

Review

Female education: A sociological analysis of girl-child education in Nigeria

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***Alabi, T. and Alabi O.S.**

Department of Sociology,
University of Abuja, Abuja,
Nigeria

*Corresponding Author.
E-mail: luckytope4j@yahoo.co.uk

The disparity in the education of male and female youths is a global issue particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. The dominant of male gender in schools in general and in the study of certain school subjects or career in particular has been affirmed by research reports. For instance, existing literature indicated low enrolment of females in school. This has strong implications for national development. This study is a theoretical one. It explores secondary sources of data to indicate the participation of female gender particularly in acquiring knowledge and skills in educational sector. Based on the discussions, conclusion is drawn and suggestions made on ways of bringing education to the doorstep of the girl-child in Nigeria. Child participation in schooling is influenced by sector, age, gender household poverty status and regional differences. The fact that girls suffer from disadvantage relative to boys is not enough to conclude gender discrimination in child schooling in Nigeria. However, the challenges facing girls are eased to some degree in urban Nigeria, but no systematic evidence emerges to this effect in Nigeria. The paper recommend that the government and other stakeholders in women affairs should strive to create conducive enabling socio-political and economic conditions which will discourage societal preference for male children and the traditional belief that the position of a woman is in the kitchen.

Key words: Education, gender inequality, discrimination, women and feminism.

INTRODUCTION

The contention that there was a bias against women in traditional Nigerian society is too obvious to scholars of history of education in the country. The notion that women are the subjects of a growing national and international interest is unquestionable (Duryea, and Arends-Kuenning, 2003; Ajayi, 2009) and this interest stems from the acute recognition that women are crucial to social and economic development. The barrier placed against women's self-actualization especially in traditional Nigerian society was without recourse to the roles the women played in such society. Apart from the domestic tasks which may be seen as facts of socialization and convention, women were also very productive in the economic sphere of the Nigerian society. Ponte (2006) has reported that women in Nigeria are more involved than men in virtually all areas of agricultural activities ranging from farm clearing to

processing. In spite of this, the women suffer and are victims of a social order that treats them largely as second position role players. Thus, gender bias against women ranges from labour market discriminations to exclusion from policy making. According to (Igube, 2004), this discrimination exacerbates poverty by preventing the majority of women from obtaining the education, training, health services, credit, child care and legal status needed to improve their prospects. One clear area of noted imbalance against women has been in the area of education. It is therefore not surprising that women's inadequate access to education has been seen as the source of the various discriminations that they suffer (Alabi, Bahal, and Alabi, 2012).

There has been a groundswell of agreement that women's lot and general socio-economic improvement of nations can

be achieved through the acquisition of education and broad empowerment of women (Adeniran, 2009). It is against this background that efforts to educate women in Nigeria have received a significant boost in recent times. Worth mentioning in this regard is the efforts of informal groups and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in encouraging female education in the South and North of the country and the commitment of state governments in the North to an enhanced education for women. Some of these efforts manifest in the establishment of special schools for girls and women education units in the education ministry of many states in Nigeria.

Despite all these efforts women still lag considerably behind men in education. Igube (2010) however believes that there has been marked closing of the gap as more and more women take to formal education while some young men under the influence of distorted values in today's Nigerian society are lured away from schools. Against this background, the paper therefore examines the link in the between the education of female and its opportunities in Nigeria.

Theoretical framework

Feminism is a collective term for systems of belief and theories that pay special attention to women's rights and women's position in culture and society. The term tends to be used for the women's rights movement, which began in the late 18th century and continues to campaign for complete political, social, and economic equality between women and men. This study deals specifically with the development of the ideas behind that movement and their influence and impact on today's women.

Feminists are united by the idea that women's position in society is unequal to that of men, and that society is structured in such a way as to benefit men to the political, social, and economic detriment of women. However, feminists have used different theories to explain these inequalities and have advocated different ways of redressing inequalities, and there are marked geographic and historical variations in the nature of feminism.

