
**NIGERIA EDUCATION AND GENDER EQUALITY: A POTENT
STRATEGY FOR ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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Abstract

Education by its design is an intellectual yeast that ferments sustainable development in all spheres of the economy. It is also the crucial link among all the sustainable development goals. Globally, in the year 2000, there were about 100 million children of primary school age out of school. Presently, the figure has dropped to 59 million. With 59 million children still out of school; the world has still not achieved equity in education. The focus of the paper is on the education of women and girls in the Northern Senatorial District of Cross River state Nigeria. 70% of women and girls in this part of Nigeria are still marginalised, uneducated and relegated to the background due to poverty, traditional norms, ignorance and so on. The paper is aimed at examining the importance of women education, because gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Its recommendation is that, the policies formulated, be translated and properly implemented especially in rural communities so that, a poor, rural girl can have equal opportunity of going to

school and gaining quality education like a city boy from a wealthy family. This is equity.

Globally, in 2000, there were almost 100 million children of primary school age that were out of school, presently, about fifteen years after there are about 59 million of such children. With fifty-nine million children still out of school, the world has still not achieved equity in education.

In Nigeria, a developing nation with a population of about 186 million people; over half of this population are women. It is sad to know that even with the free Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Basic Education (UBE) schemes in the country 61% of the women in Nigeria have no education as against 43% men, Acha (2009). The above figure shows that many girls are still not enrolled in school, (Anyebe, 2013). The present situation in Nigerian educational system points to the fact that there is inequality in educational opportunities in favour of the boys while girls stand out clearly as educationally disadvantaged group. Many reasons exist why formal education for females is unavailable to many; some of such reasons include cultural and traditional norms, beliefs and values. Some cultures believe that a woman's education would get in the way of her duties as a wife and mother. In some cases in Nigeria, girls marry at the age of twelve or thirteen, education to such is considered as a hindrance to the young woman's development. Another factor limiting women education is poverty and ignorance. In places where resources and school facilities are lacking, girl child enrolments are low because a choice must always be made in families between sending a boy or girl to school. When this happens, girls are the first to be denied schooling. The consequence of this is the high illiteracy level among female children and women.

Women in the rural areas are left in the dark as regards their educational privileges, the advantages of education and all the technological breakthroughs and modernization enjoyed by the urban women, they are therefore perpetually subjected to poverty, hard labour and ignorance. According to Afolabi (2000), those in the rural areas constitute 70% of the labour force in agriculture; they do this through hard labour and at the end, remain financially unrewarded as subsistent farmers, unable to access other basic necessities of life for qualitative living. They leave their off springs to wallow in the darkness of illiteracy and the pain of disease arising from hunger and malnutrition which ultimately results to untimely death. This is the sad situation of women in rural communities. The case of the Northern Cross River is not different.

It is on this premise that, this paper seeks to discuss Gender equality and its role on sustainable development in the Northern Senatorial District of Cross River State, Nigeria.

Cases of Gender Inequality in the Northern Zone of Cross River State, Nigeria

Cross River State is in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. The Northern District in Cross River State comprises of five local government areas namely: Yala, Ogoja, Bekwarra, Obudu and Obanliku. The local government areas have a common ancestry which makes their cultures and traditional beliefs the same. They are all descendants of one man called “Agba”. According to Ogar (2006) “Agba, it is said, had the following sons in chronological order, Alege, Bette, Bendi, Bekwarra and Igede. This is the origin of the much orchestrated slogan, Alege Agba, Bette Agba, Bendi Agba, Bekwarra Agba and Igede Agba”.

Gender inequality in this part of Nigeria is severe; women here had no place in the early literacy efforts brought in by the early missionaries. Attention was focussed only on the men; the women were relegated to the background, ignored, dehumanized and generally confined to the lower status. Women education which is a major tool that is expected to place them side by side with their male counterparts was not encouraged and is still not encouraged. Women and girls are in the dark, and all the government policies like gender equality, poverty eradication and so on are yet to be implemented or put into practice. “Women are still complete servants to their husbands” (Omagu, 2012).

