

POLICY ISSUES IN WOMEN EDUCATION: DISSONANCE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

Women bore the burden of food production for the entire population. They also least benefited from the resources in their environment due to the limited or even no exposure, awareness and knowledge. Three quarters of the working hours of the world is utilized by women, half of the world's agricultural products are produced by women. However in terms of education, women account for two-third of the world's illiterate population and can earn one-third of the world's income own only one hundredth of the world's property even though they work hardest and put in more hours. Against this backdrop, this paper examines issues in women education in Nigeria. It equally highlights the policy issues in women education and its dissonance between theory and practice and challenges to women education in Nigeria. The paper further highlights the implication of women education in sustainable national development. Finally, the paper puts forward some suggestions to improve women education in Nigeria.

Keywords: Policy, women education, theory and practice

In Nigeria, there is a popular maxim that whatever educational qualification a woman has, everything ends in the kitchen. This is not surprising because the traditional roles of women in Africa are mainly those of housekeeping, childbearing and involvement in agricultural activities. In fact, the confinement of women role to marriage, procreation, preparation of food and clothing, petty trading and farming among others has not changed in Nigeria, especially in the rural areas because majority of the women are still illiterate. Evidences abound that before the colonial administration in Nigeria, women were generally accorded inferior status in the scheme of things. All her efforts were defined by and centred around her husband and children. The tradition and culture of the Nigeria society place women in second place, only to be used as not to be heard.

The traditional roles of women vis-à-vis men has resulted in powerful gender stratification system that tends to place men in decision making position with women relegated to traditional training and economic activities with limited demand that do not provide them with adequate means of livelihood (Safilios-Rothschild, 1991). As noted by Agu (2007), women bore the burden of food production for the entire population. They also least benefited from the resources in their environment due to the limited or even no exposure, awareness and knowledge. According to her, three quarters of the working hours of the world is utilized by women, half of the world's agricultural products are produced by women and in Africa 60 – 80 percent of the food crops are produced by women. She, however noted that in terms of education, women account for two thirds of the world's illiterate population and earn one third of the world's income but own only one hundredth of the world's property even though they work hardest and put in longer hours.

It is against this background that efforts to educate women in Nigeria have received a significant boost in recent times. Such efforts include the declaration of 1975 as the International Women Year, 1976 to 1985 as the United Nations Decades for Women and others in Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and of course in Beijing in 1995. At the African regional level, similar conferences were held in Abuja in 1989 which produced the “Abuja Declaration on Participation in Development: The Role of Women in Africa in the 1990s”. Others include the “Pan-African

Conference on Education of Girls” with its Oyagadougou Declaration in 1993 and conference of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Minister of Culture and Education and Development 1993. FME/UNICEF Strategy for Accelerating Girls Education in Nigeria (SAGEN). The project was meant to serve as a model for sealing up the existing girl-child education initiative with the aim to deliver the following outputs:

1. Improved coherent strategies and planning with regards to girls’ education.
2. Enhanced capacity for gender focused policy and programmes in selected states, LGEAs and communities.
3. Increased active support for gender equity in basic education.
4. Increased demand for good quality education for girls and boys.
5. Greater access of girls and women to basic education as envisioned under EFA.
6. Greater community involvement, especially of women in school governance and management.
7. Integrated programmes of community support (including nutrition, health, hygiene and life skills).

However, in spite of these efforts women access to education is still unimpressive. This is as a result of the dampening cultural belief that no matter how educated they are, women ultimately would end up in the kitchen and probably observable lapses in policies and processes of eliminating gender disparities in education. This parochial view cuts across the African continent hence the women folk have remained largely (formally) un-schooled (Oyebade, 2010). Against this background, the paper therefore examines issues in women education, policy issues in women education: dissonance between theory and practice, implication of women education in sustainable national development, challenges to women education in Nigeria and suggestions to improve women education in Nigeria.

Issues in Women Education

Women education is germane to national and sustainable development. Educate a woman and you educate whole families and when many women are educated all citizens of a nation are educated and manpower development is facilitated for national development (Ucheoma, 2011). Educating women is fundamental to economic development and poverty reduction; promoting women’s education reduces maternal and child mortality rates, reduces birth rates and improves basic health indicators of entire families. As noted by Abanike (1997) education is the greatest resource for women empowerment. She further stressed that education influences decisively a woman’s overall health and access to paid employment and therefore enables her to make informed decision about herself and to assume a status and identity beyond those that are linked with child rearing and family. In effect, literacy of women is an important key: investing in formal and non-formal education and training for girls and women have proved to be best means of achieving sustainable development and economic growth (The United Nations Platform for Action, 1995). However, despite these testimonies on the significance of women education, the access of women to education is very low and this is attributed to the concept of women especially, in developing countries as chattels to be owned by men, socio-cultural beliefs and practices like early marriage and early pregnancy, initiative into adulthood of teenagers (where they obtain) and male preference which is common among most African countries, poverty which forces girls already in school out of school and into teenage marriage (Agu, 2007). These factors have helped to increase the population of illiterate women in the society because these teenagers who drop out of school are not allowed to go to school at all eventually grow into women on whom demands towards development would be made.

