

THE RIGHT TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN NIGERIA: THE MAJOR CHALLENGES OF OUR TIME

Dr. Mrs. Uzoma Aja-Okorie

Department of educational foundations, Faculty of Education,
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

Abstract

This paper affirms that the right and equal opportunity to education particularly at higher levels is a policy statement which has remained at the front burners of developmental discoveries. It observes that despite policy declarations on educational equality, women's education has not completely received desired attention for high level competitiveness at global level. It reveals that the journey has been tortuous. More so, in this time of knowledge based economy and globalization gender education is generally viewed as an indicator for meaningful development. This is especially true since after the United Nations World Conference on Women in 1975 and the subsequent declaration of 1975-1985, as the Decade for Women. The gains of this decade were reinforced by the Beijing conference in 1995 and such other conferences. The result is not totally bad but since development trends require high powered skills, knowledge levels and competences, the acquisition of basic education is no longer adequate to enable both men and women to contribute effectively to national development. In the light of the above it recommended that the girls/women must be encouraged to remain in school long enough (higher institutions) to acquire the necessary skills to be able to be part of national development, government on its part must restructure the industrial sector to attract investors who are gender sensitive both in providing educational opportunities and in employment. While female drop-out rate must be checked, enrolment drive must be undertaken to get more girls into schools and into higher institutions as quality education remains the fastest and the best way to empower potential beneficiaries for national development.

Keywords: Higher Education, national development, equal opportunity, Nigeria, major challenges

Introduction

Education especially at the higher level is an excellent instrument for bringing about individual and national development. It is one of the sure ways to ensuring that both men and women are best equipped to contribute positively to national development. Globally higher education is being aligned with the wider demands of economic development and competitiveness. It is therefore crucial that both male and female are in the first instance given equal opportunities to access higher education. Widening access to gender participation in higher education is a policy priority in many countries including Nigeria. It appears to be working as the participation of girls and women in terms of general enrolment into educational programmes is beginning to rise in many countries. However, it has been argued that widening access and participation to education alone without adequately checkmating institutionalised and structural antecedents that undermine women in gender relation cannot totally place women on the same pedestal with their male contemporaries.

Tomasevki (2003) implies that everyone has the right to education including higher education, which shall be accessible to all on the basis of merit. This assumption in practical term is contestable because women's participation in higher education has not received adequate attention. For many years, men have continued to receive a better education than women. A cursory look at the pattern of women's involvement in higher education in Nigeria reveals abysmal low levels. In spite of all the laudable goals and objectives of education, Nigerian women in general still suffer a lot of constraints and inhibitions that deprive them from accessing quality education (higher education). The question that readily comes to mind is whether widening access to higher education implies equality in gender enrolment? The paper attempts to discuss this topic under the following sub-headings: concepts of equity, equality and opportunity, gender gap in higher education, need for women's higher education, impediments to women access to higher education, addressing the need for women higher education and the way forward.

Concepts of Equity, Equality and Opportunity

Equity, according to Obanya (2009), implies equal chances, equal treatment and equal gains. Apparently, men and women are not in most cases given equal chances to attain same height educationally. Gendered stereotyping creates barrier to higher education for women. Even where men and women possess the same academic qualifications men seem to enjoy higher economic gain than women due to their preferences at job opportunities, which tend to discourage upcoming young women. Olanrewaju (1987) argues that biological equality is in consonance with John

Locke's and Rousseau's view that all men are equal. As argued by Salawu (1995), the idea of equality means that all persons are born equal and are to be treated equally irrespective of their social status. However, he added that nature itself initiates inequality and therefore not every inequality is unjust. Salawu further argued that educational inequality arising from difference in choices, ability and virtues are just, while educational inequality prompted by sex, social class, and race, state of origin, disability, and religion; are unjust. His analysis suggests that nature predisposes male species to superiority as opposed to the female counterpart, though frowns at further stereotyping which negates equal and co-existence between men and women.

The idea of equal opportunity with reference to education means equal rights for all irrespective of any circumstances by way of birth, race, sex, tribe, and disability. As stated in the National Policy on Education (2004), the Nigerian's philosophy of education is based on the integration of every individual into a sound, worthwhile, and equal educational opportunities for all citizens. The philosophical assumption underpinning the policy is for every Nigerian child to have full access to quality education at all levels irrespective of sex. The United Nations and the Federal Government of Nigeria have recognized education as a fundamental human right. Unfortunately, the right to education and thus equal opportunity to education as a national objective for development has not been achieved.

