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WOMEN EDUCATION: PROBLEMS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

The writer examined education in the context of its availability for the women folk. The paper also elucidates the problems of women education, and the implications of poor women education for family responsibility. It was suggested in the paper that for optimal national development, women who are the first teachers in the family set up should be provided with adequate and functional education (or literacy). It was argued that provision of functional education to the women folk would enable them to make additional contributions towards public life, social, economic, and moral development of the family and by extension the nation.

Introduction

Education is the process of becoming critically aware of one's reality in a manner that leads to effective action upon it. An educated man/woman understands his/her world well enough to deal with it effectively. Such men/women, if they existed in sufficient numbers, would not leave the absurdities of the present world unchanged. In the opinion of Edukugho (2002) cited in Imogie (2002), the prosperity of a country depends not on the abundance of its revenue, nor the strength of its fortifications, but on the number of its cultivated citizens, men (and women) of education, enlightenment and character.

The Federal Government of Nigeria has adopted education as an instrument per excellence for effecting national development (NPE, 1998:5). The implication is that government realises the importance of education as a veritable tool for national development. Thus, the policy guideline of the NPE asserts that:

education will continue to be highly rated in the national development plans, because education is the most important instrument of change, as any fundamental change in the intellectual social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an educational revolution (NPE, 1998; p. 8).

Furthermore, Nigerian government expressly states in section 18 of the 1999 constitution that:

- (i) Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels.
- (ii) Government shall promote Science and Technology.
- (iii) Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy; and to this end shall when practicable provide
- (iv) Free compulsory and universal primary education;
- (v) Free secondary education;
- (vi) Free university education; and
- (vii) Free adult literacy programme.

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. This investment however will not be complete without women education. 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 – i.e a nation.

Women from time immemorial have been saddled with many family responsibilities and are traditionally assigned many roles including custody

of children, maintenance of the home, feeding of the family, and preservation of family health. Consequent upon those traditional role expectations, they become a significant factor in socio-economic and political development of a country. Apart from roles previously earlier on enumerated for the typical woman, the modern day woman, who is expected to be a wife, then a mother is, like her traditional counterpart, expected to play the role of a dutiful home keeper. 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.

Women Education.

The home ideally is the first and the last school of the child and the foundation of his/her socialization with the mother serving as the first teacher. Information in Nigeria reveals that women constitute about half the total population of the country and are also the most vulnerable group to diseases and economic frustration (FGN/UNICEF, 2001). The 1991 census gave the proportion of women as 49.7 percent of the over-all national population with 70 percent of this group being illiterate. Masha (1994), attributed this high level of illiteracy to culture, religion, economy, early marriage and general unfavourable attitude expressed towards the education of women and girls in the country, among other factors.

It could be said that at present the situation is unhealthy bearing in mind the wide national disparity in the ratio of male and female enrolment in school. For example, statistical report (Federal Government of Nigeria and United Nations Children's Fund, 1997-2001) shows that on the national level, primary school enrolment ratio for boys and girls is 94:75. The ratio is almost twice higher in the northern states where formal female education is accorded less value (Awgbakwuru, 2000). There is also serious problem in

terms of completion rates of female students. In the opinion of Agbakwuru (2002), this is particularly low in eight states in the north. According to Oladunni (1999), in Nigeria primary school net enrolment ratio is 67 percent boys and 52 percent girls while literacy rate for those aged 15 years and above was 67 percent and 47 percent for males and females respectively.

The problems of male/female disparity in access to education in Nigeria is not restricted to the primary schools, rather it is almost the same for both secondary and tertiary institutions. For instance, according to the National Universities Commission (NUC), National Board for Technical Education (NBTE); and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE), 1999 statistical data as cited by UNICEF (2001) it was revealed that out of a total number of about 500,000 students that were admitted in all tertiary institutions in Nigeria, female enrolment represented only 34 percent. The imbalance in the number of male and female enrolment is more pronounced in the Polytechnics and in science and engineering disciplines in the Universities (Nucvihep, 2004). Hence it could be inferred that a number of factors as well as some complicated and sensitive problems have in various ways interacted to delay or frustrate women aspiration for education.

Consequent upon the scenario painted earlier on, it is postulated that owing to the high level of illiteracy among women, especially in developing countries (like Nigeria), the political opportunities extended to them become meaningless since they are not adequately enlightened to understand simple issues concerning them such as voting rights and political power (Ugbede, 1997). The case of an uneducated woman is like that of an ignorant poor farmer, who, in ignorance, sold his farm land situated on a large deposit of gold to an estate developer. However, upon its discovery, the estate developer eventually employed the poor ignorant farmer as a labourer on the gold-mine. Thus, it is presumable that the innate potential of the uneducated woman would remain untapped thereby making her to become intellectually, socially, economically, psychologically and politically crippled by her ignorance.

