

RE-POSITIONING WOMEN EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Abstract

This paper examined gender and women development. It examined also gender inequality, a barrier to women full development. The importance of women education was highlighted and efforts made to fight the barriers against gender inequality in education; and the benefits thereof were presented. Recommendations on the enhancement of women education for national development in the 21st century were proffered.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, issues of gender and gender equality have been at the forefront of international summits (UN Conferences 1990-2000). For instance, the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in 1995, called for women to be fully integrated into the system of development around the globe. This is obviously a challenge, which no-government can afford to ignore. More importantly, it has become increasingly clear that development or progress in peoples' welfare cannot be achieved where the needs and contributions of half of the world's population, women, are continually downgraded, marginalized or completely ignored. As the world's resources dwindle, it is imperative that available resources are efficiently managed to benefit both present and future generations.

Gender is a social construct that establishes and differentiates status and roles between men and women particularly in the way they contribute to, participate in, and are rewarded by the economy and the prevailing social systems. Around the world, men have been found to dominate the economy and most social institutions. Potentials of women are often under-utilized and where they contribute, their contributions are undervalued. Gender concerns involve women as well as men. Hence understanding gender means understanding opportunities and constraints as they affect both men and women, a point succinctly made by UNFPA's State of World's Population 2000.

Importance of Women Education

The importance of the education of women as a group can never be overestimated. Women's education has a lot to contribute to national development. Osisanya-Olumuyiwa (1997), points out the women in rural areas produce our food, indeed, the world's food in very nation, but often they pay a price to till the land. They become farmers early in age and often miss out on basic education, especially in developing countries. Consequently, they are uninformed about basic human development needs; they do not know their rights or claim them in order to improve on their productivity.

Investigating in women education and training means centering and empowering the under-serviced groups of women, in order that they may contribute their quota to national development. Adedeji (1991), sees development as a collective responsibility in which all (men and women have to share in the labour as well as in the fruit development). Osisanya-Olumuyiwa (1997), goes ahead to observe that in order to have equal opportunities to share in the labour of development, women, especially in their productive years must be able to access contributing tangibly to national development, over and above home management child-bearing and rearing. This they can do if they have basic education that cuts across multi-sectional confinement in knowledge, skills and competencies to meet their own self-actualization.

An educated woman makes a better mother than her uneducated counterpart. Maduwesi (2005) points out that the educated woman is better because, she is more able to understand and appreciate her children's needs, is able to make informed decisions about their discipline and is able to help her children with school work. Moreover, she is better equipped to practice hygienic living habits in her home to have educational materials such as books and media equipment which are likely to attract and stimulate the attention of her children thus, promoting a culture of enlightenment and inquiry. **Gender Inequality, Barrier to Women Full Development**

That there is gender inequality is incontrovertible. And this basic fact has for a long time hindered

women's full development of their potentials and consequently affected their contribution to national development. Unfortunately, women in any nation form a great percentage of the total population. In Nigeria, according to the 1991 Census, women were 44,053 million of the 88.514 million total populations (F.M.E. Baseline Studies Report, 1992).

Until recently, women in many cultures of the developing world were always relegated to the background, a typical example, being the Ibo culture particularly in Anambra State, Nwagbara (2000), points out that a woman in a patriarchal society is usually seen as an "object" often of man's pleasure, and whose relevance is only in the home as wife and mother. Even by the end of the 20th century to some extent, she is still subjected to oppressive laws and attitudes which are meant to keep her in a permanent subservient, dependent and marginalized position. Maduwesi (2005), points out that in sub-Saharan African countries, Nigeria inclusive, women obtain land rights mainly through their husbands as long as the marriage lasts and often they lose these rights at the demise of their husbands or when they are divorced. Except of course in the South West of Nigeria, where women have rights to own land whether married or single.

Gender issues are so strong and so much tied to the people's lives that they cannot be too easily broken. The paper has shown that there is gender inequality. This gender inequality in normal life affects women education. When a woman is seen as an object of man's pleasure, a child factory, and a being that should be seen when wanted obviously, these issues affect women education.

A number of barriers to gender equality in education have been identified by scholars such as Alele-Williams (1987), Okeke (1990-1996) and FA WE NEWS (1999). These barriers as summarized by them and cited by Okeke (2004) include:

- i) Household and family factors: There are gender disparities in literacy levels and educational attainment in many household and families
 - a. Family poverty - Poverty in sub-Saharan Africa has been traced to an alienation of women. Many families in this part of the world do not promote women's rights and increase their access to resources and schooling. As a result they neither lower their poverty rates nor have faster economic growth.
 - b. Opportunity costs of schooling - Releasing a child to attend school involved opportunity cost to the parents which were perceived as higher for girls than for boys.
 - c. Large family size - The size of most families in the sub-Saharan Africa is very large. Due to the large size of the families coupled with their poverty, there are wider gaps between women and men in areas as education, employment and property rights.
 - d. Level of education of mother - Because of the aforementioned gaps the illiterate mother have lower child malnutrition and mortality.