Specifically, the national policy on women section 6.1.3 submits that:
for (the) Nigerian women to enjoy the full benefits of contemporary living, they require basic education to contribute meaningfully to the development of the country. Government shall in this regard increase girls and women's participation in education irrespective of their location and circumstances (p.17).

It can be said therefore that the main focus of government education agenda is to bring about optimal development of its human resources, which, put in another word, is a viable source of human capital development. This investment however will not be complete without women education. Not only acceding basic education but also women need to be given opportunities for advancing to higher education in order to qualify for skilled jobs. According to James Aggrey cited by NCCE (1998), if you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a family, which in turn can translate into a nation.

The position of women basically has been that of care givers. Women from time immemorial have been saddled with many family responsibilities particularly at the home. Traditionally they are assigned domesticated roles such as keeping custody of children, maintenance of the home, feeding of the family, and preservation of basic family health. Consequent upon those

traditional roles and expectations, women serve as custodians of the home a significant factor in socio-economic and political development of a society. Invariably advancing their education paves way for social transformation. Furthermore, the modern day woman, just as her traditional counterpart is expected to play the role of a dutiful home keeper amidst other social obligations. In playing this role, she is expected to be capable of handling challenges of modern world of automation and computer. Another challenge before her is that imposed on her as the first and the last teacher of the child before and after school. This is especially pertinent because, she is expected to prepare the child to be able to cope with the challenges of the contemporary world. The simple implication of this reality is that the typical contemporary woman is not likely to play these roles efficiently unless she is fortified with adequate and functional education.

Gender Gap in Higher Education in Nigeria

In spite of the obvious importance of women education in national development, the female gender has been dastardly affected. Nigerian women occupy very low educational status compared with their male counterparts. Odili et al, (2000) posits that despite efforts at increasing the supply of female education through massive campaigns, building of more schools, subsidies for female pupils among others, the demand for female education is still very low. Supporting this position, Education Today (2000) affirms that gender disparity (with girls and women as the disadvantaged) is a well-known feature of Nigeria's educational landscape. This has often been compounded by geographical and social disparities, with the disadvantaged states and the socially disadvantaged groups in the population bearing a heavier burden of gender inequality.

In the Nigerian setting, the circumstances of gender have strongly interacted with culture to produce sex role, stereotypes and demands which have enormously influenced the attitudes of males and females to many issues including Science, Technology and Mathematics (STM) education. As Onyemelukwe (1995) reports sex difference in the performance of students (boys and girls) in some school subjects could be attributed to a variety of factors such as gender and attitude.

Need for Women Higher Education

Women empowerment can only be achieved through the provision of adequate and functional education to the women folk. This is crucial because no matter how rich or vast a nation is, without an effective, efficient, adequate and functional education for all its citizens (men and women) education which is relevant to its immediate needs, goals and objectives, such a nation would find it difficult to stand on its own. The brand of

education being advocated is that type of education in which is embedded the spirit of self realization and all that are needed for the country's overall development like mass literacy, economic empowerment (Esere, 2001).

The need for women education at a higher level is also informed by the fact that purposeful occupational achievement and satisfaction is ensured by deep self-awareness and understanding which can only be achieved through the provision of effective and functional education. This, has been noted is likely to guarantee women empowerment with its root based on women struggle to improve their status. The empowerment suggested is such that entails the process of challenging power relations and of gaining wider control over source of power. This, however, cannot be achieved without the provision of reasonable access to quality and functional education to the women folk. This is predicated on the premise that education has been adjudged to be a viable instrument of change in the positive direction.

In the spirit of Universal Basic Education (UBE), provision of formal and functional education is needed for the women folk, because it would empower them to know and ask for their rights to education, health, shelter, food clothing as well empower them to fight against every form of discrimination against their folk, assert themselves about their right to equal treatment with their men counterpart as bona fide citizens of this nation. It would enable the women take decisions and accept responsibilities for taking such decisions concerning themselves and at the same time give economic power to the women and there by enable them to contribute their quota to the economic growth of the nation.

