GENDER EQUALITY, EDUCATION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: THE NIGERIAN CHALLENGE

Agu, Stella (Ph.D.)

Abstract

Gender equity in education has remained at the front burners of developmental discoveries. This is especially true since after the United Nations World Conference on Women in 1975 and the subsequent declaration of 1975-1985, as the Decade for Women. The gains of this decade were reinforced by the Beijing conference in 1995 and such other conferences. The journey has been tortuous but the result is not totally bad however, since development trends require high powered skills, knowledge levels and competences, the acquisition of basic education is no longer adequate to enable them contribute effectively to national development. The girls/women must be encouraged to remain in school long enough to acquire the necessary skills government on its part must restructure the industrial sector to attract investors who will absorb educated labour, which component women would constitute. While female drop-out rate must be checked, enrolment drive must be undertaken to get more girls into school as education remains the fastest and the best way to empower for national development.

Introduction

Gender refers to the identification of the sexes usually influenced by cultural factors like religion, politics social factors and education. In developmental discourses gender, more specially,, refers to women or the female sex. Gender differentiation will therefore, involved a set of expectations of people's abilities and potentials days on their sex. According to Fafunwa (1974), the traditional roles of women in Africa are mainly that of childbearing, housekeeping and the sustenance of agricultural activities. Jn fact, the evidence available showed 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 traditional definition of women in relation to men has led to the gross underdevelopment of women. They 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. ATRCW UPDATE (1989) noted that, 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. Jn terms of education, according to this source,' women account for two thirds of the world's illiterate population and earn one third of the worlds' income but own only one hundred of the world's property even though they work hardest and put in longer hours.

Before the United Nations World Conference on Women in 1975 and the subsequent declaration of 1975-1985 as the Decade for women most African Governments were really oblivious of the regressive effect of the backwardness of women on the overall national development.

Some governments, as a matter of fact, designed social and economic policies that tended to aggravate the situation. For example, the Nigerian income tax laws believe that, female civil servant had no personal responsibilities and also sounded as if she was totally dependent on her husband when in reality she could be the breadwinner. The law did not permit women to own property nor allowed her to obtain a passport without the consent of her husband and she could not bail an offender.

It is the female child that is asked to drop out of school so the male child completes his. It is the woman and her children that are sold in foreign countries to engage in salve labour. This institutional attitude towards women contributed very much to their illiteracy and backwardness.

However, since after the declaration of the decade for women and the world conference on Education for all (WCEFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and the Beijing Conference in 1995, a very radical approach to the role of women has occurred and it is believe that the gains of the women outcry through these

conferences will be sustained and improve upon. In addition to exploring women education, empowerment and development, this paper will also examine the challenges that Nigeria has to face in improving women education strategies.

Women in Development

Women in Development (WID), entered into the development lexicon after the Nairobi Conference on Women in 1985 and the subsequent production of a WID strategy in 1988, by the Department for International Development (DFID), which stressed the importance of integrating gender in all aid activities. This policy thrust has helped to put gender near the top of the development agenda for many international agencies and governments.

The need to include women as partners in development has necessitated the introduction of terms such as " gender sensitivity" in which some public offices and assignments are allocated to women and the greater the number of women in such positions the greater the gender sensitivity the leadership is deemed to express.

The initial understanding of such development is that it is still the men who decide what positions and assignments to be handed over to the women but a closer examination will show that such women as appointed to exalted positions had excelled in their various fields of specialization and their achievement were what attracted them to the attention of their new bosses or sponsors. Both locally and internationally women are found in almost all areas of endeavour like Medicine, Engineering, Law, Education, Pharmacy, Journalism, Police Force, (Ekiti State Police Commissioner) Entrepreneurship, Stock Exchange, Finance, Banking, Administration and Management, Politics.

The list is by no means exhaustive since there is hardly any area of development in which a woman or two cannot be found.

Most state governors and the president of the Federation have been gracious in appointing women to positions of great responsibility ranging from Transition Committee Chairmen and members, Permanent secretaries, Commissioners, directors to Ministers and Directors general of important and sensitivity parastatals. While this is commendable and really tends to change the trend, this development by no means addresses effectively the problem of marginalisation of women in development programmes. The percentage of women who are in development is like a drop of water in the ocean with regard to the population of women who actually should be involved whether in the private sector or in the public sector. The need to get more women has forced out a call or an appeal to allocate a certain percentage of public offices to women. Thirty percentage (30%) of the positions if allocated to women is regarded as acceptable. The questions to be asked are:

1. Why is such a call necessary?
2. Are women not competent or qualified enough to be invited into public service on their own?
3. Have those women who have been in governance not performed creditably?

These questions lead me to the next section.

