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## **Gender Accessibility and Equality in Education: The Implication to Manpower Development in Nigeria**

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#### **Abstract**

*There seem to be a global progress made regarding equity between men and women in the field of education. In spite of this, the educational gap between both sexes has not been bridged in Nigeria. Even with the universal declaration of Human Rights in 1948, article 26 for instance, estimates reveal that more than half a billion adult women aged 15 and above were illiterate in 1990, which is 63 percent of all illiterates in the world. It is in recognition of this that the UNICEF strongly raised the issue of removing constraints and disparities that will place the girl child education at a disadvantaged position. This paper appraises the gender differences in education accessibility and equality of Nigerians. It equally assessed some of the constraints to gender equality in education and concludes that gender imbalance in education accessibility and equality if not addressed will have an adverse effect to manpower development in Nigeria.*

## **Introduction**

Gender inequality in education accessibility exists mostly in developing countries. This syndrome if allowed to continue is capable of eating up the foundation of any development in the country. To avoid this, there is need to provide educational opportunities for the girls so that they can develop side by side with men. The national policy on education (2004) stipulates that every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities. In spite of the roles that women play in national development, it has been observed the education system of most developing countries like Nigeria does not adequately enhance female education. This situation has impacted negatively not only on women's access to education but on their retention and performance.

Education is the bedrock of women empowerment. An educated woman not only acquires skills and develops her abilities and attitude, but also exhibits other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to the society in which she lives, as an asset to her society. Most men do not realize that just as they need to consolidate their position in the society through education, women need equal access to education for equal identity, status, elevation and positive contribution towards national development.

## **Conceptual explanation**

### **Gender**

Gender is defined by Basson (1991) as a psychological term describing behaviour and attributes expected of individuals on the basis of being born either a male or a female. Keller (1991), writing on the embarrassing nature of gender observes that, it is a cultural construct developed by the society to distinguish the roles, behaviours, mental and emotional characteristics between males and females. Azikiwe (1993) asserted that gender is obvious from birth and children are socialized very early into appropriate sex-typed occupations. Hence gender differential valuation of male and female have been viewed as an integral part of the socialization process and the development of the adult male and female personalities.

### **Education**

Education is vital in the promotion and sustenance of national development. Arinze (2008) sees education as the process of creating awareness to increase the knowledge of an individual. According to O'Donnell (2005), education is the process by which people develop their faculties in order that they may play their part in society. It also means acquiring functional literacy and

numeracy, knowledge and skills for productive activity. Peters (1989), opines that education is the process of inculcating that which is worthwhile in an individual. Education is a continuous process, which involves the transmission of societal accepted values, skills, attitudes and virtue for proper development of an individual for positive contribution to his society.

### **Gender differences in education accessibility and equality in Nigeria**

Majority of Nigerian women folk in Nigeria seem to have been denied access to education. In confirmation of this assertion, Hodges (2001) notes that Nigeria women, like women the world over and especially in most part of the developing world, continue to face various forms of discrimination which limit their opportunities to develop their full potentials on the basis of equality with men. Such areas of discrimination include: education, employment, property and inheritance rights and other opportunities. Assessing the place of women in education accessibility, Ogada (2001) laments that in Nigeria women do not have equal access with men to education especially at the tertiary level, a trend attributed to gender discrimination. Similarly, Mgbada (2003) argues that men and women do not have equal access to education; he observes that in some parts of Nigeria most of the young girls are not given opportunity to go to school because their parents would prefer them married for their bride price.

Ogunsola (2004) observed that the lukewarm attitude towards women education is not peculiar to Nigeria alone but a general trend throughout the world. Anyanwu (1999) equally observed that the available data on primary secondary and tertiary institution education enrolment in Nigeria shows that male usually outnumbered the female since the colonial days. This is because the females are rated second class citizens whose roles are limited to domestic activities and baby rearing.

### **Constraints to gender equality in education in Nigeria**

#### **Cultural barriers**

Culture, over the years has continued to play a leading role and obstacle to gender equality in education in Nigeria. The customs and traditions of different communities still dictate the role that women play. Though women are bonafide members of these communities, they have no control over their affairs. Some of the cultural obstacles to women education include subjecting women to early marriage and educating the boys in place of the girls. Girls according to Ofoegbu (1999) are deemed to be inferior or simply

destined to play the roles of wife and mother and simply for 'home consumption' (that is in the kitchen).

Again, violence against women like rape, assault, battery and other forms of molestation are perpetrated because of the assumed ignorance of the position the women occupy in the home. Also is the inherent fear that educated women are loose in morals and better informed, and can compete with men. These cultural practices not only deny women the roles they can play in development but also hinder them from acquiring the skills and knowledge that they ought to acquire which will empower them and make them have self confidence and be self-reliant.

In schools today, some professions are indirectly restricted to males especially the sciences. At the secondary and higher institutions of learning, the system tends to prepare girls for what Bakari (2001) called soft profession and domestic work. Ogunsola (2004) observed that girls are discouraged from mathematics and other sciences. If a girl is bright and clever, she is told that she would not find a husband. Thus, the school environment favours male and encourages them to perform better in the sciences. Career counselors in schools guide and condition girls minds and encourage them to choose what is considered female discipline.

### **Religious barriers**

Religion plays a leading role and obstacle to gender equality in education in Nigeria. If we take Islamic religion for example, the totality of the ways of life of a Muslim is dictated by the religion. Any act or behaviour contrary to the teaching of the religion is strongly opposed. Jades and Dabban (1996) observed that in Islamic early marriage does not mean withdrawing girls from school but purely to protect them. In co-educational institutions, both boys and girls attend classes together and this negates the tenets of Islam religion. This will automatically force the married Muslim girls to keep away from school just to respect the beliefs and virtues of Islamic religion. Also Jadas and Dabban (1996) discovered that "the kind of dress used as uniform which exposes a greater part of the female's body discourages parents from sending their female children to school". This indecent way of dressing may be viewed by some illiterate parents as a strong factor that discourages parents from sending their daughters to school.