Historically, feminist thought and activity can be divided into two waves. The first wave, which began in about 1800 and lasted until the 1930s, was largely concerned with gaining equal rights between women and men. The second wave, which began in the late 1960s, has continued to fight for equality but has also developed a range of theories and approaches that stress the difference between women and men and that draw attention to the specific needs of women.

In most societies and throughout the major part of the second millennium, women were deprived of property, education, and legal status. They were made the responsibility of their husbands if married, or of their fathers or other male relatives if not. However, there were examples of exceptional women who challenged patriarchal

structures in their lives and writings. For example, a German abbess, Hildegard of Bingen, defied the authority of male church leaders; and an Italian writer and courtier, Christine de Pisan, defended women and wrote biblical commentaries that challenged the patriarchal ideas inherent in Christianity. By the end of the 17th century, a number of women writers, such as Mary Astell in England, were calling for improvements in women's education.

More so, in *The Second Sex* (1999) de Beauvoir argued that Western culture regarded men as normal and women as an aberration ("the Other"), and she called for the recognition of the special nature of women. Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* (2000), drew attention to the pervasiveness of patriarchy and to the ways in which it was re-enforced through the family and culture, notably in literature. The recognition of the rampant nature of patriarchy fueled the feminist idea of universal sisterhood—that women of all cultures and backgrounds can be united within their common oppression.

The Nigerian woman and the girl-child in some parts of the country are hurrying to regain their virtues through education. In view of the fact that the virtue of individuals in the society has strong implication for the virtues of the society, to retain or strengthen the virtue of the society. For instance, only 20% of women in the North West and North East of the country are literate and have attended school while the North Central and North West presents the worst scenarios (UNICEF, 2007). Dugbazah (2009) noted that gender composition of occupations in both the formal and informal sectors, of a country is an important indicator of the economic opportunities open to women.

The sociological basis of education

Education generally concerns itself with the imparting of knowledge in people. Knowledge in this case can be seen as the corpus of instruction and social ethos, which hinge on the acquisition of abstract ideas, which makes for a refined mind and the acquisition of psycho-motor skills, which in turn makes for a skilled person or at least positions one in the right frame of mind to acquire the skill necessary for existence in an atomized social order. Thus, education is first and foremost a social tool that is imperative for the continued survival and growth of the human society.

Against this background, education whether formal or informal, assumes a heavy social context. It is apparently easy to figure out that the lack of social contextualization of education may be responsible for the inability of education to foster genuine development in many developing societies. It is not surprising that Oladosu (2007) has expressed dissatisfaction at the predominance of conservative, rationalizing, romantic and democratic thoughts on education. He sees these as too retrogressive and inane to lead to a groundswell of activities and thought processes necessary for continued progress in any society. He sees sustainable or progressive education as the one

that will have the following criteria:

(a) As opposed to the conservative tradition, it should stress education as the development of critical reasoning in the individual, a questioning attitude towards all existing reality.

(b) As opposed to the romantic school, it should embody a full acceptance of the social character of man, rejecting forever the notion of a pre-social dimension of human existence.

(c) As opposed to rationalizers, it should insist on the active nature of the child's participation in the learning process and contest the mechanist conception of education as the transmission of fixed skills.

(d) As opposed to the democratic tradition, it should be dialectical, treating all human reality as radically historical.

In spite of the radical dimensions of education as implied in the above prescriptions, it is obvious that it takes as its basis the progress of society and the socialization of the process of education in which man is the measure of all things. Hoare's attempt to place education within a social pedestal as the commodity deemed necessary by society as a collective, which makes each individual better positioned to contribute to societal development and generally enhances the level of progress in society is a bold step in putting back education and learning where they rightly belong, that is, in the social system.

According to Nnaka (2006) the educational system is the elaborate social mechanism designed to bring about in persons submitted to it certain skills and attitudes that are judged to be useful and desirable in the society. This then means that education derives from the social system and exists to mainly satisfy the demands of this system.

