

---

# WOMEN EDUCATION IN NIGERIA AS AN INSTRUMENT OF EMPOWERMENT IN ALLEVIATING POVERTY: HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

---

**DR. CHARLES NZULUMIKE**

*Department of Educational Foundations,  
Federal College of Education,  
Pankshin,  
Plateau State*

**INNOCENT C. OLI**

*Department of Adult Education,  
Federal College of Education,  
Pankshin,  
Plateau State*

## **Abstract**

*Women education is a process whereby women are given equal access to knowledge, skills, jobs among others in order to be enlightened or to create awareness in them about their environment and their roles as mothers, home-makers and even nation builders. Yet, poverty affects their education seriously. It does that by reducing their access to educational opportunities. Women are less educated and under-represented in all spheres of human endeavour due to “Victorian ideology”, socio-cultural factors, religious beliefs, girl-child labour among other demeaning activities that contravene their right to education. Yet, education is not only a fundamental human right but is critical in empowering women who can contribute in many ways to the development of the society. The authors are of the opinion that what the government, society and other stakeholders should do is to stop paying lip services to women education. This is given the fact that women constitute about 50 percent of Nigeria’s population and that their education which is crucial for nation building is not only wasted but that the harmonious and sustainable development required by their participation suffers a setback.*

Women education refers to the education given to or received by women in order to be enlightened or to create awareness in them about their environment and their roles as mothers, home makers and nation builders. It is a process whereby women are given equal access to knowledge, skills, jobs and participation in the wider society. Thus, this type of education, according to Okeke (2000) involves training in literacy and vocational skills so as to enable them become functional in the society, especially in their homes.

### **An Overview of Poverty Alleviation**

Poverty alleviation is a very useful human development effort which aims at reducing the magnitude of poverty in terms of the proportion of the population living below the poverty line. In other words, it is the removal or minimizing of factors that contribute to poverty. According to Adelodun (2002), poverty alleviation is the reduction to a tolerable level of the pains, sufferings, difficulties and human degradation associated with poverty especially by way of human capacity building, skills acquisition, provision of social facilities, general economic empowerment, and the provision of enabling environment for participation in decision-making. Research has shown that sustained poverty alleviation programmes have enhanced human and material development (Olaitan, Ali, Onyemachi and Nwachukwu, 2000). Hence, the major purpose of poverty alleviation in any country is to provide citizens with those congenial opportunities that would enable them attain the basic and essential means of achieving socio-economic independence. Other broad purposes of poverty alleviation programmes world-wide include the control of arbitrary and irruptive human population growth; provision of training in skills to all those who need and can use skills; tackling the problems of unemployment and underemployment through massive job creation; provision of ample and affordable municipal and other services and; improvement of the environment. Other aims of poverty alleviation especially in the third world countries include the control of rural-urban migration, establishing a happy, contented citizenry and; stimulation of economic growth and social stability (Olaitan, Ali, Onyemachi and Nwachukwu, 2000). The foregoing implies that poverty alleviation programmes are used for achieving a wide variety of expectations in the political, social, economic and human developmental areas.

### **Constraints To Women Education**

One can say without equivocation that poverty affects education seriously. It does that by reducing the access of people to educational opportunities not minding that education is a fundamental human right. One of such victims is the woman. Women can contribute in many ways to the development of the society yet, they are less educated and under-represented in all spheres of human endeavour as compared to their male counterparts (Imhabekhai and Olomukoro, 2010). Many factors are responsible for this general low level of women's education in Nigeria. Colonialism is one such factors that has been identified as a major barrier to women's education. The British colonial policies in Nigeria were dominated by 'Victorian' ideology which presented men as 'breadwinners' and women's role as domiciliary and procreation (Olaleye, 2008). This explains why emphasis on girls' education during the colonial period was limited to the stereotypical jobs of sewing, house-making and laundry which aimed at making women 'good wives', mothers and good ornaments of the society.

Many socio-cultural barriers still hinder the empowerment of women through education. For example, the basic socialization process still presents marriage as an unequal relationship between men and women. In such an unequal gender relationship, a woman's desire to participate in literacy programme or to improve self through higher

***Women Education In Nigeria As An Instrument Of Empowerment In Alleviating Poverty:  
How To Make It Happen- Dr. Charles Nzulumike And Innocent C. Oli***

---

education is undermined by her husband in order to maintain traditional status quo in the home. Related to the basic socialization process is the gender stereotyping which still occurs among the traditions and cultures of many ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Nigerian woman is born into a culture of male supremacy as exacerbated in the general preference for a male child. The male supremacy traditions have led some parents to either refuse to send their girls to school or to marry them off at a young age. In fact, when families are affected by serious illness or suffers economic adversity, it is the girl's education that is first discontinued in favour of the boys. This attitude of parents investing in the education of boys and in denying girls their education has largely impacted negatively on the educational system of women in Nigeria (Olaleye, 2008).