Need for women 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 over all development like mass literacy, economic empowerment etc (Esere, 2001).

The need for women education 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 and/or guidance and counselling. 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 formal and functional education to the women folk. This is based 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:

- (i) It would empower them to know and ask for their rights to education, health, shelter, food clothing, etc.
- (ii) It would 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 bonafide citizens of this nation Nigeria.
- (iii) It would enable the women take decisions and accept responsibilities for taking such decisions concerning themselves.

Women Education

- (iv) It would give economic power to the women and there by enable them to contribute their quota to the economic growth of the nation.
- (v) It would empower the women scientifically through exposure to science and technological education for the challenges of the present technological age and information computer technology break through unfolding world wide.
- (vi) It would help women to reduce maternal and infant mortality through improved nutrition, improved child rearing practice , health care and prevention against killer diseases.
- (vii) It would avail women with the opportunity of participating keenly in the world of sophisticated politics and governance as enlightened citizens.

Problems against women education

The bane for women education in Nigeria is entrenched in the nation's new national policy on education which states inter-alia that:

With regards to women education special efforts will be made by ministries of education and local government authorities in conjunction with ministries of community development and social welfare and of information to encourage parents to send their daughters to school. (FGN, 1998, p. 14).

The tacit reference made to women education in the national policy on education is contained in the primary education section of the document. It must be observed here that no further reference was made to the provision of women education in this all-important document on education. Nagees (1995) opined that the absence of a policy statement on women education as reflected in the National Policy on Education (NPE), makes the NPE fall short of women expectations and it amounts to a total disregard for that section of the population in this country.

The plight of women, in terms of education is further compounded by the negative attitude of parents toward female education. Some parents

are usually reluctant to send their girl-child for formal education especially to higher levels like their male counterpart. Another problem closely related to this is the reluctance to acquire western education and misunderstanding on the part of the girls themselves about the values of the acquisition of formal education. In education, equity means equal access to good schooling. According to Ocholi (2002), geography (in term of location) and families' relative wealth have been discovered to also affect equity. For example, in Nigeria, in the last few years, the regression (toward male-female education in balance) in basic education is reflected in the fact that the net enrolment rate of girls in primary school is lower than the female literacy rate. Ocholi, noted that in 1995, 25.09 percent of girls who should have enrolled in school did not. It was equally observed that in 1995 the average primary school completion rates for boys and girls were 56.3 percent and 43.7 percent respectively. Most girls leave school due to inability to pay cost, among other reasons.

It is however, an open secret today that Nigeria women are educationally backward when compared with their male counterparts. According to the 1991 national population census, women alone constitute 49.7% of the overall population with 70% of this being illiterate. It has been discovered also that 70 percent of Nigerian women of 35 years and above are illiterate (Amazigbo in Nagess, 1995). The level of illiteracy is said to be thrice as high in the rural areas when compared with the urban areas.

Three fundamental barriers have been identified by Awe (1990) to be responsible for low level of development and enhancement of women especially for educational advancement. These barriers are:

- (i) Restricted access to education.
- (ii) Reluctance to aspire and
- (iii) Resistance to women advancement within a patriarchal system.

Restricted access to education by women in this country is profoundly rooted in history, religion, culture, the psychology of self, law, political institution and social attitudes which interact in several ways to limit women's access to formal education when compared with their male counterparts. For example, it has been observed that Nigerian women are lagging behind

their counterparts in developed and some developing nations due to the late start in educating them. This is caused by our traditions and culture which are hostile to women. This tradition reduces them to kitchen manageresses and producers of babies. Thus, their education ideally, is expected to end in kitchen a condition which ironically is detested by many parents thereby discouraging their investment in girl-child education.

Reluctance to aspire is another major problem against women education. This is the main manifestation of African wrong socialization which tends to impress upon the women folk the belief that certain subjects and professions are the exclusive preserve of men. Our socialization at the same time confines women to certain roles (e.g cooking, baby making, baby nursing, home keeping etc). This state of affairs is definitely a negation of the scientific discovery that women are not intellectually inferior to men. This is because of the fact that both males and females have 42 chromosomes in their genes. Furthermore, science has revealed that "there is no innate biological or psychological reasons why girls should not do as well as boys if given the opportunity and if provided with adequate motivation (Oniye, 1993; NCCE, 1998).