In this case, education even though with a universal orientation should be dynamic enough to reflect the socio-cultural realities of the society in which it takes place. The problems of development in many African countries may be related to the inability of most of these countries to fashion their educational systems to suit the demands of their societies which are peculiar and often different from those of the original owners of the educational systems being operated.

Women and education in Nigeria

It must be understood that historically education in Sub-Saharan Africa and even Asia was initially available only for males (EFA Report, 2003/2004). This then entails that women were from the onset disenfranchised in the formal employment sector since jobs in this sector are mainly negotiable through acquisition of education and skill. In fact women's late entrance into education and the tailoring of women's education to meet mainly domestic needs is not peculiar to Nigeria. Thus, it has been reported that even in Latin America where the expansion of the educational system started earlier, women were denied formal education during colonialism but often received

instructions to enable them perform domestic tasks and raise their children (Offorma, 2009).

However, the coming of Christianity and the introduction of formal education changed the order of things. The first educational institutions in Nigeria were established by the Christian Missions. In fact, the Reverend Thomas Freeman of the Wesley Methodist Mission is credited with the establishment of the first formal school in Nigeria (Lawal, 2007). Following the example of the Methodists, other denominations such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican etc. involved themselves in the school enterprise. Thus, the first secondary school in the country, Lagos Anglican Grammar School was established in 1859 by the Church Missionary Society, around 1878 this initiative was followed by the Roman Catholic Mission with the precursor of the present St. Gregory's College and the Wesleyan Methodist Mission with the Methodist Boys High School, Lagos (Nduka, 2004).

Expectedly, the missionary venture in education was borne out of the desire to use the school and its curriculum to reinforce church doctrine. Hence, such schools at that time were largely pious, parochial and restrictive both in curriculum and organizational principles. Apart from the selfish aim of the missions, the colonial government needed clerks as well as teachers and other manpower required by the colony especially since the importation of all levels of manpower was not only impractical but beyond the budgetary allocations of the colonial government.

Therefore, this education was neither the product of the social exigencies of the country nor rooted in the socio-cultural reality of the nation. While at first, it was convenient for the administrators to leave education for the missionaries, they soon realized its futility in achieving their primary objectives. This arose from the realization that as more and more converts are won by the church and as more denominations staked their claims to different geographical zones of the country, the church as a whole began to emphasize the more spiritual aspects of its mission.

Also, the competition among the denominations for new converts and the over-riding need to retain those already in the fold pushed secular education to the backburner of the missionary schools. The involvement of the colonial government in education eventually was ostensibly borne out of a need to make education suited to the social needs of the society as well as equip the people of Nigeria mentally and otherwise to meet the challenges of nation building and self government. However, Uremu (2012) has cast doubts on whether these noble objectives guided the colonial government since the educational system put in place was largely divorced from the life of the people and emphasized aspects of education with little contribution to development. This sort of education stressed the rejection of indigenous cultures while facilitating the adoption of foreign ones.

In spite of the discomfort this might have on educationists, there is always in existence some form of

relationship between education and politics. In this sense, all or at least a significant number of educational issues are also political issues (Amin, 2005). This is because educational considerations usually involve decisions about priorities especially in a situation where there are competing uses for scarce resources. In other words, decisions on education and educational policies mean, at least, indirectly decisions on resource allocation either immediately or in the future. Despite this fact, many scholars do not see this connection between the educational and the politics and the over-riding nature of educational issues.

Hence, educational policies and government's involvement in education are sometimes solely motivated by political considerations. Thus, the colonial government ventured into education when it saw it as politically expedient. So also have the policies and actions of postcolonial governments in Nigeria on education been well influenced by political considerations. While one cannot deny that, there have been profound changes in the educational system in Nigeria over the years, the point remains that taken as a whole; the educational system is still not anchored on the society's social rubric, culture or functional needs. Thus, the more educated one becomes the more alienated or distanced from his roots and culture he often becomes.

