

Role of Education in Promoting Gender Equality and Women Empowerment: Implication for Social Justice and Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Equal educational opportunities for all have been the major concern of well-meaning individuals all over the world. As a result, governments and non-governmental agencies are poised to propagate the gospel through policy provision, advocacy, etc., which encourage participants to appreciate the need to receive functional education at different levels of education. In Nigeria, efforts that will encourage better participation and invariably lead to national development was put in place through the review of the Nigeria's National Policy on Education (FGN 2013). The changes in this policy document became imperative as a result of the demands from international bodies such as United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Education for All (EFA), and other interested citizens, etc. This study examined the role of education in promoting gender equality and women empowerment using critical indicators such as enrolment and graduation rate at the primary, secondary and open and distance learning in Nigeria. The paper contends that the attainment of gender equality and women empowerment are sine qua non to effective education policy implementation and monitoring. It was therefore concluded that the obvious implication for social justice and development in Nigeria can be sustained through well articulated education for all.

Keywords: Gender equality, Women empowerment, social justice, Nigeria, development.

Introduction

Governments as well as stakeholders over time have recognized education as the single most potent instrument for the emancipation of the people and also most vital element in combating poverty, empowering the citizenry and promoting human rights. Researchers observed that education is a sure pathway to the liberation of the mind and improvement of socio-economic status of people (Okeke, 1995); enhances healthy living, empowers the masses and leads to higher productivity of nations (Koko, Tawari & Ofoegbu, 1995); and a tool that prepares people for the world of work (Ebong, 2006).

Education is globally acknowledged the greatest legacy anyone or governments can bequeath its citizenry and expect high dividend and socio-economic gains. That was why the Nigerian government placed so much emphasis on its provision in the Federal Constitution (1999) and in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013). For instance, the National Policy on Education, Section 1, sub-section 6c, (2004 and 2013 6th ed.) which restates Nigeria's national goals and the philosophy of education, stipulates one of the goals of education in Nigeria as;

The provision of equal access to qualitative educational opportunities for all citizens at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels both within and outside the formal school system.

Nigeria's philosophy of education which is based on some set of beliefs also recognizes education as an instrument for national development and social change. It therefore states that education is compulsory and a right of every Nigerian irrespective of gender, social status, religion, etc., and any peculiar individual challenges. This inputs by implication, indicate that government and its agencies will ensure unhindered access to education based on gender equality.

In order to further project government's good intentions, the then Honourable Minister of Education stated, *inter alia*, "our covenant with every Nigerian child therefore, is access to quality education relevant to the need of the Nigerian economy" (FGN 2013:iii). Furthermore, it was also stated that basic education is, by law, compulsory

for all children of school age in Nigeria. In other words, every Nigerian child irrespective of gender must be allowed access to primary education (basic) which runs through age 5 to 15 years. Unfortunately, most regions of the country still record high level turnover in basic primary education. Children who enroll in basic education sometimes are withdrawn on flimsy excuses and the majority of the affected persons are girls. Laudable as these provisions may be, the major concern is the extent the government and its agencies pursue the implementation to its logical achievement.

The United Nations (1996), as cited in Ebong (2006), posit that “education is for all a human right to foster equality, development, personal interaction and peace”. To buttress these points, the Federal Republic of Nigeria’s Constitution makes provision for “education for all irrespective of sex, age, etc”. Unfortunately, experience abound which indicate that inequality still exists particularly in West Africa where Nigeria belong. Alele-William (1993); Okolo (2001); Koko (2003), and Yeba (2013) all agree in their separate works that gender inequality exist at all level of education in Nigeria and in West African country such as Cameroon.

In Nigeria, girls’ education when compared with that of boys is narrowing, although large disparities still exist at the North-east geo-political zone as a result of insurgency. With the displacement of people of the region and the recent abduction of secondary school girls by Boko Haram, many families are scared of sending their female children to school and this creates more gaps in enrolment. The implication of the above trend is that if care is not taken Nigeria may not be able to meet the Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality and Women Empowerment of the United Nations (UN, 2018). We must appreciate the fact that equal access to all levels of education is foundation for all other developmental goals. Education plays key roles in individual emancipation and national development.