Women and Development

The Ministry of National Planning (1980:20-21), sees development as the development of man in which he is able to improve his material conditions and living through the resources available to him, Weidner (1970), believes that, development is the process of growth in the direction of nation
- building and socio-economic progress ------ a process of acquiring sustained growth of systems capabilities to cope with new and continuous change towards the achievement of progressive political, economic and social objective.

Torado (1981:56), therefore, concludes that, development should be perceived as multidimensional that would involve institutional, social and attitudinal change. In view of these perceptions of development, to be able to make a significant impact, the women must understand the dynamics of the existing structures and appreciate the need for change and the direction and special technical skills that are necessary tools of action.

Generally, 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, imitations 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. These factors have helped to increase the population of illiterate women in society because these teenagers who drop out of school or not allowed to go to school at all eventually grow into women on whom demands towards development would be made. Furthermore, the policy document guiding women Education in Nigeria remain flimsy (FRN, 2004), and the policy makers are predominantly men (Aderigbagbe, 2004: 98), and so the women populace has remained largely illiterate. Babangida (1986) noted that, a nation cannot truly develop if her women remain illiterate, unskilled and unable to harness resources in their environment and actually operating below their potential. It is the ability to harness the resources in the environment and improve on such environment that is the hallmark of development and most women cannot contribute effectively to development with the limited or basic education they acquire. Of course, high-powered education is available for the women but how many of them have access to it In poor families, priority will be given to boys, education at the expense of the girls and socio -cultural fixations discourage them from pursuing disciplines that will enable the benefit from the education they have acquired but simply queue up in the unemployment line. The resultant effect is what has been called" genderization of poverty" (Suara, 1996). The society also fails to get their contributions in the dimensions required for sustainable development. Research has shown that, the level of women's education affect economic productivity, child health and welfare, family size and agricultural productivity in the rural areas which factors are indicators of development and when the human component of development which is usually acquired through education is poor, then development level can hardly be satisfactory. It really seems as if women are deliberately excluded from participating in development.

Equality and Women Empowerment

Equality is a concept usually for granted especially in traditional communities when dealing with issues like age grade or other socio-cultural activities where equals a grouped together. In a democracy, one of the cardinal principles is equality before the law which interpreted means that if A received a particular treatment before the law on a particular matter, B must receive the same treatment. Equality can also mean sameness, that is, one thing is the same as the other. Akinkpelu (1981) noted that, if $3 + 3 = 6$, the sign of equity in the expression indicates that, the figure on the right is perfectly the same as those on the left of the equation when put together. It is very doubtful whether this is applicable in human affairs especially when dealing with gender issues in which roles and expectations are assigned.

In fact, such accidents of birth as sex, location, religion, culture etc already constitute social disparities, which we know, will influence access to education and other social benefit (Agu, 1994). In terms of education therefore, there will always be inequality between the sexes. However, in order to attain a level of equality, there could be positive discrimination. favour of the group that is socio-cultural disadvantaged in other to be at par with its counterpart.

Women empowerment can be seen as the capacity of women to increase their self-reliant strategies through the inducement of education. The empowerment of women has been recognized as a pre requisite for achieving effective and people - centered development and empowerment strategy.

In order to achieve equality through women empowerment, there is need to:
a) increase the access of women to education, not just basic education but at the level that will enable them appropriate the resources in their environment and still contribute effectively to its development;
b) improve on the quality of their achievement in relevant disciplines;
c) encourage the women/girls to stay longer in school in order to acquire the necessary skills (retention/persistence); and
d) accord the girls similar treatment as much as possible in similar circumstance.

Simply put, empowering women through education implies that the women will be fully supported to join male counterparts in acquiring formal education and the appropriate skills that will enable them compete favourable in the job market or in the life market.

The United Nations Education and Cultural Association (UNECA) and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFE, 2001), agree that, education is necessary for the growth and

development of every civilization. Nwaubani (2000) noted that, tertiary and University education is the bedrock of women empowerment and the best strategy to develop the potentials of women is to expose them to quality education at the highest level.

The Challenge

The determination of the Federal Government of Nigeria to accord women full opportunities of formal education is a step in the right direction and could be described as long overdue. It is more evidently so now that serious alignments should be made towards the Millennium Development Goals. With the campaign on education for all, at least, up to Junior Secondary 3, and tuition free incentive, more women may get to appropriate such opportunities. With the Adult Education Programmes in some states of the Federation and the Distance Learning Courses in most Nigerian universities, women education and empowerment and their contributions to development are possible.

However, the greatest challenge to high-level women education is attitudinal re-orientation in which parents in certain parts of the country should be made to drop their prejudices against high level women education and participation in national development.

