
Regenerating Women Education for Poverty Eradication, Self Reliance and National Development

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Abstract

Education worldwide is regarded as an authentic tool that promotes a nation's economic, social and political well-being. In some parts of Nigeria, bias and prejudices existed against women education. Recent events in education reveal a conquering of this deep-rooted anomaly. Women's enrolment figures in education in the last twenty years have shown remarkable expansion. Yet the number of women engaged in education is regrettably low for rapid accomplishment of national goals of producing an egalitarian, self reliant nation with a great and dynamic economy capable of providing bright and full opportunities for all citizens. Consequently, women education is sometimes presumed to 'end in the kitchen'. In this computer age occasioned by quantum leap in technology, Nigerians should not be stuck with unfounded biases and prejudices against women education. This paper examines the state of women education and proffered ways of regenerating it for poverty eradication, self reliance and national development.

Historically, women's education was presumed to end in the kitchen hence the interpretation of the ellipsis 'WEEK' to mean 'Women's Education End in Kitchen' by many people. With advancement in education, technology and melting economic opportunities, there has been a shift in this belief. Nowadays, many are of the opinion that 'if you train a woman, you train a nation'. Although biases and prejudices has existed from the traditional Nigerian society against women education, recent events especially in education reveal a conquering of this deep-rooted and age-long prejudices. Enrolment figures particularly in the last decade show a remarkable bridge of the gap between the genders. In other words, more and more women are accessing education at all levels of education. However, it is the assertion of this paper that, in the view of the needs for poverty eradication, self reliance and national development, education becomes meaningful when most members of the society have access to it.

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Against this realization this paper argues that the number of women who have acquired education is grossly disproportionate to the number involved in the labour sector. There is a very significant number of women that have attained tertiary education but are not involved in the labour market of Nigeria. Consequently, the under-exploration and utilization of human resources yields a negative return on investment. In the view of Ibrahim (2008), such factors like the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian labour market, women's attitudinal and psychological dispositions, and choice of marriage partner by women among others have been pinpointed as the determinants of the marginal and insignificant participation of women in education and the labour sector.

As a result of this deviation from the norm, there is the need for addressing the imperatives of liberating women from unfounded biases and stereotypes that keep them away from labour force participating which is a minus for poverty eradication, self reliance and national development.

Historical Development of Women Education in Nigeria

History of education has it that, education in sub-Saharan Africa for a very long time was only available to the males (Education For All Report, 2003/2004). This then means that women were from the onset disadvantaged in the pursuit of education and employment sector since jobs are usually negotiated through acquisition of education and skills. In fact, women's late entrance into education and the tailoring of women's educational needs as mainly domestic needs is not peculiar to Nigeria. Thus it has been reported by Ivan (2009) that, in Latin and America where the expansion of the education system started earlier, women were initially denied functional education during colonization but often received instruction to enable perform domestic chores and raise children. This existed in Nigeria too.

According to Uzi (2009), the coming of colonialism and the industrial revolution changed the order of things. The first education institutions in Nigeria were established by the Christian Missionaries. In fact, the Rev. Thomas Freeman of the Wesley Methodist Mission is credited with the establishment to the first formal school in Nigeria. Following the example of the Methodists, other denominations like the Presbyterian, Roman Catholic Mission and others got involved in the establishment and management of educational institutions. The first secondary school in Nigeria was established in 1859 known as the Lagos Anglican Grammar School by the Christian Missionary Society. In 1878, the Roman Catholic Mission established the precursor of the present St. Gregory's College. The missionary venture in education was born out of the desire to use the school and curriculum to enforce church doctrines. Hence, such schools at that time were largely pious, parochial and restrictive both in curriculum and organizational principles. Apart from the spiritual aim of the mission, the colonial government needed clerks as well as teachers and low level manpower required by the

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colony especially since the high levels of manpower was not only impractical but beyond the budgetary allocation of the colonial government.