The important role education can play in closing the gender gap between boys and girls in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. When boys and girls are given equal opportunities to acquire functional education in Nigeria, then women empowerment in diverse social settings can be guaranteed. Ejumudo (2008) contend that the task of achieving gender equality in Nigeria requires not just passive policies, as outlined. All it requires is proactive actions by stakeholders and parents alike towards effective monitoring and follow-up of the implementation processes.

The Problem

In spite of the efforts put in place by governments and interested individuals in pursuing gender parity in education, research reports and observations still show that disparity still exists in favour of males (Igbuzor, 2006; Koko, 2008 and Ejumudo, 2013). In Nigeria, adequate policy provisions are provided by government towards effective participation of male and female children to all levels of education. However, the traditional dictates of our culture poses impediment to active participation of the girl child to education at different levels. At basic primary education for example, girls are unfortunately made to take care of their younger siblings while their brothers go to school or be given out as helps to relations and friends who may use them for child labour. The experience of the first author of this article is a typical example. Her education was truncated after primary school for her other male siblings, after which she never regained that opportunity until adulthood through distance learning. This decision may have been influenced by the lack of importance given to female education by our culture and parents which dictates that the man is always the breadwinner and head of the family while the woman is domestic servant whose major role is to care for family needs. Thus, the important role education plays in promoting women emancipation and empowerment is therefore undermined. When one gender of the society is deprived the opportunity of education to the benefit of the other, what then is the implication to social justice and development in Nigeria? This is a major concern to the authors and forms the problem of the study. Against this backdrop therefore, the study examined the role of education in promoting gender equality and women empowerment. It will further highlight the implication of the observed trend on social justice and development in Nigeria.

The Role of Education in Promoting Gender Equality in Nigeria.

Gender has been described as the social attributes and opportunities associated with being a man or a woman, as well as the relationship between boys and girls. However, these attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are often learned through societal socialization processes.

Gender equality on the other hand, refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities open to women and men, boys and girls in a given society (Afu, Gbobo, Ukofia & Itakure (2017). Equality can therefore be measured when men and women, boys and girls enjoy same rights and privileges across all sectors of the economy including education. In line with this, United Nations (2003) contend that equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. In agreement with this input, the question that comes to mind is, do both males and females in Nigeria enjoy equal right to education without a fight?

Equalization of education does not come easy without concerted efforts of all and sundry to drive its implementation processes. In Nigeria for example, what are the follow-up activities towards government's policy directive on compulsory education for all? To what extent are the people in tandem with the recent policy that provide compulsory education through the foundational level (basic 1 – 9) to the higher education levels and its consequences for non-compliance? At the secondary education level, what is the statistic of children who transit from the basic education based on gender?

Haralambos & Holborn (2004) contend that schools operate as meritocratic institutions where the same standards are applied to all students irrespective of ascribed characteristics such as social class, gender, family background etc. This assertion supports the Federal Republic of Nigeria's National Policy on Education which prescribes equal access to qualitative educational opportunities for all citizens.

Education that will promote gender equality entails a compulsory enrolment of a girl child and boy child in at least basic education without interruption until completion. But where one gender, either boy or girl's education is disrupted as a result of one flimsy excuse or the other as is mostly the case in many sectors of Nigeria, then whoever is so affected has been disenfranchised and denied equal right to education.

The Nigerian government in her quest to enforce free and compulsory education at the foundational levels, restructured its provision from the old 6-3-3-4 (six years primary, 3 years junior secondary, 3 years senior secondary and 4 years tertiary education), to 9-3-4 (9 years basic education (6 years primary and 3 years junior primary education combined), 3 years senior secondary and 4 years tertiary education). This means that a child who enrolls into school is expected to spend nine consistent and uninterrupted years (age 5 – 15) in order to at least acquire functional basic education. This is a level that can prepare a child with requisite knowledge and skills for economic and social emancipation as well as aspire for secondary education. Unfortunately, experience shows that some parents or guardians after the first six years in school (under the old system) withdraw their children without recourse to government's policy of un-interruption.