### **Economic factors**

In some parts of Nigeria, it is a known fact that the input of the girl child into the family income is so high that it becomes economically unwise to allow

such a child to go to school. Examples of such inputs include generating income by way of hawking food items. The girl child who helps with the house hold chores and look after the younger ones which relieves the parents of employing paid house helps. This therefore reduces financial burden on the family.

Another reason can be attributed to the rising unemployment and economic hardship which is compelling some parents to withdraw their children from school especially the female ones. In addition, poverty compels many parents to marry off their daughters to wealthy men instead of sending them to school. This is because education is so expensive that parents do not consider the returns of girl child education as high as that of the boys.

### **The implications of gender accessibility and equality in education to manpower development in Nigeria**

Women make up more than half of the Nigeria population. For them to face the challenges of our time require they have access to the benefits of formal and informal education to the same level and of the same quality as that given to the men. Only in this way can woman provide their full inputs to the socio-economic development of Nigeria.

Acquisition of knowledge is one of the pre-requisites of manpower development. Women education provides for women's participation in national development under equal conditions and with equal benefits. As more and more women are allowed to become educated, the health of the nation improves e.g. Ballara (1992) in study undertake by the United Nations in conjunction with non-Governmental organizations group on women development pointed out that women's education plays important role in reducing infant mortality, increasing life expectancy of future generation and improve child rearing and development. It has shown to have a positive impact on reducing birth rate, especially when supported by family planning project. Education leads to more knowledge and understanding of hygiene, child and mother nutrition (especially during pregnancy), control and prevention of diseases, general health practices and child care. It enables mothers to improve their own health as well as that of their infants, their family and community. The implication here is that if we want a healthy nation, our women must be educated.

With rising education among women, there will also be a rise of the number of women in the labour force. Women's education increases productivity and self-employment in the informal sector especially among rural women in

relation to production incentives, marketing facilities, distribution of seeds and fertilizers and rural extension programmes.

Educating women also has implication for agricultural practices. Women are known to be fully involved in all stages of the food production processes i.e. from hoeing, weeding, fertilizing, harvesting and threshing grains to storing produce and buying and selling in the market. But protecting and conserving the environment while increasing production is difficult if women are unaware of the effect of their agricultural practices and how they relate to family health and well being. If not educated, they will be unable to make proper use of any innovation in this area. To decide whether or not to use a particular fertilizer, made of transportation or fumigant depends on knowing about their effects on the environment.

It is generally agreed that educational level of parents is reflected in the attitudes and values they transmit to their offspring. Women spend more time with their children than men do and it is through them that children receive their first perception of the world, mothers transmit habits, attitudes, values and knowledge. Women continue to play important role as educators; and the higher the educational level of the mother, the more effective she is able to transmit the knowledge required for their children to achieve a better quality of life. Mothers who dropout prematurely from educational system, or are functionally illiterate, often have low self esteem and are forced to perform unrewarding work. Such women perceive their lives as patterns of failure and thus transmit negative messages to their offspring, who consequently are subjected to an economic climate that perpetuates conditions of poverty and deprivation.

### **Measures that can promote gender harmony and balance**

Going by the millennium development goals and targets for 2015 of which Nigeria is a signatory on promoting gender equality. Empowering women and ensuring 100 percent universal primary education, there is need for federal government to legislate on free and compulsory universal primary education for all young ones up to the junior secondary school level, however its compulsion for parents to send their children to the school must be backed up with strict legislation against early marriage and child labour and sometimes jail term for defaulters.

Women or girls pursuing men dominated course like the science, mathematics, engineering and other vocational studies should be given enhanced bursaries and scholarships by governments. According to Ogunsola

(2004), the education of women give them a better chance to control their lives, to earn money, to have a better bargaining and decision making power in the home, to be better mothers and to have improved relationship with their spouses. Girls should be encouraged to role model successful women like Dora Akunyili, Grace Alele Williams, Oby Ezekwesili, etc. who have made their marks in national development.

Ogada (2001), opined that gender balance can also be enhanced if women could mobilize their husbands support, through love and mutual respect. According to her, since women are formidable forces in marital relationship, they could convince their partner into seeing the merit of highly educated women and assist them to be such. Indeed most husbands derived joy and pride in their wives achievements. Efforts should be made by women professionals and academics to provide assistance through workshops, training, seminar, and conferences for enhancing the productivity of the women.

Boys should be educated about equality when they are young building their potentialities. According to Okeke (2005), boys should be taught that gender equality is something normal so as to end poverty of all human race regardless of sex. In addition, curricular in schools should be reviewed with a view of removing all forms of gender biases in content. Curriculum in history and social studies should include more of the prominent contributions of women in national development and peacemaking processes as exemplified by the roles of Madam Tinubu and Queen Amina of the past, Prof. Dora Akunyili, Dr. Mrs Okonjo Iweala and Oby Ezekwesili of our contemporary times. This will generate values and improve general image of women.

### **Conclusion**

Illiteracy is one of the symptoms of a very dangerous disease which is inequality, exploitation and poverty. Without attacking the disease, we cannot remove the symptoms. The disease can only be attacked through equal education opportunity and accessibility for boys and girls. Although the level of awareness among women is increasing day by day, the women folk for cultural reasons are being marginalized and not offered equal opportunities as their male counterparts. Gender imbalances in education equality and accessibility if not properly addressed will have an adverse effect to manpower development in Nigeria.

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