Be that as it may, women even in contemporary times still live in a male-dominated world that gives more preference to the man than the woman. In the area of education, this preferential treatment of the males has persevered. But an emerging reality today is that more and more women are getting educated thus narrowing the gap between them and the men. In fact, if this trend continues with the same momentum, it will take only a few years for the women to close the gap in education between them and the men in Nigeria. As interesting as this observation appears, it has implications for the formal labour sector and the development of the nation (Fraikhumen, 2008).

This is because as more women acquire education their percentage of the manpower resources of the nation increases. Therefore, more women are going to acquire the mental skill and capability necessary for work life. Besides the well known fact that the involvement of educated women in the labour force aids the development of society, there is also the positive impact this exerts on the women themselves. Thus, "the relationships between family, education and work are major influences on women's futures and on the patterns of incentives and costs facing families in deciding to send girls to school" (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2003/2004).

As a result, education produces the work force needed to keep the wheel of the economy turning. Education then contributes in concrete terms to development basically when those educated submit themselves to work and seek some form of actualization or fulfilment in the work process; hence, governments in many parts of Africa are

aware of the benefits of female education. Education of females has a profound effect on national development as lack of their education has been linked to low birth weight, poor health and high mortality rates in children, high fertility rates, poor family nutrition, low life expectancy, poor sanitation and high illiteracy rates. The socio-economic importance of female education can thus not be over emphasized.

Consequently, efforts to boost female education have been made by governments, international organizations and NGOs. However, there is still a gender disparity in education. Oke (2000) Oladosu (2007) demonstrated that females still have low access to education, low participation and poor performance in many subjects, especially Mathematics and Science subjects. Many factors which are home, community and school based, continue to restrict developments in female education (Uremu, 2012).

Hence, research has shown that factors within the classroom are not the only cause of gender imbalances in education and that home based factors which include family size, household income, parents' education, cultural and traditional beliefs all contribute substantially to poor female enrolment in school. Girls are pulled out of school and boys left in school when the family income dictates that all children cannot be educated. Girls miss school when there are chores to be done at home or there is a sick family member to nurse. Girls are taken out of school when they mature to prepare them for marriage or to help supplement the family income by selling, farming or performing other money earning activities (Acato 2006).

Acato, (2006) pointed out the factors which interplay and affect female education are limitless. Extracurricular and out of school factors play a big role in female education. Long distances from school, sexual harassment by classmates, teachers and males in the community and inefficient use of her time contribute to making attendance in school poor. Finally, the girl child drops out of school when conditions at home, in school, on the way to school and in the community prevent her from having a meaningful and conducive learning environment.

However, Nigeria, a developing country is being confronted with economic, social, political and educational challenges. The challenges led to the introduction of different reforms at different levels of the national operation. The reforms were designed to bring about developments in areas of needs through infusion of modern methods and values. Specifically, education constitutes of a major focus because it is believed that education is an instrument of national development and thus, it could be employed to achieve political, economic and social developments.

The development of any nation requires the collective efforts of its citizens and all residents. More importantly, to achieve national development, both male and female members of the society need to be carried along (Alumode, 2000). The World Conference on Education for All, (EFA)

held in Geneva in 1990 stressed the need for gender equity in education. The Beijing conference of 1995 and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) of 2005 also emphasized gender equity.

In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (2004) also acknowledges the need to equalize educational opportunities between girls and boys. Gender equity is a major issue in the on-going reform programs embarked upon by the Federal Government of Nigeria and it is designed to address gender imbalance in education. This is because girls' access to basic education, especially in the rural areas of Nigeria has remained low (UNICEF, 2007).