While at first it was convenient for the colonial government to leave education for the missionaries, they soon realized its futility. This arose from the realization that as more and more converts were won by the church, and as more denominations staked their claims to different geo-political zones, the churches began emphasizing the more spiritual aspects of their mission. Also the contention among the denomination for new converts and the over-riding need to retain those already in the field pushed secular education to back-burner of the missionary schools. The involvement of the colonial government in education eventually was ostensibly borne out of a need to make education suited to the social needs of the society and equip Nigerians mentally and otherwise to meet the demand of the colonial administration. Even at this moment, women education had not taken prominence in the administrative structures of the colonial government.

The contention that there was a bias against women education in traditional Nigerian society is too obvious to scholars of history of education in the country. That women are the subject of a growing national and international interests and debate is unquestionable (Sash, 2010). This international debate stems from the acute recognition that women are crucial in the economic, social and political development of a nation. The barrier placed against women's self actualization especially in traditional Nigerian society was without recourse to the roles women played in such a society. Apart from the dominant fashion which may be seen as facts of socialization and convention, women are also very productive in the economic sphere of Nigeria.

According to Usman (2001), women in Nigeria are actively involved more than men in virtually all areas of agriculture direct from site clearing to processing of farm products. In spite of this, women suffer and are victims of a social order that neglected them largely to second place role players. Against this gender bias, women are excluded from labour market decisions and policy formulation. This has stemmed from their being denied access to quality education and it negatively impacts on poverty eradication, self reliance and national development. According to Okechukwu (2011), this arrangement exacerbates strategies of poverty eradication, self reliance and national development by preventing majority of women from obtaining the credit, education, training and legal status needed to improve their prospects and potentials. One clear area of noted imbalance against women has been in education. It is therefore not surprising that women's inadequate access to education has been seen as the source of the various discriminations they suffer.

Consequent upon the realization of the contribution of women in nation building, there has been a groundswell of agreement that women's lot and general social and economic improvement can be actualized through the acquisition of education. Most post-independence Nigerians believed rather correctly that, the woman of today is not just a member of tomorrow's society but a mother and a leader who will shape the future of her family and the community. By implication therefore, her need for qualitative education to equip her for that role of womanhood and subsequently national development cannot be downplayed. Worthy of mention in this regard are the efforts made by Non-Governmental Organizations in encouraging women education in Nigeria. History of education has it that, with the realization of the need for adequately educating the Nigerian woman, disparity existed across the zones of the country. There were more women in education in the south as compared to the north of the country. With the intervention of NGOs and more States' commitment in the provision of quality education for women, the situation was reversed. Some of these efforts manifested in the establishment of special schools for girls and women units in the education ministries of many states of Nigeria. Despite all these efforts, women education still lag considerably far behind male education (Ede, 2008). There has been a marked closing of the gap as more and more women take to formal education while some young men under the influence of distorted and misdirected value system in today's Nigeria are lured away from schools.

The National Universities Commission Annual Report since 1998 show an appreciably significant increase in female enrolment figures in Nigerian universities against what obtained a decade and more ago. In addition, female enrollment in post-primary schools especially in the south has virtually caught up with male enrolment. According to Oguche ((2006), in furtherance of the desire to include women in the policy making of the nation, in 1986, the National Council on Education (NCE) endorsed policy objectives of women education. Part of the policy objectives for women education is:

1. To provide more educational opportunities for girls from primary to tertiary levels.
2. Creating awareness in citizens to the fact that equal educational opportunities exist irrespective of gender, age, locality, creed or status and should therefore be made available (and accessible).
3. Provision of basic literacy and skill acquisition for illiterate females and early school leavers through skills such as sewing, cooking, baking, typing, knitting and subsistence agriculture.
4. The awakening of the consciousness of all women to the need for the development of positive self image.
5. To educate parents and the general public so as to bring change in attitude toward women educational programmes, and

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6. The promotion of women education in the fields of science and technology.