Women Access to Higher Education; the major challenges of our time

Gender inequality still characterizes the educational advancement in the country. From the primary school level to the tertiary, gender inequality subsists as more males are admitted to the tertiary educational level than females. Several factors according to Bamidele (2011) still affect women education negatively. They include:

a) **Religion:** Some religious sects in Nigeria still believe and teach that women shall not acquire western education as seen in the Boko Haram sect in northern Nigeria. The issue of pudah and other religious sanctions against women limit their participation in higher education.

b) **Illiteracy among parents and guardians:** Majority of parents and guardians in some parts of Nigeria particularly at the rural areas are illiterate and hence, do not know the importance of education let alone investing in it. Recent data released by the chairman of National Population Commission, Samaila Makamma, revealed that literacy level among parents and guardians in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria are as follows:

South-West 73.6%, South-South 71.9%, South –East 74.1%, North –West 33.8%, North East 33.8% and North-Central 54.9%.

What this implies is that the literacy level in North West and North East combined is less than what obtains in any part of the South. This trend has implication on willingness to invest in wards' education.

(c)Poverty: Many Nigerian families are still living in abject poverty. According to Masha (2011), 45% of Nigeria population still lives below poverty line. This implies that out of 155 million people (2010 estimate), over 69 million are still struggling to meet their basic needs of food, shelter and clothing and cannot afford to pay for education.

Also, Williams (1987) states that the world-wide problem of low participation in Science and Technology is compounded by low enrolment rates of girls in formal education when compared with boys with the gap widening at the higher level of education.

Several social-cultural, economic and political factors have reinforced the gender gaps evidenced in women enrolment in higher education and corresponding low accessibility to management positions. Socio cultural restraints such as limited parental resources, early marriages, pregnancy, childbearing, sexual harassment etc. negatively impact on women's participation in higher education. In many societies, the education of women especially at the tertiary level is considered unimportant since girls do not normally pay back in full measure the money invested in them. Again, religious practices of keeping women in purdah and the Shariah system (mostly in the northern part of Nigeria) hinder women from participation in education especially at the higher levels.

In addition special protective measures aimed at protecting women and enhancing their effective participation has turned round to work against them. For instance, International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions ban women from night work, underground work and stipulate maximum weight to be carried by women. It also provides for maternity protection and welfare facilities at the work place. Some employers have capitalized on this to discriminate against women and spend less on educating them. Added to the foregoing some have suggested that women are their own worst enemies. Women married to wealthy men sometimes have lukewarm attitudes to education. Some women are lazy, lack proper education and are not making positive efforts to improve themselves. Okeke (1990) identified some obstacles encountered by female in education to include (a) lack of support from educational policy makers, (b) differential socialization patterns for boys and girls at early stages of life, (c) Limited access to education for girls, (d) Sex differences in the quality of education experiences for boys and girls (e) Perceived irrelevance of school for girls, (f) Absence of career education; and (f) Masculine image of education.

While males and females have been theoretically afforded equal access to higher education, traditional social attributes about the appropriateness of higher education for young Nigerian women are not changing so rapidly towards social equality of the sexes.

In general, girls and women have made steady progress in all areas of formal education in Nigeria since independence in 1960, enrolment rates have risen at all levels of education, and drop-out rates have fallen while the government continues to make constant efforts to improve the quality of education that is received. Female education especially at the higher level, however, still lags behind that of males in many respects.

Female enrolment rates at all the levels of formal education especially at the higher level remain below those of male; girls have a higher drop-out rate; girls are much fewer in the important subject areas of science, technology and mathematics, and their career choice is still largely confined to the ‘feminine’ areas of teaching, nursing, secretarial studies, catering, the arts and humanities (Nageens, 1995; Ugbede, 1997; Goldin & Katz, 2002).

Addressing the Needs for Women in Higher Education

More women are getting enrolled in open learning, long distance learning as well as part-time programmes. Implications are that a larger percentage of Nigerian women will become more educated in the near future thereby infiltrating the workforce in larger numbers and being placed in a better position to demand for transformation of existing status quo. A major step towards redressing these inequalities is the implementation of the gender policy at local, state and national levels.

Gender specific measures to address cases of low enrolment in certain disciplines as well as affirmative action in respect to greater participation in higher education will ensure women’s visibility thereby providing role models and mentorship for emerging women managers. Women’s networks must be strengthened to ensure greater visibility and boldness for them. In addition, enlightenment programmes that target policy makers, male colleagues and self esteem programmes for women will aid behavioural change and affect negative perceptions and stereotypes. More specifically the focus could be in areas such as teaching and research, gender orientation, scholarship and fellowship, admission policy, incentives for training of women, environmental safety.