High-level education is usually regarded as a waste since it cannot get one the needed empowerment but actually consumes the few resources that are available in the case of men who are already in jobs. The case of women fighting to get into similar jobs can obviously be considered absurd. The government and the people of Nigeria must therefore, wrest the industrial sector out of the hands of fraudsters who are determined to ruin the sector in order to attract serious minded investors who will require greater population of the educated labour and thus, reduced the unemployment level.

The implementation of the 6-3-3-4 School Curriculum must be revisited to reactive the necessary components of the system especially in the secondary schools. The Technical Workshops need to be re-equipped and both male and female school leavers will be able to get in the job market at graduation as institution inability to sustain women education and empowerment programmes and projects. In 1987, Mrs. Maryam Babangida, initiated the Better Life Programme (BLP) which made a significant impact in the empowerment of women through education, politics, finance and in skill acquisition but as soon as she left office those programmes-were phased out. Her successor, Mrs. Maryam Abacha, initiated the Family Support Programme (FSP) with family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) as it financial back-up.

These were also dropped when she left office. As it is today there is no women education and development program that can be said to have a nation - wide coverage and for almost 10 years the women who are usually sensitized into the need for education are left without direction.

The NGOs are having a field day with workshops and seminars that are abandoned immediately after while they smile broadly to the banks with their shares of the funds from donor-agencies. The challenge here is to develop a sustainable women education and empowerment mechanism or structure which women can appropriate at all times.

The next challenge is to keep the girl child in school until she has acquired adequate skills to be able to contribute meaningfully to national development. The general motion is that school enrolment of girls has greatly increased as a result of the various government interventions but in a study by Graham-Brown (1992), it has been discovered that, Nigerian women literacy rates have dropped significantly to 40% or less in some states of the Federation. Table 1, below shows the world distribution of girl-child in school and out-of-school.

Table 1: Total Number of Out-of School Girls by Region

S/No	Region	Total No of Girls (in Millions)	No of Girls Out of School (in Millions)	No of Girls Out of School	No of Girls Out of School %
1	Sub-Saharan Africa	42-5	22.2	20-3	47 - 8%
2	Mina	26-6	18-0	2-6	12.6%
3	South Asia	6- 1	55-6	30.5	35-4%
4	South East	90-5	66-8	23-7	26 - 2%
5	Latin America	31-3	27-4	3-9	12-5%

| 6 | Developing World | 271 -0 | 190-0 | 81 -0 | 29 - 9% |

Source: UNDP -The State of the World's Children, UNDP Human Development Report (1991).

In the Table above, Nigeria falls with the African category and the statistic shows that, the sector has the highest percentage of girls out-of-school.

The reasons that could be adduced for this situation may include:

(i)   The demand for girls as domestic helps,
(ii)   Teenage marriage,
(iii)   Teenage pregnancy.
(iv)   Cost of their education since government pays only the tuition component of their fees.

(v)   The attraction for quick money which low level jobs offer as they do not demand high powered skills e.g. GSM operators, Okada riding, etc.

It can also be safe to conclude that, the upper primary classes and secondary schools contribute the greater dropout rate among girls.

The percentage could even be higher in the states where women education has remained problematic.

Studies made by Ugwuanyi and Olokun (2000) shows that, the male enrolment figures surpass those of the females in all the subject categories in the colleges of Education as shown in the Table below.

Table 2: Gender Streaming by Field of Study

Year	School of Education		School of Arts/SOS		School of Languages		School of Science		School of Voc Tech. Ed.	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1992/93	57. 158-4	41 -6	58-8	41 ..2	54.4	45-6	57-5	42-5	51 -4	48.6 -
1993/94	57.1	42.9	56.5	43-5	48.3	51.7	56.-S	43-5	54-1	45-9
1994/95	54.1	45.9	54.7	45.3	48.9	51.1	55.6	44.4	58.6	41.4 .

Source: Ugwuanyi and Olokun (2000).

With these statistics much needs to be done to keep girls at school and encourage them to acquire sufficient education to be useful to the society.

The next challenge is that of HIV/AIDS occurrence among schoolgirls. Observation shows that the girls (both in school and out of school girl children) have not appreciated the terminal nature of the disease once contracted. Of course, there are many people living successfully with AIDS but AIDS infested schoolgirls will constitute an all-round burden on society. There is need to emphasize more strongly on the reality of HIV/AIDS as it cannot be guaranteed that a school girl living with AIDS will continue in school and make the needed grades as this paper has advocated.

Conclusion

Gender equality and education has remained a serious issue both in education and developmental discourses. Government and NGO initiatives in these areas have made a lot of impact in the country however, the intensity and level has been very low. Certain states of the Federation witness high female dropout rates while others record low enrolment in schools at all levels. If women must contribute to development in the needed areas and levels they must be encouraged to remain in school long enough to acquire the necessary skills for effective contribution.

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