Factors affecting female participation in education

Geographical

Alabi et al., (2012), maintain that the considerable spatial disparity, and in some cases incompleteness, of institutional provision (even at primary level) relates directly to difficulties of physical access which adversely affect girls more than boys; there is an overall and profound urban/rural dichotomy which favours towns and cities, especially in respect of secondary school (and especially single sex) provision for girls; patterns of transportation and migration affect educational provision and take up, again normally disadvantaging females and in some cases extreme physical difficulties, such as flooding and other hazards act in the same way. The influence of these factors can only be overcome by more sophisticated and multivariate spatial analysis of educational needs and the planning and implementation of integrated development projects as a result. Educational planning on its own would be futile taking cognizance of these realities.

Socio-cultural

A major deterrent to female take up and follow through of educational opportunities (even when these are available) is a near universal fundamental cultural bias in favour of males. The widespread operation of patriarchal systems of social organisation; of customary early marriage; of the incidence of early pregnancy (in and out of marriage); of heavier domestic and subsistence duties of females (especially in rural areas); a generally lower regard for the value of female life, all combine though differentially in each case, to adversely affect the participation of girls and women in formal education. To this list may be added problems of seclusion and security in some areas. Such long standing constraints result in a dearth of female role models that could challenge the traditional one that is clearly acquired by both sexes at a very early age. The influence of these factors can only be overcome, inter alia by a profound change of attitude on the part of influential males, and in some countries of traditionally minded Powerful females in key family positions (Amin, 2005;

Nnoro, 2006; Alabi et al., 2012).

Health

In general the effect of poverty and malnutrition on the health of school age children falls harder on girls than boys. Boys may get preferential feeding, while girls (who have a heavier domestic work load) are more likely to be undernourished. Even if they get to school, this adversely affects their performance and therefore retention rate. Health problems associated with pregnancy, especially for adolescent girls, obviously have a negative effect, as do rising trends of sexual activity in the younger generations where these occur. Problems associated with family size and family planning is widespread in relation to possible participation in education and imply the need for sex/health education at school level. It is clear that the health factor, though partly hidden and indirect in effect is a very significant one in respect of the quality of (young) female participation in education as well as the quantity of it (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Igube, 2010).

Economic

Together with the fundamental socio-cultural bias in favour of males, the economic factor, especially in terms of grinding poverty and hunger, is probably the most influential in adversely affecting female participation in education, especially in rural areas. In such harsh economic circumstances, both direct and hidden costs to a family of sending daughters to school are perceived by parents to be prohibitive in terms of the provision of books, paper and uniforms/clothing (important for social reasons) as well as the loss of vital help at home and on the land. In most cases the contribution of females is unpaid and they may have little or no experience of the handling of money which further reduces their status and power, but increases their vulnerability. Because of the patriarchal and patrilocal predominance, investment in a girl's schooling is wasteful since it benefits the family into which a girl marries rather than her own (Dills, 2006: 33).

In a classed society, investment in the education of females may be an advantage in 'their placement in social strata. This further increases the urban/rural gap. Vocational education which might relate to employment prospects, is everywhere weak and under-valued, but especially so in respect of the interests of girls. The apparent inability of some countries to resource their schools and even to pay their teachers regularly lead to low morale, teacher absenteeism and parental disenchantment (Miller, and Birch, 2007).

Educational

This factor itself can be a deterrent to female participation in schooling. Difficulties of accessibility, lack of resources

and low teacher quality and morale are widespread. In particular the lack of female primary teachers in rural areas is a real problem. Parents are, in some countries, very reluctant indeed to send daughters to school if there is no female teacher, and the facilities for the accommodation and security of such teachers are usually absent or inadequate. The organisation of schooling in terms of the daily and seasonal imperatives of local economies usually renders it dysfunctional, and the curriculum is often unattractive in instrumental terms. At secondary level, in addition to the lack of (accessible) places, problems of cost, direct and hidden are acute, and there is a considerable need for more single-sex (girls) schools, some with secure boarding facilities and scholarship schemes to enable participation. Vocational education is weak and schemes open to girls in this field are particularly useful. There is still a widespread problem of gender bias in books and materials (Dills, 2006: 47).

