

IN DEFENCE OF GENDER EQUALITY FOR SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The paper views with great concern gender equity in human and national development and therefore, contends that it is high time gender discrimination practices which manifest in various forms and processes, such as the altitude of the classroom teacher, the stereotyped nature of the curriculum and inequity in managerial appointments be discarded. There is need for a rethink of our societal norms. All traditional practices that relegate the feminine gender to marriage and household duties alone are unfair and must be held in contempt! by our educational, social and political institutions, in this 21st century, women must be given the necessary support to compete favourably with their male counterpart, to enable them contribute to nation building

Introduction

Gender inequality is a phenomenon that is common with many societies. There is a prevalence of traditionally structured discrimination against women in the family, labour market, religious institutions and other public organizations. Consequently, the immediate society is heavily influenced by culturally dictated gender stereotypes (Kearney, 1996; Jen & Yero, 2005). In Nigeria, socio-economic, political, and legal institutions serve interconnected and interrelated functions to solidify this gender inequity.

Education which is regarded as a liberating force and agent of social change (Fagerlind & Saha, 1989) in practice perpetuate the structurally gendered society, especially in developing countries like Nigeria. The education institution, in conjunction with other structures of society (family, mass media, political institutions), dispenses an elite ideology and skills to males who are "destined" to hang on to society's dominant positions. Consequently, even some "educated" women in Nigeria believe that the education of women should gear towards the enhancement of the traditionally approved women's role such as house wives, better cooks and other domestic child care duties (Mamman, 1996). This position undermines the role of women as agents and beneficiaries of national development. Generally, women in Nigeria have limited access to socio-economic rights and privileges. They enjoy lower social status and are encumbered by harmful traditional practices (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1996).

Available data show that there is an unequal educational opportunity for girls and women than for boys. It is estimated that of 130 million out of school children, at least 60% of them are girls (UNESCO, 1995). In addition, two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults are women, and in sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 80% of illiterates since 1990 are said to be women (UNESCO, 1995). Stephens (1998), citing UNESCO (1991), further revealed that only 1% of women attended higher education in sub-Saharan Africa compared to 2.8% of men.

Even in the political arena, "Culture, sex, lack of education as well as ethnic background have been used to deny the womenfolk the opportunity to participate fairly in the political life of the nation" (Oladeji, 2005:127). Ndubuisi (2005), related that for long women have been discriminated against although the author conceded that the many ills that are associated with politics in Nigeria, such as thuggery, arson, and blackmail, have made women to prefer not to vie for political offices. The author further explained that the Second Republic did not produce a single female governor or senator. In fact the situation in the Second Republic was such that even women's wings of political associations were not allowed to exist (Udegbe, 2000). In the Third Republic in 1991. Iroka (2003), related that out of a total of 589 members of the House of Representatives, only 4 of them were females, and out of 91 senators, there was only one female. Oladeji (2005), added that there were only 2 deputy governors. Globally, women have been under represented in politics. Available data show that only 10% of legislative bodies are occupied by women and they also occupy lower ministerial positions (Oladeji, 2005).

think more of themselves as leaders and the girls to see themselves as followers. The study of Onibokun and others (1995), showed that 10.9% of boys interviewed aspired for national and political leadership roles, while about 30% of the girls aspired for social leadership roles such as parenting and caring. As an agent of change, education should and ought to have removed these unhealthy stereotypes.

4) Sexual harassment: Gender inequity goes far as attacking female personalities. Although it is mostly refuted by school authorities, sexual harassment and abuse are a daily occurrence in our educational institutions. Odaga and Heneveld (1995), citing Sutherland (1994), explained sexual harassment to mean

- i) unwanted physical conduct of a sexual nature such as unnecessary touching, petting or pinching or brushing against another person, ii) unwanted verbal conduct of a sexual nature such as sexual advances, propositions, pressure for sexual activity, suggestive remarks, innuendoes or lewd comments, and iii) unwanted non verbal conduct of a sexual nature such as the display of phonographic, sexually suggestive pictures, objects or written materials, leering, whistling or making suggestive gestures.

Sexual harassment is a reality in many educational institutions. The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 1991), identified this problem as a major source of disciplinary behaviours in the country's educational institutions and a strong factor for gender inequality. Earlier, Nwabara (1985) affirmed that sexual harassment in Nigeria happens in all spheres of a woman's life. The author argued that women are being regarded as sex objects. They are considered as things which a man admires, desires and uses. Nwabara further argued that male teachers impregnate female students and in most cases, no disciplinary action is taken against such teachers. On the other hand, the female student is expelled as soon as it is discovered she is pregnant. Female students also face threats of failure from male teachers should such students refuse to yield to the whims and caprices of those male teachers.