According to UNESCO (2000), the rate of female children out of primary school is higher than that of male children in all the African countries where data is available. Until equal number of girls and boys are in school, it will be impossible to build the knowledge necessary to eradicate poverty and hunger, combat disease and ensure environmental sustainability. If there is no parity between boys and girls school enrolment, millions of children and women will continue to die carelessly placing the sustainable development agenda at risk.

Writing about the Igede people of Benue State in Nigeria, (Agogo, 2011) stated that access to western education by the girl-child and women was seen as a waste of resources. Women according to him were only expected to be seen and not heard and their roles ending in the kitchen. Girls represent nearly 60% of all children not enrolled in school, in violation of their right to education and a loss of talent and capacity that no society can long afford (UNICEF, 2000).

It is an abomination for women to claim equality with men, especially in decision making, or wanting to head the man under any circumstance. In a typical Nigerian society, women are not allowed to participate or even contribute during major decision making forums; they are also not allowed to own lands and property not to talk of participating in politics or political activities. Socially, women in the Northern Zone in Cross River State still suffer degrading treatment and are regarded as second- class citizens. Worst is that they have no say and are not consulted even in matters that concern them directly or intimately, for instance, it is abominable for a woman to profess love to a man, ask for sex or even make love

advances. Such a woman would be seen as wayward or not properly brought up by her parents. This treatment affects them emotionally and psychologically.

Conceptual Clarifications

Gender

Omoregie (2009) says “gender refers to society’s division of humanity, based on sex, into two distinctive categories. Gender guides how female and males think about themselves, how they interact with others, and what position they occupy in society as a whole. Thus, gender also operates as a dimension of social inequality. This inequality historically favoured males”.

Gender Equality

Gender equality refers to a situation where women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and potentials; are able to contribute equally to national, political, economic, social, emotional and cultural developments and benefits equally from the results. It also entails that the underlying causes of discrimination be systematically identified and removed in order to give men and women equal opportunities.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. At the United Nations sustainable development summit on the 25th of September 2015, world leaders adopted 2030 agenda for sustainable development which includes a set of 17 sustainable Development goals, to end poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and tackle climate change by 2030. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) otherwise known as the global goals build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which were adopted in 2000. Despite the success of the MDGs, the indignity of poverty and inequality has not ended for all. Women and girls of school age in rural villages and towns in Africa especially Nigeria are still out of school due to poverty, cultural beliefs and ignorance. After the UNDP summit, the UNDP administrator Helen Clark noted that “this agreement marks an important milestone in putting our world on an inclusive and sustainable course. If we all work together, we have a chance of meeting citizens’ aspirations for peace, prosperity and well-being and to preserve our planet”.

These Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) especially the fifth one which is to “Achieve Gender equality and empower all women and girls come 2030 can only be achieved if all women and girls of primary school age in rural areas and of poor socio-economic backgrounds are enrolled in school and given quality education like their male counterparts from rich and well-to-do parents in urban centres. This is because education is the crucial link between all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Factors Responsible for Gender Inequality in Northern Cross River State

Despite the fact that education is a basic human right and has been recognised as such since the 1948 adoptions of the universal declaration of human rights, obtaining equal educational opportunities for women in Nigeria has been challenging. It is believed that female children will eventually get married and become members of their husbands' families. So nothing or little is done to secure their futures in their various paternal families. Preference is thus given to the education of their male siblings forgetting that education bestows on an individual a disposition for a lifelong acquisition of knowledge, values, attitude, competence and even skills for being a good wife, keeping the home and nurturing the children.

The Nigerian national policy on education (2004) does not give preference to any gender in any educational programme in schools; it emphasizes equal access to education for all, irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities according to the child's ability. Yet some school programmes have been designated for men only because of the predominance of the male gender in the enrolment figures of such courses. The sciences, technologically based courses and more intellectual types of jobs, for instance are believed to be for the men only (Yerokun 2002).