The Nigeria's National Policy on Education describes post-basic education (senior secondary education) as the education male and female children receive after a successful completion of basic education and passing the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). It is a level of education that is designed as a means of preparing its participants for the world of work, wealth creation and entrepreneurship (FGN 2013). Pathetically, children that were withdrawn at the basic education level for whatever reason(s) eventually loses part of their productive years to acquire quality education and are automatically denied their livelihood and aspirations in life to some extent.

Gender inequality in education is still prominent in different parts of Nigeria. For instance, the northern states of Nigeria are still recording low female participation and enrolment in education at different levels. At the South-East geo-political zones particularly Anambra, Ebonyi, and Enugu, observation shows that more girls are in schools while boys' enrolments are depleting. Looking at this phenomenon holistically, a UNESCO Country

Report of Nigeria (2004) reveals that about 15.7 million (16%) school aged children are not enrolled in any formal institution. Also, Table 1 below shows the enrolment of children into Junior Secondary schools in Nigeria from 2000 to 2003 shows a disparity between male and female children (FME 2004).

Table 1: Percentage Enrolment into Junior Secondary School (Basic 7-9) in Nigeria

Gender	YEAR			
	2000 N/%	2001 N/%	2002 N/%	2003 N/%
Male	448,016 (55.5%)	525,760 (56%)	530,827 (56.35%)	1,986,460 (56.67%)
Female	358,795 (44.48%)	413,143 (44%)	411,057 (43.65%)	1,518,440 (43.32%)
	806,811	938,903	941,884	3,504,900

Source: FME (2004), Country Report of Nigeria.

The outlined record clearly shows that education that will promote gender equality is still a mirage in Nigeria. Ezeogbo (2007) posits that it is only education that can help the society give women their rightful positions and places. Accordingly, education equips an individual's growth and that of a nation. In fact, educating a woman can never be waste of resources but an investment well targeted at national development. Observation shows that when both boys and girls are educated, the nation gains.

Education and Women Empowerment in Nigeria

So much have been said in this paper in respect of education provision, participation and possible benefits to men and women globally and Nigeria in particular. The role of education in promoting women empowerment cannot be over-emphasized. Lakshmi Puri (2018) posits that "gender equality and women's empowerment central to sustainable development". Invariably, education is a sure key to unlock women's potentials for empowerment. This is further buttressed by The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (2018) which states that;

Providing women and girls with equal access for education, health care, decent work and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity at large.

Women constitute more than fifty per cent of the population of Nigeria. Yet, when it comes to empowering the women in order to enable them take their rightful place in decision-making and governance, they face major constraints. Even though Nigerian government has made adequate provisions for equal education of male and female citizens, the literacy level of women at the higher levels of education still remains low and thus, has negative influence on their empowerment. Agreed that access to education in Nigeria have generally improved, but the concern here is sustenance since the country is facing instability from time to time and women bear the biggest burden. Most often, when a family loses the male family head, children are withdrawn from school. Worst still, the withdrawn child or children now suffer neglect and sometimes used for child labour in order to raise income for the family.

Many factors affect women access to education which in effect influences their empowerment. These factors have been severally documented as socio-economic, socio-political, socio-cultural and to some extent school-related (Parchure & Soman, 2017; Koko, 2008 & 2003). Socio-economic emancipation enable women to provide missed educational opportunities for themselves and their children even it requires they embark on adult literacy later in life. When women acquire functional literacy, they become equal participants with men in decision-making organs.