To achieve these policy objectives, a workshop was organized to prepare a blueprint on women education in Nigeria. The goals and objectives of the framework were:

1. Increasing the speed of mass mobilization and advocacy of equality of access to education for all children at all levels of education, irrespective of age or gender with particular efforts to emphasize the benefits derivable to society from girls' education.
2. Maintain the legal age of 18 for girls at first marriage and enforcing legal provision or penalties for withdrawal of girls from school for marriage.
3. Endorsing existing laws prohibiting hawking and street trading by girls with penalties stipulated for contrary behaviour.
4. Increasing female enrolment and completion at all the tiers of the educational programme and to provide selective types of learning for specific objectives for adult education and secondary school drop outs and women who desire further education.
5. Improving the quality of education by increasing the number of school teachers and instructional materials.
6. Provision of education for women with special needs, the gifted and handicapped, nomadic women, women in Pudah, riverine areas, rural areas, drop-outs, widows, single parents and market women.

The impact of this policy on women education is that, there is a surge in enrolment in education by women nationally and the drop-out rate among school girls in relation to boys has declined with little disparities in the educational achievement of boys and girls (Ano, 2004). This has been a big plus for women education in Nigeria.

Worthy of mention here is that, these lofty aims of education can be fulfilled only when the individuals is offered to opportunity of employment and uses the opportunity to significantly contribute towards poverty eradication, self reliance and national development. In the contemporary Nigeria society, in spite of the increase in the number of women accessing education, the socio-economic terrain has not tackled the structural and historical factors limiting women education for poverty eradication, self reliance and national development.

Women Education and Poverty Eradication, Self Reliance and National Development

Apart from frequently resonating but downplayed policy statements such as the need for poverty eradication, self reliance and national development, women education perform the following roles in the society. (1) It avails women the potentials to improve

their standard of living and contribute to national development. (2) High rates of high school and university education among women helps women to make inroads to professional careers and better-paying jobs. (3) It leads to later ages of rational sex activities (such as the practice of safe method of birth control and the prevention of the transmission of sexually transmitted infections) and first intercourse, later age at first marriage, and later age at first child birth as well as increased likelihood to remain in first marriage engagement. (4) It avails the women the opportunity to actively participate in national issues such as governance. As women acquire education, their percentage in labour force participation increases as they acquire more mental cum intellectual skills and capabilities. (5) The participation of women in labour force aids the development of the society and exerts a positive impact on the women themselves. It also provides the workforce needed to keep the wheel of the economy turning progressively as it contributes in concrete terms to the health of the family.

Globally, it is estimated that women labour force participation has increased from 36% in 1990 to 48% in 2007 (Ibrahim, 2008) in advanced economies. In Nigeria, however, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) brought a change in dimension and perception of women education. Sadly still, the situation has not improved significantly owing to the following obstacles.

Obstacles of Women Education in Nigeria

According to Ade (2000), poverty eradication, self reliance and national development in Nigeria cannot be properly actualized without women accessing quality and functional education. Unfortunately, it is obvious that the involvement of women in education. According to Zaki, Uba and Iortim (2010), women's access to formal education is obliterated by the following factors.

1. The patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society and labour market where women are in some instance are still regarded as reserve role players whose domain of influence is strictly at the domestic front.
2. Women's life entails oscillating between working part time or interrupting education or employment to raise children.
3. High cost of schooling: Inadequate provision of instructional materials and high cost of school fees, textbooks and other necessities endangers women education.
4. Most men see their wives first as homemakers rather than fellow partners that should have access to quality and functional education.
5. Women's attitudinal dispositions: Many women approach education with the wrong mental and behavioural dispositions. Some display no desire to aspire to higher education qualifications. They thus display attitudinal and educational orientations that portray them as not hardworking or committed to surmounting

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the rigors of education but easily succumbing to the pressure, stress and strain of education.

