

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND IMPACT OF WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN FORMAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

Girl's educational opportunities tend to be circumscribed by patriarchal attitude. Lack of education has been a strong visible barrier to female participation in the formal sector. The social pressures on females such as early marriage and other extraneous factors as well as consideration of female education as secondary to that of boys and certain inhibitive religious practices are the major causes of the high illiteracy rate amongst women. As the impact of teenage pregnancy and early marriage make abundantly clear, girls are at a double disadvantage in educational access especially in the Northern part of the country where these practice are mostly widespread. Parents attach greater importance to the education of boys than girls. This is always the likelihood when the parents lack resources to enrol all children in school. In some families, investing in girl's education is regarded as investing for the benefit of the family she will eventually marry into. This argument holds in particular for higher education, which involves greater expenditure and is seen to be less necessary for female. This paper through the use of secondary sources attempt the historical background of women's education in Nigeria, which later led to their involvement in formal education sector bringing to an end female inferiority complex established from childhood through social interactions in the home.

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**Keywords:** Extraneous factors, Teenage pregnancy, Social interactions

## Introduction

Education is first and foremost a social tool that is imperative for the continued survival and growth of the human society. Against this background, it is worthy of note to mention that education whether formal or informal, assumes a heavy social context since education generally concerns itself with the imparting of knowledge in people.

As observed by Okafor (1971) & Ali (1988) Education ideally trains manpower for the economy, it also helps to fully develop the potentials of individuals and equally help such individuals consummate employment opportunities. Thus, since education is a critical variable in modern work situations, formal education enhances labour force participation of women.

Shaheed (1995) argued that women's involvement in formal education broadens their experience and also gives them access to new resources and skills. To a very large extent, it is to be understood that education is the main tool for imparting skills and attitudes relevant to the contribution of the individual concerned to natural development. Traditionally, Nigerian Society does not see much importance in women's education, but rather in the domestic tasks. In view of this the woman's role has come to be limited to sexual and commercial labour, satisfying the sexual needs of men, working in the fields, carrying loads, tending babies and preparing food (Hammond & Jablav1992). Turning an historical lens on women's

involvement in formal education helps demonstrate that discrimination against them sometimes overt and other times quite unawares has led to limited expectations for where, how and why women should participate in education. The belief that they would not be able to use advanced schooling led to concerns that their movement into certain fields was inappropriate or unfair to men. Invariably, this goes against what Schaeffer (2005) argued that education depicts individuals involvement informal training for the purpose of acquiring basic knowledge, skills and expertise necessary for living a meaningful and impactful life, generally aims at the development of human beliefs.

Interestingly, the high illiteracy rate among Nigerian women is the consequence of the interplay of several factors, including sex stereotyping and forced early marriages. In his argument Adamu (1987) identified culture among the Hausa Fulani ethnic group of Northern Nigeria as one of the greatest problem confronting women's education. As at the period when universal free primary education between 1975 and 1984 was in operation statistics provided by the Federal Ministry of Education (1985) indicate gender discrimination in access to basic education in the extreme north when compared to the Southern states. This trend could be attributed to early marriage of females, which remains a common phenomenon by the Hausa Fulani ethnic groups.

It is the contention of this paper in view of the above statements to argue that the number of women who have acquired formal education at the earlier stage is disproportionate to the number involved in the labour sector at that period. It observes unequal access to educational opportunities as the bedrock of ignorance and powerlessness associated with women's social disempowerment in Nigeria.

### **Women and Formal Education in Nigeria**

Historically, it is of significant to mention that earlier education in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia inclusive was available mainly for men. Against this backdrop, women were from the onset disadvantaged in acquisition of formal education talk less of having opportunities in the formal employment sector.

Education acquired by the women initially was to meet the expectation of domestic needs. Avalos (2003) pointed out that this situation was not peculiar to Nigeria alone but even in Latin America where women education was to enable them perform domestic tasks and in raising children.

Be that as it may, formal education introduced by the colonial masters brought little or no changes as Okoro (1993) noted that Christian missionaries founded the first formal school in Nigeria. Further afield, as soon as the Wesley Methodist mission led by Reverend Thomas Birch Freeman established the first school, Roman Catholic Mission Anglican Missionary and host of other followed suit. Lagos Anglican Grammar School was founded in 1859 by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and this was the first secondary school to be established in Nigeria. In 1878 the Roman Catholic Mission founded St. Gregory's College and Methodist Boys High School was established by the Wesleyan Methodist Mission.