The five components of women empowerment according to Parchure & Soman (2017) include; women's sense of self-worth; (2) right to have and to determine choices; (3) right to have access to opportunities and resources; (4) ability to influence, (5) provide the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order nationally and internationally. The actualization of women empowerment through education in Nigeria as outlined above, seem to be difficult and far-fetched. A situation where women are seen as inferior to their men-folks and are therefore given the back bench or secondary consideration in matters that concerns them, leaves a lot of concern. For example, Koko (2008) in her study of "Academic Women Managers in Nigerian Universities" found that only 17 per cent of women were members of Senate, while 4% only were occupying positions of leadership (Provosts/Deans/Directors) in the two universities in the South-south geo-political zone of Nigeria in that year. Unfortunately, the requirements for employment and appointment into academic positions are same irrespective of gender. Yet, women are often disenfranchised when it comes to appointments. This is a clear indication that education does not in all cases open avenue for women empowerment without a fight. University management positions encompass the major decision-making organs within and outside the systems in Nigeria and are an essential unit that can enable women's voices to be heard. To buttress this observation, Koko (2000 and 2003) contend that most often, male academics are given first consideration when recommendations for appointments are made even when there are more qualified senior female candidates.

The positive role of education in promoting women empowerment has become a burning issue universally. As a result, many international, national and local agencies have embarked on diverse sensitization programmes to awake the minds of people to appreciate the importance of education in all spheres of life. Specifically, to achieve gender equality in education as a means to women empowerment requires concerted efforts of all and sundry towards the motivation of women to actualize their dreams in line with the Millenium Development Goals of the United Nations and Federal Republic of Nigeria's policy documents.

Education, Gender Equality and Women Empowerment: Implication to Social Justice and National Development.

Social justice is at the core of the United Nations drive for peace, gender parity, dignity and human rights within nations. The United Nations therefore describes social justice as the underlying principles for peaceful and prosperous co-existence within nations, which is achieved when those in position remove societal barriers of gender, age, etc., that inhibit human advancement (Leadership Newspaper, 2018).

Since it has been acknowledged that education equips its recipients for personal growth and national development, all efforts should be put in place to ensure gender parity in its acquisition. It has been acknowledged that gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but an essential ground for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable community. Talents and abilities well harnessed through education will enable women to enjoy their God-given potentials and contribute to national development. Equity and fairness should therefore drive government's efforts towards educational access, opportunities and advancement.

When women are denied their right to education as a result of obnoxious societal prescriptions, half of their potentials for growth and development are short changed. Akinbi & Akinbi (2015) are of the opinion that women and girls' education would not only contribute to move the nation forward economically and otherwise, it would also go a long way to liberate the women folk from dependency to independence. There is therefore, the need to equip the women with education that will enable them adequately face the challenges and realities of life in Nigeria and compete favourably with their male counterparts. Education in its various forms, formal, informal and non-formal is imperative for the women to wipe out the obvious obstacles they face in exercising their rights and privileges in society. Women can exercise their rights socially, politically and economically as well as redeem their self esteem and image through education.

When one considers the number of women in politics in Nigeria when compared to that of men, it is obvious that the society has not been fair to the women. In fact, it is hard to find a woman in most governments in the north. In states that give women opportunities, however record very low percentage. Yet, women are making their

waves in all spheres of life using education but are not allowed to utilize their full potentials in the society. Gender equality is a catalyst for social justice and national development in Nigeria.

Conclusions

This paper has identified the importance of education towards the empowerment of the masses. However, evidence abound which suggest that thus far, inequality in the education of boys and girls, men and women in Nigeria is a major hindrance to the achievement of Millenium Development Goal 5 of the United Nations and the educational policy provisions of the Nigerian government. Even though education gap has narrowed substantially at the foundational levels (basic education), it is not so at the other levels (senior secondary and higher education). Again, at vulnerable regions of the country, for instance Niger Delta states and the North East where there is pronounced Militancy, kidnapping and instability as a result of insurgency, the narrowing gaps are becoming even more prominent and alarming. Children are no longer going to schools in these regions and parents are not eager to persuade their attendance.

Obviously, education is a panacea for promoting women empowerment and national development. When you train a woman, you train society. On the other hand, when women are disenfranchised from acquiring quality and functional education their contributions to national development becomes stunted. This by implication means women's contributions to the family, communities and larger society becomes unattainable. The law of equity and fairness demand that Nigeria's government and stakeholders consciously design workable policies that will encourage women to actively participate in school attendance. However, the authors believe that when equality in education is rigorously pursued and attained, Nigeria will be heading to the achievement of social justice, fairness and development of its teeming female citizenry.

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