6. Women's choice of marriage partners also contribute to their eventual withdrawal from the educational sector. This creates a situation where women are forced out of the education system because they get married to men that have a terrestrial and nonchalant attitude to education. It's not surprising to see a woman with enviable academic qualification end up in the kitchen because she got married to a business mogul who does not see any reason for his wife to exert herself in the school system.
7. Socio-cultural factors and religious creed in certain parts of the country blocks women's access to education as a tool for poverty eradication, self reliance and national development. In certain socio-cultural settings, women education is considered as an unprofitable venture that should be resisted vehemently.
8. Women's unquestioning submission and willingness to conform to those societal notions that keep them out to school or see them as inadequately and inefficient learners. Women are at times seen as not possessing the submissive kind nature and thoroughness that education demands.
9. Sexual harassment of women by some male teachers: This ugly phenomenon contributes to drop out rates among females. Although the government is aware of this problem, the problem is still rife with no decisive approach to tackling the menace.
10. Lack of dedicated champions to vigorously champion the cause and course of women education in Nigeria. Poor participation has arisen from lack of the willingness, enthusiasm or determination and a hidden reluctance on past and even present administrations and community-based bodies to provide ample opportunities for women to avail themselves of quality formal education.

Conclusion

The rate of development of any nation is related to its investment in human capita. In a system where a substantial number of people are forced out of education and from participation in economic development on the basis of gender irrigates distortions, inequalities and retards the development process. In a developing economy like Nigeria, prevailing male-biased education system, women education should be vigorously regenerated by all stakeholders so as to facilitate poverty eradication, self reliance and national development.

Recommendations

It is obvious that women have a greater part to play in a nation's life. Apart from being major players in the procreation of human race, numerically, women ought to have a good and resounding say in many matters of national interest. Unfortunately, some women are relegated to reserve role players considered to be essential mainly at

the domestic front. This negatively impacts on poverty eradication, self reliance and national development as one of the goals of the Nigerian society. Women education can be regenerated to achieve these three essentials aims of the Nigerian state through the following ways.

1. Government at all levels should provide unrestricted access to quality and improved formal and informal education at all levels to women. This initiative should be designed to address the critical imbalances in access to education, retreating quality of basic education delivery services and gender-based inequalities.
2. Rapid awareness campaigns should be mounted to dispute the age-long and deep-rooted conviction in many Nigerian parents, husbands and guardians that, women education ends in the kitchen and as such is an unpromising venture.
3. Rapid rural, urban, religious and cultural mass mobilization of support for women education should be embarked upon by all stakeholders in the Nigerian society to debase long-held biases and prejudices against women education.
4. All states of the federation as a matter of constitutional obligation should establish and properly fund Centers for Continuing Education which will take care of the education needs of disadvantaged women.
5. Ample opportunities should be provided for female drop-outs at both primary and secondary school levels to complete their studies at Centers for Continuing Education established by states across the nation.
6. There should be an edict prohibiting hawking by girls in a bid to build a decent society. This is in addition to another law in operation to promote the enrolment and retention of girls in schools and which prohibits withdrawal of girls for any reason apart from health.
7. Rapidly intensified aggressive and product-oriented public enlightenment campaign should be mounted for parents to give equal opportunities to their children irrespective of sex and make efforts to retain girls in schools to complete their education at all levels.
8. The government should promote research into the capabilities and obstacles of women education to foster better programming, policy formulation and implementation of women education.
9. Government should provide budgetary assistance to women education in form of either bursary allowances or better accommodation facilities for girls / women.
10. Female students' harassment by male teachers should attract the attention of law makers and policy formulators to curb the menace.
11. Education should be conceived as investment in human resources. Women education should be viewed as a means of assisting women contribute to the development of the self and general development of the nation.

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12. Education policy planners should look beyond access and enrolment figures and focus on structural impediments by assisting women constantly to challenge the practices and beliefs that reinforce male dominion relating to matters of their education

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