The increasing number of secret cults whose members terrorize their fellow students and staff in our institutions of learning is of particular concern to the female sex. Besides killing, maiming and robbing their victims, rape has been a central characteristic in the spiral of violence against females by cult members (African Rights, 1994). African Rights reported that in the University of Jos, one Adelakun was quoted as saying: "Although it was glaring that cases of rape occur on campus almost on a daily basis, it was difficult to keep good statistics because most of the affected students prefer to conceal such ugly experiences."

Lecturers are also known to sexually harass and abuse female students. African Rights (1994), reported that in 1992, a Nigerian female university student won a court case against a lecturer whom she accused of deliberately failing her in examination because she had refused his sexual advances. Although not all male lecturers sexually harass their female students or are emotionally attached to them, Osinulu (1994), noted that, those not involved in the practice intervene to protect female students. Thus, the persistence of sexual harassment and abuse prevent many female students from participating in classroom activities and from using school facilities such as libraries and classroom at night. Hence, apart from being a problem in itself, sexual harassment also affects female students' self-esteem and achievement.

With the above situation, one is persuaded to agree with Odaga and Heneveld's (1995), description that the females face an "extremely hostile and uncomfortable learning environment in schools and universities" (p.35). This description is likely to partly explain why female students are largely known as underachievers and subsequently drop outs.

Strategies for Enhancing Gender Equity for Sustainable Development

Educating a woman, it is said, is educating a nation. In order therefore to achieve gender equity for sustainable national development, several measures are necessary. Kontagora (2005:72), citing the World Bank Policy Paper (1995), gave the following measures:

- 1) Reducing the opportunity cost of training females
- 2) Offering shorter but more intensive courses...for women
- 3) Giving compensatory general education programmes to reduce low level of illiteracy and numeracy among women,
- 4) Kontagora (2005), added that "Husbands in general and particularly fathers should always be ready to render helping hands and support and understanding" (p.73).
- 5) Jen and Yero (2005:217-218), suggested the following essential measures, among others, for achieving gender equity for sustainable development:
 - a) There should be greater investment in women by both parents and government.
 - b) Campaigns against socio-cultural and religious practices that contribute to high drop out rate among female students (need to be intensified)
 - c) Creating awareness of the various educational opportunities available to women
 - d) Use of electronic media to counter the negative image portrayed in various ways, showing women as sex symbols. For this reason there should be a documentary showing women in their various capacities as scientists, doctors, accountants teachers lawyers, etc.

- e) The right of girl child like any other child guaranteed in the Nigerian constitution should be enforced and respected. Punitive measures should also be taken against parents who force their female children into early marriage.
- f) Teachers have a particularly important role to play in changing the present bad conceptions about women. Teachers have the duty to ensure that the process of school education is not itself used to hold women down.
- g) There should be no discrimination against women in employment, social life or public activities. Men must also learn to accept women in leadership positions.
- h) The school curricula need to be revised with a view to eliminating such stereo-types and making school more gender friendly.

Conclusion

It is absolutely important to state that the growing demand for equality, egalitarianism and democracy the world over justifies the need for gender equity in educational provision as well as in other aspects of human endeavour. Therefore, the knowledge and ability of both sexes need to be effectively harnessed for social, economic, personal and political development. With women constituting about half the nation's population, suppressing their potential is a huge waste at both micro and macro levels.

The paper reviewed the various forms and processes that impede the realization of gender equity in Nigeria's education system in the 21st century. Consequently, discrimination in educational provision impedes national development. That is why a good section of the female population in Nigeria is illiterate. Added to this, are problems relating to poverty, socio-cultural impediments and underdevelopment.

Teachers are active instruments of desired change. Hence, teacher training process is crucial in the nation's education system. This is because the type of education which teacher-trainees receive will have far-reaching effect on their behaviours and performance as prospective teachers. There is the likelihood that they will carry the same belief, teaching methods and behaviours from the college to the classroom in which they are assigned to teach after training. Therefore, the nature of training and message that is passed on in the teacher-training institutions significantly determines the degree to which gender inequality in the education system can be eliminated, perpetuated or even refined and justified. As Rudduck (1994), rightly observed "teachers do the main work of maintaining the conservative gender regimes. But, they are also, of course, central to the remaking of gender regimes" (p.10). Siraj-Blatchford (1995), citing Thomas (1990), added that "the institution which many sociologists regard as central in perpetuating inequality-and also, crucially central in potentially eliminating inequality-is education" (p.242).

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