Religious

Although in general acting indirectly, the religious factor is on balance a positive one, though it is often overcome by the fundamental socio-cultural bias in favour of males. The fact that most religious practitioners and leaders are male makes for a powerful image in favour of that sex, and it would be a very helpful move if religious leaders of all faiths and denominations were to speak out strongly in support of the female cause (Crosnoe, Monica, and Glen, 2004:24).

Political/Administrative

Amin (2005) opines that although policies exist in most cases for such developments as universal primary education, equal educational opportunities in terms of gender and the eradication of gender bias from texts and other materials, the political will to carry these through seems to be weak in the face of severe economic constraint.

Problems with the girl-child education

Over the years, the role of females in Nigerian society has been erroneously conceptualized to child bearing and house-keeping. This is why, in most developing countries males are groomed for career in technical and scientific fields while females are guided to concentrate their efforts on home economics.

In Nigeria, the social relations and activities of Nigerian women and men are governed by patriarchal system of socialization and cultural practices, which favour the interest of men above those of women. The women are in subordinate position particularly at the community and household levels and the male children are preferred to the females

In the same vein, Agwagah and Agule (2009); Offorma,

2009); Alabi et al.,(2012) identified preference of some parents toward certain disciplines, girls' negative attitude towards mathematics; teachers' negative attitudes to students, poor methods of teaching and inadequate importance attached to girl-child education by the government/ society, as possible factors that could influence the participation of the girl-child in STM. The consideration of the girl-child education as secondary to that of boys in some societies and in some religious set up, could also be responsible for the wastage rate among females at all levels of education. Furthermore, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF,2007) identified poverty, early marriage and teenage pregnancy; inadequate school infrastructure; cultural and religious biases; gender bias in content and teaching and learning processes; poorly qualified teachers among others as some of the barriers to girl-child education.

Conclusion

Education is a human right and an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace. Non-discriminatory education benefits both boys and girls and thus ultimately contributes to more equal relationship between men and women, and promoting gender equity in education systems creates a healthy, educated and productive human resource base. It is time therefore to begin to do the right thing – to train and educate our girls. It is time to stop the insult of poverty and dependence, and minimize the culture of begging by maximizing the great resource GOD gave us in women. It is time to train and re-train the girl child. If something is not done urgently, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will suffer a major setback.

In the words of Kofi Annan, the former United Nations Secretary General, "No development strategy is better than one that involves women as central players. It has immediate benefits for nutrition, health and savings and reinvestments at the family, community and ultimately, country level. Educating the girl child is a social development policy that works and a long term investment that yields an exceptionally high return". Although the Federal Government has promulgated a number of edicts and legislations on Universal Basic Education, it is time to make these legislations effective by making our primary schools centers of learning, equipped with the right kind of resources and manpower for effective learning. All barriers must be eliminated to enable all girls to development their full potential through equal access to education. The Fourth World Conference on Women pointed out that, government should promote a policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policy programmes in order to generate awareness of the disadvantaged situation of girl children.

Also, parents must be made to understand the benefits

of education through community based information dissemination techniques. The use of mass media like televisions and radios which most people do not have access to should be reduced and town criers, village based crusades and enlightenment programmes, use of religious centers and market awareness activities carried out on regular basis.

If education must serve the society, it must produce people who carry much more than certificates. It must produce people, both normal and exceptional ones, with the right types of knowledge, ability and attitude to put them to work for the good of the society. 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, professional guidance counsellors and other stakeholders should take cognizance of the following recommendations:

Government and other stakeholders in women affairs should strive to create conducive enabling socio-political and economic conditions which will discourage societal preference for male children and the traditional belief that the position of a woman is in the kitchen.

All the stakeholders in women affairs and development should focus on the provision of formal education to women as well as improving their working conditions while at the same time facilitate their access to resources like land, credit and technology as a way of enhancing their relevance in the society.

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