Religious beliefs are another set of factors that has continued to inhibit women education in Nigeria. The practice of *purdah* or female seclusion makes it difficult for northern Nigerian women to be adequately represented in literacy programmes available in their locality. They are not to be seen mixing with members of the opposite sex. Other social factors that inhibit women education include early marriage, teenage pregnancies, poor perception of self and lack of self will. Prejudice from teachers and male students also contribute to the low level of female children who have access to education. Classroom observational studies in Nigeria have shown that both male and female teachers do not give girls enough opportunities for classroom participation while boys are usually given greater opportunities to ask and answer questions, to manipulate materials and lead groups (Osokoya, 2008). Furthermore, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (2003) report on Nigerian education, identified lack of healthy classroom interaction resulting from high pupil and teacher ratio as another cause of girls' dropout of school. It claims that in many urban centres, classrooms, especially in primary and secondary schools were overcrowded as 100 or more pupils were found in one classroom.

Another constraint is the use of young girls for child labour or as household or agricultural helpers. This has contributed a lot to inaccessibility of girls to schools. Nzulumike, Achugbu and Ahupa (2009) noted with dismay that such demeaning activities contravene the rights of the children (including the young girls and women) and runs contrary to the provisions of Section 18(1)(3)(a-d) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) Constitution and; Section 1 (4c and 5c) of the education policy document of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) which stipulates that every Nigerian child shall have a right to educational opportunities at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

The foregoing are some poverty related constraints and social barriers that affect women education in Nigeria. The question then is: how can women education be used in alleviating poverty in the country? This becomes the next issue to be considered.

### **How Can Women Education Be Used In Alleviating Poverty In Nigeria?**

Education, no doubt, is one of the most important factors that distinguish man from other animals. It is a human right and a key index of development. Education brings about empowerment, improves productivity, health, and reduces negative features concomitant with life. In other words, the goals of wealth creation, employment generation, value reorientation, and poverty alleviation can be effectively pursued, attained, and sustained only through an efficient, relevant and functional education system (Nzulumike; Enemuo; Achugbu, 2008). For Ali-Akpajiak and Pyke (2003), the level of education of a country's population is used as an indicator of its socio-economic development. Fasokun (2008) argued that no country has succeeded in eradicating poverty if it has not educated its people. Educating girls and women is no doubt, a country's single most effective route out of poverty. A very important consequence of society investing more in the education of girls and women is the change brought about in household behaviour and practice. Such change is that education makes women better mothers. This is true as the improved sustenance of children has shown to be more strongly associated with increased levels of education of the mother. This is so with respect to the birth weight of children, child mortality, nutrition, morbidity, school entry at early ages and longevity in school (Schultz 2002; Abu-Ghaida and Klasen, 2002). For UNESCO (2006), women who participate in literacy programmes have better knowledge of health and family planning, and are more likely to adopt preventive health measures. Vision (2006) opined that educated mothers immunise their children 50 per cent more often than mothers who are not educated do, and their children have a 40 per cent higher survival rate. Hence, education not only provides basic knowledge and skills to improve health and livelihoods, it empowers women to take their rightful place in society and the development process. Education of women brings about preference in the quality rather than the quantity of children to have. It increases the age of marriage of females and thereby, delay the total fertility rates. Equally, the schooling of female parents increases the probability of their children attending school. Furthermore, basic education has been linked with mother's nutrition, better family choices and the way families view children. Women with basic education are more likely to attend to their own nutrition during pregnancy thereby, reduce the chances of giving birth to mentally retarded child.

Women education is not only important for the overall development of the society; it also plays a crucial role in the democratic process. It empowers women to exercise their rights and assume their responsibilities as citizens of their country and enables them to make more efficient choices. This is against the backdrop that women make up about 50 percent of Nigerian population while two-thirds of them are illiterate (Joda and Babayi, 2004) and that in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, Nigeria is facing the challenges of empowering her women through education. An obvious implication to this is that women education which is crucial for nation building is wasted and the harmonious and sustainable development required by the participation of all citizens of the nation (including women) suffers a setback. Another obvious implication is that this challenge of empowering her women through education has become imperative since Nigeria

***Women Education In Nigeria As An Instrument Of Empowerment In Alleviating Poverty:  
How To Make It Happen- Dr. Charles Nzulumike And Innocent C. Oli***

---

moves towards economic growth through various economic reforms and since the challenge has a positive correlation between a country's educational efforts and its economic status. In addressing the foregoing challenges, UNESCO (2000) observed that no nation can move forward in terms of development if her womenfolk remain ignorant, excluded and marginalized. Ojobo (2008) also noted in the same direction that the educational empowerment of Nigerian women is the spring board to every other form of empowerment. This is saying in effect, that women empowerment involves developing their mental and physical capacity and skills in order for them to operate meaningfully in their social, economic and political milieu. Thus, it could be argued that education does not only prepare the woman herself to participate in development, it enables her to prepare her offspring for better participation in development.