Based on available data for primary school enrolment in the Northern Cross River State, it is realised that parents prefer to send their male children to school rather than send their female children. This is because it is believed that the male child will grow up to take over from his father and needs to be equipped while the female will get married and eventually belong to another family. As a result of this, over 50% of girls and women in this part are illiterate and ignorant.

Omagu (2012), states that Circumcision which the World Health Organization (WHO) defines as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is still practiced. It is an age-old practice which is believed to be customary. This mutilation imposes on women and the girl-child a catalogue of health complications and untold psychological problems. It is believed that by mutilating the female's genital organs, her sexuality will be controlled and her libido reduced. While their male counterparts are traditionally allowed to have concubines and marry as many wives as they desire.

According to Oganwu (1996), the Nigerian women and their counterparts in other African countries have been debased and dishonoured by the thought that every woman is supposed to consider motherhood as the principal purpose of her existence. She is expected to produce children, cook, mend and wash clothes and take care of men and be subordinate to male authority.

Most families in the Northern part of Cross River State, especially the less privileged ones, see children as a means of generating income. They therefore send their female children out to perform such economic activities as hawking, domestic home services and farm work from where they earn money to fend for themselves, their families and sponsor the education of their male children at the expense of the female ones.

Sexual Slavery; women and girls make up about 95% of victims of sexual exploitation-including sex trafficking. Women and children; mostly girls, are victims of sexual trafficking and prostitution both within Nigeria and across international borders. Some women in this part are sexual slaves even to their husbands; this is because sex is regarded as “sacred” and as such should not be discussed.

Child Marriage; in some communities, the female children are not sent to school like their male counterparts due to some cultural practices. Most Nigerian parents erroneously believe that sending girls to school may interfere with their marriage, which they consider constitute the primary mission of a female child (Nwideeduh, 1994). Child marriage or early marriage is majorly caused by poverty in the Northern Zone of Cross River State because; the bride price that is collected for the girl child is used to train her male siblings or given to them to pay the bride prices of their would-be wives. So early marriage here is a quick means of achieving economic gains for the family. Idoko and Anyebe (2013) have stated, and rightly too, that poverty compels many parents to give their daughters out in marriage earlier instead of sending them to school. These young girls who do not have access to education, contraception and reproductive health information and services are therefore exposed to recurrent, hasty sexual relationships and child birth before they are psychologically and physically mature, thus endangering their lives with medical conditions and challenges like: Vesico Vagina Fistula (VVF), disruption of education and long lasting emotional problems. In many developing countries such as Nigeria, child marriage and teenage pregnancy has been one of the major hindrances to the educational success of girls (UNICEF 2000). The implication of this is that majority or most of the teenagers in Northern Cross River State and the northern part of Nigeria are not enrolled in schools or do not complete primary education. This situation therefore affects everyone, from the immediate family, to the local community, the state and the nation as a whole.

Sexual Violence; Sexual assault disproportionately affects women. At least one in every six women has been a victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime according to Charity RAINN. Worldwide rape figure are hard to get or come by as rape is rarely reported due to the extreme level of stigmatisation cast on women that have been sexually assaulted.

In some countries, marital rape is seen as an offence. But in other countries, Nigeria inclusive, it is not. Women and girls are vulnerable to violence, such as sexual violence, marital violence and daily domestic violence emanating from cultural norms and practices.

Gender Equality and Development

International development cooperation has increasingly recognised the importance of addressing the issue of gender equality, not only to promote fundamental human rights, but also to create sustainable development. The fourth world conference on women held in Beijing in 1995, underscored the fundamental importance of

women's empowerment and full participation in all spheres of society to the achievement of equality, development and peace.