In Nigeria, there is the belief that school enrolment of women and girls have experienced a steady increase as a result of the various government interventions. In spite of this argument, a wide gulf still exists in enrolment and retention in favour of men. As it is today there is no women education and development programme that can be said to have a nation-wide coverage and for almost ten years the women who are usually sensitized into the need for education are left without direction (Agu, 2007). In fact, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are having field days with

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workshops and seminars that are abandoned immediately after while they smile broadly to the banks with their shares of funds from donor agencies. A study by Graham-Brown (1992) has discovered that Nigerian women literacy rates have dropped significantly to 40% or less in some states of the Federation. Similarly, in 2003, UNICEF analyzed the literacy situation in Nigeria and came up with the following findings:

1. The overall literacy rate declined from 75% in 1990 to 49% in 2001.
2. Literacy among women declined from 44% to 41% during the same period/
3. There are striking geographical discrepancies in literacy among women and men – urban areas 67%, rural areas 42%.
4. There are also striking regional (or geo-political) differences both in overall literacy rate and women’s literacy rates as shown in table 1 below:

Table 1: Regional and Gender Difference in Adult Literacy

Zone	Women	Men	Female and Male
South East	60%	74%	67%
South West	55%	74%	64%
North West	22%	40%	31%
North East	21%	42%	32%

Source: UNICEF (2003)

Table 2 showed the world distribution of girl child in school and out of school.

Table 2: Total Number of Out-of-School Girls by Region

S/N	Region	Total No. of Girls (in million)	No. of Girls out of school (in million)	No. of Girls in school %	No. of Girls out of school %
1.	Sub-Saharan Africa	42 – 5	22.2	20 – 3	47 – 8%
2.	South Asia	6 – 1	55 – 6	30.5	35 – 4%
3.	Latin America	31 – 3	27 – 4	3 – 9	12 – 5%
4.	Developing World	271 – 0	190 – 0	81 – 0	29 – 9%

Source: UNDP – The State of the World’s Children, UNDP Human Development Report (1991)

The statistics in the table above indicated that African category where Nigeria falls into has the highest percentage of girls out-of-school. The reasons that could be responsible for this situation may include:

1. Lack of role models – very few highly educated women in leadership positions to act as positive role models for girls.
2. Social cultural values, belief and practices – less valuing of girls’ education by illiterate parents since it is considered as an unwise investment.
3. Gender socialization – girls learn to accept being the weaker sex and to have the attitude of lesser ability in SMT subjects leading to under achievement and failure in these subjects.
4. Lack of gender policies either on the part of the government or educational institutions themselves.

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In Nigeria, there are many educational policies on very specific aspects. They include the National Policy on Gender in Basic Education, National Policy on Education, the Universal Basic Education Policy, Early Child Care Policy and the National Gender Policy by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Mobilization. These various policies have made very broad and far-

reaching provisions for education generally in the country. The central focus of all these efforts has been the need to raise the status of women and bring them into education and development process as equal partners with men. However, inspite of all these concerted efforts, a wide gulf still exists in enrolment and retention in favour of men (Ahmed, 2010). This suggests that the policy documents guiding women education in Nigeria remain flimsy, and the policy makers are predominantly men (Aderigbagbe, 2004) and so the women populace has remained largely illiterate. According to Adeyemi & Akpotu (2004), the National Policy on Education (NPE) does not have provisions for priority focus of female education. Thus inattention has resulted in low production of female graduates that are needed in the productive and service sectors of the economy in Nigeria. It has been suspected that sustainable development has become a mirage in Nigeria because of the apparent neglect of this important area in the education sector.

Furthermore, most of the existing policies on women education in Nigeria do not take into account the peculiar context of economic costs, social traditions, and religious and cultural beliefs limiting women educational opportunities. In practice most of the existing policies cannot respond to peculiar challenges of women education. More so, there is lack of full implementation and government’s strong commitment to women and gender issues as enshrined in the National Policy on Gender in Basic Education. For instance, married women education is less promoted as an integral part of the nation’s development agenda. In fact, key constraints affecting women education which the policies on women education could not practically capture and implement are pictured in the following boxes:

Table 3: Constraints Affecting Women Education

Systemic	Content and Process of Education	Economy, Society and Culture
Access problems Dysfunctional schools Poor quality schools Lack of teacher motivation Inflexible education provision Calendar and timing	Gender stereotyping Perpetuation of gender bias Relevance of curriculum Language issues Lack of joyful learning Lack of access to books, magazines, papers, etc. Lack of appropriate reading materials for the newly literate	Poverty/powerlessness status of women Cost to family Child labour/domestic chores Battle for survival Self-perception Child marriage

Source: Singh, J.K.S. (2002). *Women and Management in Higher Education: A Good Practice Book* Consequently, Oyebade (2010) averred that there are lapses in policies and processes of enhancing women access to education. Such as:

1. Gender not being seen as a priority in the context of what is regarded as more pressing.
2. Wide implementation gap between policy intentions and actions for organizational and social changes. While governments or educational institutions make policy commitments to equal opportunities, these do not always translate into changes in organizational practices. International ideas are not always adhered to nationally. For example, despite being a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and having put in place some projects for the implementation of the articles of the convention, Nigeria has not enacted the domestic laws for their enforcement.
3. Under representation of women in enrolment, academic and management posts.
4. Women comprising less than a quarter of professional and executive heads.
5. High tuition – Tuition fees charged by the educational institutions are impediment to access to education in general.