### **Conclusions**

Poverty affects education seriously. It does that by reducing the access of people to educational opportunities. Women are such victims as they are less educated and under-represented in all spheres of human endeavour due to "Victorian ideology", socio-cultural factors, religious beliefs, girl-child labour among other demeaning activities that contravene their right to education. Yet, education is not only a fundamental human right but is critical in empowering women who can contribute in many ways to the development of the society.

What the government, society and other stakeholders should do is to stop paying lip services to women education. This is given the fact that women constitute about 50 percent of the country's population and that their education which is crucial for nation building is not only wasted but that the harmonious and sustainable development required by the participation of all citizens of the nation (including women) suffers a setback.

### **References**

- Abu-Ghaida, D. & Klasen, S. (2002). *The Costs of Missing the Millennium Development Goal on Gender Equity*. Washington D. C.: World Bank.
- Adelodun, S. O. (2002). *Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria: The Role of National Directorate of Employment*. In V.A. Adeyeye; J. O. Yusuf (eds), *Nigeria's Lead Issues in Poverty Alleviation*, (pp. 219-232). Abuja: ACDR.
- Ali-Akpajiak, S. C. A. and Pyke, T. (2003). *Measuring Poverty in Nigeria*. Oxford: Oxfam.
- Fasokun, T. O. (2008). *The Role of Education in Poverty Eradication*. In M. Boucouvalas and R. Aderinoye (eds). *Education for Millennium Development: Essays in Honour of Professor Michael Omolewa (Vol. 1, pp. 459-506)*, Ibadan: Spectrum.

- Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999). *1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. Lagos: Government Printer.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National Policy on Education (4<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Lagos: NERDC.
- Imhabekhai, C. I. & Olomukoro, C. O. (2010). Strategies for Improving the Standard of Women Empowerment Programmes in Nigeria. *International Journal of Literacy Education*, 7(1), 133-147.
- Joda, F. M. & Babayi, A. A. (2004). Women Education as a Veritable Tool for Active Leadership in Society. *Journal of Women in Colleges of education*, 8, 170-173.
- Nzulumike, C.; Enemu, P. C.; Achugbu, P. C. (2008). Education Reform and Distance Education in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis. *Nigerian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11(2), 239-242.
- Nzulumike, C.; Achugbu, P. C.; Ahupa, V. I. (2009). Universal Basic Education (UBE): A Panacea or Myth to Nigerian Education System? *Approaches in International Journal of Research Development*, 1(3), 426-433.
- Ojobo, J. A. (2008). Education: A Catalyst for Women Empowerment in Ethiope. *Journal of Education and Science*, 4(1), 23-27.
- Okeke, E. O. (2000). Women Education: An Effective Instrument for Family Advancement. *Journal of Women in Colleges of Education*, 4, 53-57.
- Olaitan, S. O.; Ali, A.; Onyemachi, G. A.; Nwachukwu, C. (2000). *Poverty and Poverty Alleviation Initiatives in Nigeria*. Nsukka: Nigerian Educational Research Association.
- Olaleye, F. O. (2008). *Empowering Women Through Education*. In M. Boucouvalas and R. Aderinoye (eds.). *Education for Millennium Development: Essays in Honour of Profesor Michael Omolewa (Vol. 2, pp. 155-167)*, Ibadan: Spectrum.
- Osokoya, L. O. (2008). *Towards Maximising Women's Contribution to National Development Through Education in Nigeria*. In M. Boucouvalas and R. Aderinoye (eds.). *Education for Millennium Development: Essays in Honour of Profesor Michael Omolewa (Vol. 2, pp. 69-77)*, Ibadan: Spectrum.
- Our Vision, (2006). *Educated Mothers Immunize Their Children*. [http://www.careaustralia.org.au/downloads/annreport\\_045.Pdf](http://www.careaustralia.org.au/downloads/annreport_045.Pdf). Retrieved 2009.

***Women Education In Nigeria As An Instrument Of Empowerment In Alleviating Poverty:  
How To Make It Happen- Dr. Charles Nzulumike And Innocent C. Oli***

---

Schultz, T. P. (2002). "Why Governments should Invest more to Educate Girls". World Development, 30(2), pp. 207-225.

UNESCO, (2000). *Education For All Global Monitoring Report. Education for all by 2015*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO, (2003). *Education and Training of Women and the Girl Child in Paris*. <http://www-bekkc.c.edu/liberalart/images/parisfinal>. Retrieved 2012.

UNESCO, (2006). EFA Global Monitoring Report Literacy for Life. [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.phpURL\\_ID=35953URL\\_DO\\_TOPICURL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.phpURL_ID=35953URL_DO_TOPICURL_SECTION=201.html). Retrieved 2009.