- ii) Socio-Cultural factors — It is argued that women's access to institutions such as schools depends on the extent to which cultural and religious beliefs accord women a role outside the home. Thus, one would expect to find that in cultures dominated by patriarchy or where female seclusion is practiced, women will have less access to education than men.
 - a. School undermining cultural values - It is widely believed that educated women do not make 'good' wives; that they are morally corrupt or promiscuous. However, the real fear was of the effects of education on women's attitudes, the newly acquired attitudes are seen as incompatible with their "proper" roles as wives and mothers.
 - b. Traditional attitudes to investing on women - Traditionally women are only to be seen and not to be heard. Resources spent on the development of women are regarded as counter-productive and a colossal waste because they are not to be supported to participate actively in the development process of any nation.
 - c. Socializing patterns that disadvantage females — Like race and social class, gender orders social relationships in such a way that some individuals have greater power than do others. In every society, the roles women and men assume accord women fewer opportunities and privileges.
 - d. Social status of women - Women usually have less power to go school; inherit land or enter or refuse a marriage. Women are less likely to develop individual characteristics (such as higher levels of education) that would give them access to better-paying jobs or political office and enhance their power. Individuals with

- power over are able to assert their wishes and goals even in the face of opposition from others. Women generally have less power over than men in all facets of society.
 - c. Early marriage and initiative rites - the practice of early marriage was/is a reason for women's limited education especially at higher levels. Female genital mutilation and other initiative rites are detrimental to the well being of the girl child.
- iii. School - based factors - The factors explained below showed how the school itself discouraged female education.
 - a. Inadequacy of facilities especially in rural areas - Parents are generally less willing to allow their daughters to walk long distances to school at the primary level. Most rural schools lack infrastructural facilities and teachers hence they do not attract the children.
 - b. Gender biases in curriculum and teaching - The general education taught in primary and secondary schools is seen as irrelevant to the everyday needs of women or of the community.
 - c. Poor quality and irrelevance of learning experiences — Since the general curriculum is irrelevant to the everyday needs of women, poor quality and irrelevant learning experiences are the orders of the day.
 - d. School management practices - Schools do not accommodate pregnant or nursing school girls.
- iv. Policy - Based factors. In both developed and developing nations, there are policy guidelines for the administration of their schools. These include:
 - a. Exclusion of pregnant or nursing school girls - This category of pupils/students are not allowed in the schools for fear of contaminating their colleagues who are not in such a situation even though some of these girls were withdrawn from school to get married.
 - b. Discrimination in educational goals and resource allocation - In the traditional economy, male and female roles were complementary to each other. The colonial masters brought with them Victorian attitudes about a woman's roles. The attitude was that "a man's home is his castle" and "a woman's place is the home". This is to infer that men are the sole bread-winners and women relegated to housework. Thus as regards provision of facilities for girls, the perception of educational authorities was that education was more relevant for boys

The factors listed above are the summary of barriers to gender equality in education. Many of these barriers are still there, although some, as the result of some dynamics within the culture some have weakened.

Efforts Made to Fight the Barriers against Gender Inequality and the Benefits

Efforts have been made at removing barriers that stand against gender equality in education worldwide with the greatest effort from the Beijing 4th World Conference on Women, 1995. At that international Conference, women rights became a major focal point in international efforts to promote gender equality - a cardinal gender issue.

Another world conference that took look at gender issues and made some recommendation is the Dakar Forum (2000), Education for All. Among its goals are:

- i. Ensuring that by 2001, all children particularly girls, children in difficult-circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities have access to a complete and compulsory primary and education of good quality.
- ii. Eliminating gender disparities in primary education by 2005 and achieving, gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access and achievement in basic education of good quality (Obanya, 2003).

At the national level, conscious efforts are also being made to break the barriers to gender inequality in education. In the Nation's Blue Print and Implementation Plan for the national open and distance learning

programmes (2002), it was stated inter alia:

- i. Girls and women are important target groups in development programmes. One aspect of the education gap in Nigeria is the discrepancy as regards equal opportunities in education for girls and women.
- ii. Education delivery should reach substantial number of women, including societies where women lack equal opportunities of participation in conventional forms of education and training such as women in purdah, nomadic communities, and disabled/handicapped people.

These efforts yielded a lot of positive results. When we look at the landscape of our national development, we see deep footprints of some great women, who were able to achieve because of their education. Some women are presently occupying seats at our houses of assembly both at the national and the state levels. In Lagos State, a woman served as the State Deputy Governor. At the federal level we have some women as Ministers and Personal Assistants to the President.

When we look at other sections of the economy, we see some women contribute significantly even where their male counterpart has failed woefully. A pointer that comes to mind is the case of Prof. D. Akunyili, Director of National Agency for Food, Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC), she has made NAFDAC a household name. Before she took over, the directorate NAFDAC meant little or nothing to most Nigerians. Since she came into the directorate, she has turned things round for the benefit of the entire nation.

In the field of education, women are contributing a lot. Prof. A. Williams has served as the Vice Chancellor of the University of Benin, Prof. E.B. Maduewesi, until recently was the Executive Secretary of National Education Research and Development Council, (NERDC). Of course, a woman by name Mrs. C. Obaji is the current Minister of Education.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been put forward as ways of encouraging women education for national development.

1. There should be institutional and professional capacity-building at all levels to achieve greater efficiency, effectiveness and gender friendliness of the educational politics.
2. Rigorous implementations of existing national policies to accomplish national targets and targets of the various conventions to which Nigeria is a signatory, including improving access, eliminating gender disparities and gender stereotyping, and enhancing quality of education.
3. Strengthening relevant legislative, legal, political, financial and institutional framework for the reform and further development of education at all levels, to meet the targets set at the various global conferences, and in particular, the Dakar Framework of Action adopted by the World Education Forum in April, 2000.
4. Intensifying advocacy and social mobilization and programmatic efforts to promote female education and formal education in Nigeria and enhance the quality of learning environment in schools.

Conclusion

The importance of the education of women as a group can never be overestimated. Women education has a lot to contribute to national development. Therefore, all socio-cultural practices and economic barriers that turn to negate the elimination of gender disparities and achieving gender equality in education by 2015 should be rigorously tackled.

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