First, teaching and research on gender related issues will bring to fore peculiar gender problems that can be identified and solved. Some issues such as parental perceptions of costs and benefits of educating females, seclusion practices and early marriages have been identified through research. Further research into gender matters could reveal other ways of assisting females to

attaining greater heights and becoming exemplary leaders. Major emphasis should be placed on leadership development.

Second, special gender orientation workshops and short training programmes could be organized as sources of empowerment. Female students should be allowed to assume leadership roles and responsibilities in activities in the school. Next, scholarships and fellowship could be awarded to female students to motivate them. To reduce the gender disparity in terms of academic opportunities a fifty percent quota each to both male and female is advocated at issuing scholarship and fellowship opportunities.

In addition, higher education policy makers must have the will to reduce gender imbalance. This should reflect right from the admission policy and enrolment figures. University and higher education managements must be concerned with capacity building of both male and females. Gender balance must be ensured at all levels of education academic structure and particular focus should be on educating females for managerial and leadership positions.

Moreover, concerted efforts should be made to appoint more female lecturers in all faculties who will serve as role models to the female students aside from other females in the society who have excelled in their various careers and therefore could also be role models. Furthermore, the environments of the various campuses could be made more conducive for women. Proactive and enforceable policies must be put in place to protect females from sexual harassment, cultist attacks, sexual abuse, rape, and other social problems that may affect them bearing in mind that women are severe victims of all these vices.

Next, efforts must be made to ensure that higher education curriculum is broad-based and diverse to cater for the need of both male and female. The curriculum must be relevant, flexible, nonmoribund and applicable to the needs of women.

Mainstreaming of gender issues into academic curricula in each department should also be encouraged. Another important thing is that females must be given adequate training that will ensure that they display high levels of professionalism and moral rectitude after higher education.

Educational Implication of poor women education

Marital harmony has also been found to be dependent on academic/intellectual compatibility among the couples. According to Ugbede (1997), marital conflict is heightened among couples who are educationally incompatible. It was observed that educational difference between the sexes further aggravate the social and economic differences between husband and wife. For instance, educated men now discover to their dismay that their uneducated wives are unable to fit into their social and

public life in the sense that such wives are incapable of responding to the requirements of their husband's new ideas, status, and official positions.

So many implications are inherent in the poor state of education of Nigerian women. These implications include the fact that the average uneducated Nigerian women would not be able to rise up to the challenges of being a wife and mother in this age of automation and intellectual advancement. Apart from this, she is equally susceptible to being employed or engaged in low paying jobs or ventures which would translate into poor/weak economic base for her and her family. The uneducated woman is not likely to be in any position to influence decisions, policies and opinion which are likely to affect her wellbeing and those of her family. It has also been revealed that with poor educational attainment, the average Nigeria woman is likely to encounter marital instability as a result of imminent spousal incompatibility between the educated man and his uneducated or poorly educated wife. There seem to be a connection between spousal abuse against women and their low level of education. Women at this level find it more difficult to leave abusive relationship due to their dependence on their spouses for economic supports.

Another implication of the poor education opportunity for women is involvement in low paying ventures. It has been noted by Oladunni (1999) that because of societal stereotype and stigmatization on certain professions and subjects as the exclusive preserve of men and or women most Nigerian women have been forced into less paid jobs like teaching, nursing services, agriculture, small scale food processing, secretariat duties, clerical duties, note counting in banks, cleaners and middle level professional occupations. It was thus submitted that some of the effects of this is that majority of these women are poor and impoverished. This is critical bearing in mind that there is a relationship between level of education and poverty with most of the illiterate women being poorer than the educated counterparts. According to Agbakwuru (2002) education equips one with marketable skills thereby lifting the possessor up from the poverty arena. Essentially, through education, the individual learns good health habits, principles and practices which promote healthy living and longevity as well as acquire marketable skills that confer economic power on the educated.

Another implication of poor women education is that their lower access to education automatically denies them the opportunity and power of influencing significantly public policies and programmes unlike their male counterparts. It thus implies that women will continue to play second fiddle in the socio-political and economic scheme of things; they would remain marginalized and exploited. It can thus be said that the poor educational opportunity for Nigerian women would rob them of two things, the ability to positively affect their children's educational development and the

opportunity to make meaningful contribution to their socialization process (and by extension the overall national development of the country).