This is why we need to make some redress as soon as possible as the absence of it has created a policy vacuum in the efforts to reposition women participation rate in education in Nigeria.

Implication of Women Education in Sustainable National Development

Women are known for their efforts to sustain the family. They carry large portions of work in trading and farming such as crop production, food processing and distribution among others. Ebong (1997) noted that in addition to the traditional roles of women, they are more involved in heavy socio-economic duties, they shoulder or share most responsibilities of the family, by feeding and educating the children and other members of the families, and most importantly, taking care of the health of the family members.

Education has made women to contribute immensely to or make outstanding achievements towards sustainable national development in Nigeria. Women now contribute to:

1. **Health:** Many women are now aware of personal hygiene, environmental and control of some diseases such as cancer, hypertension, malaria and respiratory tract infections and so on. Education has made women to know that health is wealth and for this reason educated mothers strive to bring up healthier children. They make maximum use of medical services available to them for the benefit of their households. Education has made women to take better care of them and to produce the number of children they can take care of, spacing them as they want (Nwaji, 2011).
2. **Social and Economic Contribution:** Nigerian women are involved in various small business enterprises and factories.
3. **Agriculture:** Women in all parts of Nigeria have farms, established and run various model farms (fishponds, snail rearing etc.). It is a fact that half of the world's agricultural products are produced by women and in Africa 60 – 80 percent of the food crops are produced by women.
4. **Political:** In the political sector, the Nigeria women have played major roles in the past and present. In the past there were such great names like Madam Tinubu, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo. Presently, more women have played major role in government and politics. There are increasing women commissioners, senators and women justices. Women are now found in high positions such as managerial positions, administrative positions, politics, lecturing, banking among others, combining these with their roles as mothers, wives and house makers. It is education that empowers these women to be able to play all these roles (Nwaji, 2011).

In this regard, Aloh (1999) remarked that educating women is the greatest investment any nation can provide to ensure sustainable development considering the diverse roles women play in the society.

Challenges to Women Education in Nigeria

Some of the challenges as gleaned from Ahmed (2010:199) are:

1. Cultural practices, such as early marriage, are deeply rooted in some parts of the country. Changing attitude towards such practices is a mammoth, long term task that will require the combined effort of many organizations.
2. Poverty continues to be the overriding factor which impacts negatively on women education. When families are faced with the issue of scarce resources, it is usually the girls that loose out. Families find it difficult to invest in the education of the girl child.
3. Mobilizing sufficient resources for the upkeep of girls is a big challenge.
4. Early pregnancies prevent the girls from fitting into formal education system.
5. Management of multi-sectorial undertaking to achieve desired goal.
6. Lack of effective communication inhibits collaboration among stakeholders and partnership. Since there are a lot of opportunities for inter-learning as ongoing activities, the areas of communication and networking deserve special attention.

Conclusion

In this paper attempt has been made to discuss issues in women education. The paper stressed that women education is germane to national and sustainable development. The paper further examines some policy issues in women education with emphasis on the difference between such policies in theory and practice. The paper concluded with some suggestions on how to improve women education in Nigeria.

Suggestions to Improve Women Education in Nigeria

The following suggestions on ways to improve women education in Nigeria are gleaned from the works of Mukoro (2013:7 – 8) and Nwaji (2011:97) viz:

1. **Gender-Neutral and Targeted Interventions:** Some strategies are “gender-neutral”, but have greater benefits for girls than boys. Example of such strategies include: reducing distance from home to school, improving quality of teaching – learning, open admission, abolishing of fees, providing early childhood development programme, making school scheduling flexible, recognizing opportunity cost, assisting with learning materials and providing scholarship/stipends. All these have positive impacts on access and retention. This may be one of the major areas where benefits can be seen in the short term.
2. **Multiple Interventions:** This should be in the form of advocacy, mobilization, building partnership and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)/Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and sensitization programmes. Through gender sensitivity programmes teachers can be made to become conscious of gender biases which are brought into the classroom to hinder females from active and effective participation. Parents especially those in the rural areas, should be made to understand that females are so important or even more important than male children with regard to the need for education. Also, efforts should be made to focus on how to develop the university system with appropriate cultural curriculum and learning systems that do not offend the faith of the people and curricula in schools should be reviewed with a view of removing all forms of gender biases in content.
3. Ensuring that girls who drop out of school as a result of pregnancy are provided opportunity to continue with their education after delivery.
4. Providing gender awareness training for teachers and teacher trainers.
5. Engaging successful women as “role models” to organize talk shows, counselling and discussion groups in their localities.
6. Empowering NGOs and local communities, women organization and PTA for advocacy, programme development and execution in favour of girls.

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