Resistance to women advancement within a patriarchal system is a further manifestation of our cultural practices which overtly and covertly interact to hinder women advancement especially from educational viewpoint. This resistance is further engendered by cultural impediments imposed on women by her traditional assigned roles of housewife, mother, baby sitter, member of inferior sex, stereotyped gender victim, among others. Thus, it is stated that the problem of resistance to women advancement are culture based and they include those brought about by homework conflict, ignorance on the part of many parents, erroneous belief that religion is against the provision of sound formal education to the girl-child, gender stereotyping and stigmatization, socio-economic constraints and poor attitudes of some parent (NCCE, 1998).

It is pertinent to note at this juncture that the greater access of men in Nigeria to education more than their women counterparts have very negative consequences on the latter. In fact, it has been observed that this

unwholesome situation is the principal factor that is responsible for the preponderance of women in lower positions in work organizations and less paid jobs. For instance, it has been noted by Oladunni (1999) that Nigerian women are found predominantly in such occupations as teaching, nursing, services, agriculture, small scale food processing, secretariat duties, clerical duties, note counting in banks, cleaners and middle level professional occupations. Consequently, it has been opined that majority of them are therefore poor, impoverished and susceptible to attack by a number of debilitating diseases such as vesto vaginal Fistula (V V F), etc.

Other problems against women education include the familiar problems in Nigerian education like lack of funds, inadequate facilities, inadequate manpower, sexual harassment, conflicting societal role expectations, government policies and lack of political will power to implement the entire educational programme.

The inferiority complex observable in Nigerian women can be attributed to the influence of environmental manipulation. For example, through the traditional socialization process of the typical African society, women are made to accept negative self-fulfilling prophecy, stereotyping and stigmatization that they are members of a weaker sex. At present, the forces which combine to hamper women education and development in Nigeria could be viewed broadly to include denial of access to education, early marriage, confinement to solitary living, subjugation by culture to accept choices forced on them, discrimination and harassment at work, political disenfranchisement from elective and political appointment, and exposure to cruel mourning rites upon the death of their husbands (Oniye, 2000).

Implications of lack of women education

The quantity and quality of education available to Nigeria women will invariably determine the developmental pace of Nigerian families, children from such homes and the Nigerian nation at large. It has been noted that what Nigerian women are today and what they will be tomorrow depend on what plans Nigeria has for her women. Nigeria is craving for patriotic citizens to develop her potentials politically, economically, socially and technologically.

The actualization of these goals is dependent on the provision of functional education to the citizenry especially the women who, as mothers, are the teachers of the child in his/her first and last school (i.e home). Thus, unless the mother herself is adequately enlightened, she cannot inculcate in the child the spirit and principle of true patriotism-a basic requirement for national development. According to Ajayi (1995), among the factors militating against the development of the spirit of true patriotism are:

(i) Home indiscipline; (ii) tribalism; (iii) corruption in public life; and (iv) lack of national ideology. It has thus been argued that Nigeria cannot develop fully without mothers who are patriotic and sincerely committed to the training of the young ones in the patriotic norms. The spirit of true patriotism advocated a socio-ethical value which inclines a citizen to the enlightened and legitimate love of his home, community and native land.

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 differences 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.

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 a) 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 marginalised 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 formal education, participation in policy formulation and policy implementation especially in the education sector. It could also be deduced that owing to our traditional socialization process Nigerian women have been misled into believing that aspiring for higher educational attainment is insignificant. After all, women education ends in the kitchen. The problems against women education are many but they could be summarized under three major headings namely; restricted access to education, reluctance to aspire and resistance to women advancement within a patriarchal system.

So many implications are inherent in the poor state of education of Nigerian women. These implications include the fact that the average uneducated Nigerian woman 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. The revelations contained in this write-up implies that professional counselors would have to be ever alert to combat the negative repercussions of poor education base for Nigerian women.

Recommendations

If education must serve the society, it must produce people who carry much more than certificates. It must produce people, but 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:

1. All stakeholders in women affairs and development should focus on the provision of formal education to 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. 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.

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.

4. 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 harmful widowhood practices.
5. Government should fund counselling centres at all levels of Nigerian education system adequately to enable counsellors provide all round functional guidance and counselling to parents and other stakeholders. This is imperative if all concerned must be assisted to see the female child first as a human being with all assets capable of immeasurable achievements.

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