Conclusion

It is clear from the submission of this paper that Nigerian women are educationally disadvantaged in terms of accessibility to and full participation in higher education, which hinders their participation in national development. It could also be deduced that owing to our traditional socialization process Nigerian women generally lack self confidence and enough motivation and drive for higher educational attainment. In essence, women peculiar circumstance can be summarized under three major headings namely; restricted access to education, reluctance to aspire and resistance to women advancement within a patriarchal system. It is expedient that efforts be harnessed to ensure steady increase in female enrolments and retention at higher institution. There is an increasing connection between education, employment and productivity. It is of necessity that our women need to join in our national development agenda.

The way forward

If education must serve the society, it must produce people who are highly skilled which higher education beholds. It is therefore imperative that in order to improve the educational base of the typical Nigerian woman and by extension her socio-political and economic status, government, community leaders, parents, administrators and teachers and other stakeholders should take cognizance of the following recommendations:

1. All stakeholders in women affairs and development should focus on the provision of formal education that transits into higher education for women as well as improve their working conditions while at the same time facilitating their access to resources like land, credit and technology as a way of reducing unemployment/ underemployment among women.
2. All the laws promoting equal opportunities in access to education should be popularized for every Nigerian child to know that she or he has a right to educational opportunities and take advantage of it.
3. To ensure educational equality in Nigeria, it is necessary that all inequalities and discrimination based on sex, state, religion, tribe, language and certain traditional and cultural practices be abolished.
4. The government and other stakeholders in women affairs and development should strive to create conducive enabling, socio-political and economic conditions which will discourage early

- marriage, societal preference for male children and the traditional belief that the position of a woman is in the kitchen.
5. Parents and opinion leaders should encourage the members of the female sex to be more enterprising in their educational pursuit as a way of contributing meaningfully to national development.
 6. Government should be more forthcoming in terms of women empowerment policy formulation and implementation especially in term of legislating against obnoxious customs and practices which are detrimental to women's optimal functionality and wellbeing, like legislating against all forms of harmful practices.

References:

- Agbakwuru, C. (2002) The role of primary education in the promotion of national integration and cohesion. *Knowledge Review* 1(2), 15-23.
- Bamidele, S. (2011) Educate the North. Retrieved august 30th 2012 from www.234next.com/csp/cms.
- Eseré, M. O. (2001) Women empowerment and its challenges to gender counseling. *Journal of Counseling and Human Development* 1(1), 16-31.
- Federal Government of Nigeria (2004) The national policy on education. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Goldin, C. & Katz, L. F. (2002) The power of the pill: oral contraceptives and women's career and marriage decisions. *Journal of Political Economy* 110 (4) 730-770.
- ILO (2004) International Labour Organization's information sheet on the convention on workers with family responsibilities. (156)
- Masha, G. I. (1994) *Women's access to education: Issues of tradition and culture*. A paper presented at the National Conference on Education Kano State College of Education, Kano.
- Nagees, H.A.Z. (1995) *The empowerment of females through education: The Nigerian perspective*. A paper presented at the first national conference of the national association of women in colleges of education, held at the national teachers' institute, Kaduna, August, 1995.
- National Commission for Colleges of Education (1998). *Newsletter*, editorial 6 (1). 2
- Obanya, P. (2009) *Dreaming Living and Doing Education*. Ibadan: Education Research and Study Group
- Odili, et al (2002). Gender Equity as Development Framework of women Integration in Economic Development. *African Journal of Social and Policy Studies* 1(2).
- Okeke, E.A. (1990) *Gender science and Technology: a challenge for education*. The Bama Methal Lecture. Radcliff College.

- Oladunni, E. B. I. (1999) *The dimensions of poverty in Nigeria: spatial, sectorial, gender, dimensions* Bullion: publication of the Central Bank of Nigeria 23(4), 17-30.
- Olanrewaju, A.O. (1987) Egalitarian Principles and the Nigerian Educational System, African Journal of Research in Education. (2) 139-145.
- Onyemuluke, E.C. (1995) A hand book on school administration and ethiop. Journal of Education and Science.4(1)
- Salawu, K.A., (1995) “Education, social mobilization and the myth of equal education opportunity in Nigeria”. Paper presented at the first National Conference, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, 22-27 October.
- Tomasevki, K. (2003) Education Denied: costs and remedies, St Martin’s Press, New York.
- Ugbede, O. E. (1997) *Enhancing women education through technology*. A paper presented at the 19th National Convention of Nigeria Association for Education Media and Technology, University of Ibadan, June, 1997.
- Williams, G.A. (1987) Science, Technology and Mathematics Education for all, including women and girls in Africa. Keynot address at the Commonwealth workshop on gender-stereotyping in Science and Technology and Mathematics.