According to Akubue (2001) and Acha (2009) women form about half of the world population and any society which neglects such number of human resource potential cannot achieve any meaningful development. At the local and international level, population problems especially of women constitute the cornerstone of discussions about the gap between the actual number of women to employ, educate, equip etc. In Nigeria, the underestimation of female population growth has been blamed for the marginalization of women because the actual number is far higher than the number accounted for. See Aderant, (2002).

Education is the fulcrum on which every nation's development pivots. Denga (2015:1) asserts that "Education is the precursor, the harbinger and the propeller of national socio-economic, scientific, political, industrial and technological development".

According to Nzeneri (2010), education emphasizes skill training and skill acquisition which are relevant to the adults, youths and children.

Since education is the driving force behind a nations growth, and also the crucial link among all the sustainable development goals, a nation cannot grow or develop without gender equality which is giving the male child and girl child and even adult women equal rights to education, skill training and skill acquisition.

William (2000) in Afolabi (2012) states that; Majority of these women are in the rural areas hence there is prevalence of poverty in the rural areas. Education therefore is needed in the rural areas to lift the women's mind above petty life styles. Education is the bed rock of any meaningful national and sustainable development because it liberates the mind from superstition and other repressive and retrogressive mind-sets. It is a powerful tool or the central tool for achieving sustainable development.

Iloegbunam (2006), said education, is a weapon for social development, equality and justice. Providing women with equal opportunity for education would foster the repositioning of women socially, economically and even politically since women are mothers of tomorrow's nation.

Education is the linking force between gender equality and sustainable development. This can be seen thus:

- Increasing girls' education reduces infant and maternal mortality because educated mothers have fewer pregnancies, are less likely to give birth as teenagers, and are able to seek and negotiate lifesaving health care services for themselves and their young children.
- Reduces the number of girls giving birth before age 17, promotes healthier, smaller families. If all women have primary education, early birth rate would fall and mortality rate for children under five years would also fall.

- An educated woman is most likely to send her own child to school. Thereby giving them the opportunity to succeed and the educational cycle continues in the family (irrespective of gender).
- An Educated woman tends to be healthier, wiser, earn income and support her husband, participate in the labour force, have fewer children and take care of them. This would lead to the development of her family, community and nation as a whole.

The Way Forward

- Government should enact and strictly enforce laws that would deal decisively with parents who see the female children as money making assets by sending them out to hawk for the family and giving them out into marriage before maturity when they should actually be in school.
- The entire Nigerian public should live above the stereotype that education is meant for boys and not for girls, and that girls are supposed to learn to be good housewives and mothers only. They should realise that both girls and boys are their children and should be given equal opportunities to grow.
- All cultural and traditional practices which may tend to enhance gender inequality in education should be discouraged at all levels of education.
- Government (Federal, State and Local) should give financial assistance through scholarships or bursaries to female students.
- The gap between the school enrolment of the male and female children in the rural areas should be bridged.
- The gender equality campaign should be effectively monitored to reach the grass root rather than broadcasting it from the top and policies should be fully translated implemented in the rural areas.
- Government policies should include the schooling and sensitization of community heads, chiefs (leaders of thought) and men on the importance of women education so that the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) which is to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” would be achievable by the year 2030.
- Adult and continuing education centres in the rural areas should be revived so that women who did not have the opportunity of going to school in their early years would have the opportunity of enrolling in these centres and acquiring knowledge and skills for self-development, self-actualization and national development.
- Government and non-governmental organisations should initiate periodic educational programmes that target the rural women.
- Some of the gains of democracy should be ploughed back into the rural areas, for instance, roads, electricity, schools, hospitals and other social amenities. These are marks of modernization which are necessary to bring the rural people’s minds to the reality of the present new age.

Conclusion

The fact that education is the crucial link among all the sustainable development goals cannot be underestimated, it is said that educating a woman is educating a nation. So this paper concludes that women education in the rural areas be encouraged as this will result in the development of the family, community and the nation as a whole, so that the 2030 Sustainable Development agenda will be achieved even in the remotest part of the world.

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