Indeed, to a considerable extent one would have expected that colonial education introduced in Nigeria would change and amend the existing distribution of power between men and women educationally as Nmadu (2000) observed but reverse was the case. The colonial conception of gender conspicuously marginalized the women folk, while it privileged men. Mama (1997) asserts that colonial exclusion of women from most sectors of the formal labour market for domestic works engagement which were largely unrewarded has been observed as one of the most formidable factors responsible for women's marginal significance in contemporary African societies. Undoubtedly, the missionary venture in education was borne out of the desire to use the school and its curriculum to reinforce church doctrine as opined by Anugwom (2009).Not basically to have women educated, but the

colonial masters were in dire needs of teachers as well clerks in order to support manpower to run the colony.

Interestingly, education at this time was neither the product of the social exigencies of the country nor rooted in the socio-cultural reality of Nigeria. Surprisingly, the overriding need to retain those already in the fold relegated secular education to the background. Along the same line, the educational system put in place was largely divorced from the life of the people especially women and emphasized aspects of education with little or no contribution to natural development.

According to Omolewa (2002) the colonial system of education was primarily geared toward meeting the manpower need of the colonial government that obviously alienated women from educational and economic opportunities. As Ojo (2002) equally noted, women in Nigeria are harder-hit than men by poverty due to the non-challant emphasis placed on female education including the prevalence of early marriage which further tend to impoverish women folk generally subjecting them to statutory discrimination. With the passage of time, women's participation in formal education improved tremendously as this will relief them from the grip of traditional practices and to promote their emancipation demystifying retrogressive customs and transforming attitude towards them.

It is worthy of note to mention that women's participation in education would reduce or minimize the rate at which they are being forced into marriages when they should be in schools. Par adventure, in the absence of guaranteed free education, parent are forced to choose which of the children to send to school and most of them will gladly choose sons. Albeit the,educational history of girls and women is one of continually trying to move from the margins to the mainstream.

### **Impact/Expectation of Women's Educational Participation**

Although bias has existed from the traditional Nigerian society against women's involvement in formal education perhaps there is need for women to be liberated of this ugly spell in order for them to contribute to national development.

Acker (1994) argued that one dominant theoretical perspective on women education and economic development or empowerment is the women in development (WID) approach which was made popular by the World Bank and other UN agencies. This approach was based on the assumption that education leads to economic development and therefore policies and actions for greater access to education must be based on gender equity.

Judging from this WID approach which advocates for women's inclusion in economic and educational policies, this perhaps would be a panacea for empowerment of women and more crucially improvement in families and national development as impact of women's participation in education leads to economic development of a nation. It is of essence to note that women in contemporary times should still not be made to live in a male dominated world that gives more preference to the man than the woman.

Significantly, as more women acquire formal education, the percentage of the manpower resources of the nation increases, thus more women would be seen acquiring the mental skill and capability necessary for work life. Closely related to this, women's involvement in formal education leads to their involvement in labour force which invariably aids societal development. Against this backdrop, suffice to mention that education is directly related to development, the more educated nations citizenry are, the more likely developed such nation. In view of this, involvement of women in formal education in Nigeria brings about rapid development. Women should still not be seen as mainly to play reserve role players whose domain of influence is strictly acting the domestic front. It is to be added that the non-active participation of women in the formal education as well as the economy cannot be anything but counterproductive.

Undoubtedly, involvement of educated women in employment goes a long way in family and societal improvement on the other hand; women who possess good educational qualifications and end up only in some domestic front or kitchen make little use of the investment that their education constitutes. Basically education is a form of investment in human capital. Hence the rate of development of a nation is related to its investment in human capital. It is to be understood that education can only perform this task whenever those who possess this education made use of their skills and knowledge be the males or females to develop the economy. However, a situation where a substantial number of educated women stay away from contributing or participation in the economy because they are women will not only create distortions but as well as inequality in the development process.

### **Conclusion**

It is of paramount importance to state that eradication of ignorance, social instability and poverty in Nigeria demands that women and men be given equal educational opportunities and socio-economic spheres in order to make the society more habitable entity for both sexes to co-exist progressively. It is equally to be noted always that in empowering educational approach, women's incorporation as invaluable partners for development socially should be pursued.

Similarly, educational unevenness that has been constraining women in Nigeria from active socio-economic including political participation should be discarded. If the Eurocentric contextualization of male-gender privilege, impact of tenets of Christianity (and Islam) as well as the colonial "ideology of domesticity" all combined together to lay the foundation for women's educational disempowerment are tackled critically, Nigerian women would have a special place of pride in the country. This is because the nature of political leadership evolved from the colonial orientation has been largely unhelpful to the course of women's educational empowerment but now women empowerment should be viewed as a key component of democratic governance putting into consideration that the level of educational attainment by women determines generally the extent of their socio-economic participation.

For women especially, the educational system should be made to be anchored on the society's social rubric, culture or functional needs. Because the more educated the women becomes, the more alienated or distanced from their roots and culture they often becomes. More and more women should be educated to narrow the gap between them and men.

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