) Local Government Areas in Akwa Ibom State. Each Local Government Area has at least one socio-political women group or organization. These groups could be identified, by their various names as Nka Uforo Iban, Nka Idorenyin Iban among others. They have their banners with various inscriptions, and uniforms for occasions, ceremonies and other outings. Membership is for the women who are twenty five years and above. Most of them are married. These women more often than not showcase themselves to prove how relevant they are in the society. There are not less than two hundred (200) women members in each of the groups in the Local Government Areas. Therefore the population of this study consisted of 6,200 women from different groups in the 31 Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State in April, 2016.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample size for this study was 2,480 women selected from each of the Local Government Areas. Eighty women were chosen from each of the Local Government Areas to give the sample size of 2480 for this research study. Any woman who was within the age range of 25 and 35 and had read up to senior secondary three was chosen. Many of them have basic admission requirement of five credits including Mathematics and English for tertiary education.

Instrument

The instrument for this research work was a checklist tagged “Women Education Checklist (WEC)”. The instrument had two sections, A and B. Section A had

five items which sought information on the respondents' bio data, while section B had eleven item statements that reflected on the reasons for not enrolling for admission into tertiary institution. They included job expectation, skill preference, marriage preference, attitude of spouses, and gender stereotype among others. This instrument was validated by experts in Test, Measurement and Evaluation unit in the Department of Educational Foundations, Guidance and Counselling, of the Faculty of Education, University of Uyo, Uyo. The reliability was established by administering the instrument on other women who were not selected for this study. Cronbach's alpha reliability co-efficient estimated at 0.76 was established.

Administration of the Instrument

The researcher personally administered the instrument on the participants in the afternoon during their normal meetings. The checklist was self explanatory. This exercise took about seven weeks and the retention rate was 100%. The data obtained were coded and analyzed using simple percentage.

Results

The research question for this study sought to establish the contributory factors to low enrolment of Akwa Ibom women into higher institutions of learning. Data were analyzed using simple percentage and the results are presented thus in the Table below.

Table showing contributing factors to low women enrolment for admissions into tertiary institutions of learning

Factors	No. of	%	No. of	%	Total N	Total %
	Yes		No			
Job expectation	1,692	68	788	32	2,480	100%
Skill preference	2,003	81	477	19	2,480	100%
Marriage preference	658	26	1,822	74	2,480	100%
Attitude of spouses	1,122	45	1,358	55	2,480	100%
Gender stereotype	2,034	82	446	18	2,480	100%
Lack of funds	985	40	1,495	60	2,480	100%
Phobia for school	1,504	61	976	39	2,480	100%
Issues from children	722	29	1,758	71	2,480	100%
Flare	1,008	41	1,472	59	2,480	100%
Role model	993	40	1,487	60	2,480	100%
Coping	807	32	1,673	68	2,480	100%

The result on the Table above showed that gender stereotype (82%) was the highest contributing factor to low women enrolment for admission into tertiary institutions. Followed closely was skill preference with 81%, job expectation 68%, while phobia for

school had 61%. Attitude of spouses had 45%, flare 41%, role model 40%, lack of funds 40%, issues from children 29%, coping only 32% and marriage preference 26%.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study revealed gender stereotype as the reason for low enrolment of women into tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State. The participants overwhelmingly indicated that gender stereotype (82%) was the major factor that hinders women from enrolling into higher institutions of learning. This finding is supported by Perry and Pauletti (2010) who asserted that gender stereotypes have considerable influence on women education. Akwa Ibom women are discouraged from attending higher education because cultural bias keeps them at bay from competing with the male. Again Ifedili and Ifedili (2012) identified gender stereotype as a factor hindering women from attending school.

Skill preference (81%) has been shown to be a factor responsible for low enrolment of women into tertiary institutions. This is not surprising because most women preferred to achieve skills. Women prefer to learn skills because of the assumption that they would earn quick money rather than stay in school for four years or more. In this study 81% of the respondents believed strongly that learning skills is better than going to school perhaps this would waste their time and make them vulnerable to unemployment.

Job expectation (68%) of women refuses to go higher on academic ladder for fear that there would be no employment for them on completion of their various educational programmes. This is an indication that more women are getting aware that in Nigeria graduate unemployment is an issue. Therefore these women would prefer learning skills to acquiring tertiary education. This study finding is in line with what Timothy (2014) asserted that without adequate and sound education women would still be experiencing abject poverty.

In an investigation carried out by Okon (2014), 78% of the respondents indicated interest in going for higher education but were afraid if that would give them a good job. Attitude of spouses only 45% of women responded positively to their husbands allowing them go back to school which was not quite impressive. Based on this investigation, it is clear that many husbands do not encourage their wives to acquire tertiary education. This could be explained by saying that it is either these men are scared of their wives calling off the marriage on completion of their education since some of them did not go to school or they do not want to be at the same status with their wives.

Other reasons for low enrolment of women into higher education programmes are lack of fund 40% and role model 40%. Only 40% of the sampled women population indicated that lack of money to go back to school was the problem, while 60% said money was not the issue. The role model of 40% only positive response from the participants showed that many women still do not see or have other educated women to

model. This explained that there was no encouragement from well educated women in the society.

Flare and marriage preference also showed strong contributory factors to poor women enrolment for higher degree 41% and 26% respectively. Even if these women have interest in school; they would still prefer to keep their marriage intact. Again attitude of the spouses may hinder them. Consequently, they lack motivation and encouragement. This study indicated that these women (respondents) would have loved to study higher but due to issues from children they would not choose education. Instead they preferred to stay at home and take care of their families.

Conditions for acquiring tertiary degree is to be in school, attend lectures and cope with the demands of the school. Many of the respondents dreaded these conditions. This is why many of the women responded positively to phobia for school (61%) and negatively to coping 68%.

Conclusion

Based on this investigation, it has been revealed that gender stereotype (82%) is an indication that many women are still being bound by these socio-cultural beliefs and practices be it descriptive or prescriptive which tend to limit their right to education. This is so because these women find it difficult to set themselves free from this bondage.

It has been revealed from this study that the factors contributing to low women enrolment into higher institutions of learning are job expectation, skill preference, marriage preference, attitude of spouses, gender stereotype, lack of funds, phobia for school, issues from children, flare, role model, and coping. In sum, based on the findings of this study, women in Akwa Ibom tend to have doubt regarding the relevance of women education. The present economic situation concerning unemployment further heightens the case of women not willing to further their education. It is through education that women and indeed humans try to realize their needs for self enhancement and self esteem for national development.

Recommendations

1. This write-up recommended that women should contribute to national development through education by not naturally placing a barrier on themselves caused by gender stereotype. Law should be promulgated to prevent all forms of discrimination.
2. The Akwa Ibom State government should emphasize the importance of women education not only in arts, humanities and social sciences but also in the area of science and technology.
3. There should be sensitization of their spouses and other relevant people about the importance of women education.

4. Female educators and other professionals should be used as role models for career talks as guest lecturers.
5. There should be positive motivation and reinforcement of women by the government.
6. Government should give scholarship to women to encourage them stay on in school.
7. Government should provide adequate employment opportunities for women graduates to alleviate the fears by others of remaining unemployed after graduation.
8. Women should be sensitized on the importance of family planning so as to have the number of children they can adequately care for.

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