

Gender Feminism and the Girl-Child

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Abstract *The issue of girl-child education is a global concern even though its negative impact is much more pronounced in the third world countries. For the past two decades or more, conferences, seminars and workshops have been organized to discuss gender-feminism and girl-child education in national development. The central theme of such discussions centered mostly on the need to raise the status of women and bring them into the developmental process as equal partners with men. This paper examines the role of women in national development, education of girl child, the implication of girl-child education on national development. This paper suggests strategies for maximizing the contributions of women to national development through girl-child education.*

Introduction

The fact that no nation can develop beyond the level of education of its citizenry has been established at different discussions in and outside Nigeria. As important as education is to national development, it would not fully play its role in development where the women folk have less opportunities to be educated. This is not only based on the numerical strength of the women folk but also because of the socio-cultural and economic roles they play in the society. Since the forth world conference on women held in Beijing in 1995, the place of women education in the promotion of the contributions of women to national development had been brought to the fore. However, women still encounter various limitations that hinder their acquisition of formal education. For instance the UNFPA (2006) noted that (two-third) of the world illiterates are women and that majority of them are from developing countries. All over the world, women had been identified as major elements in the process of development. This is because of the significant role they play in society. For instance, Egunyomi, Fadeyi, Folaranmi and Adalore (2001) noted that women represent half of the world's population, perform two third of the work and receive one tenth of the total income. Despite the size of work done by the women, they still constitute the largest group among the world poor and are also the most vulnerable in terms of disease.

The genesis of these problems had been traced to the low level of education among the women folk. It is based on the problem facing the women and the importance of education that Abanihe (1997) observed that education is the basis for the full promotion and improvement of the status of women. She further posited that education is the basic tool to be given to women in order to fulfill their role as full members of society.

Furthering the course of women education Okeke (1995) as cited in Egunyomi et al (2001) women empowerment should include education followed by participation in cash economy and review of the laws on status of women. Abanihe (1997) also pointed out that education is the greatest resource for women empowerment. According to her, education influences decisively a woman's overall health and access to paid employment and therefore enables her to make informed decision about herself, and to assume a status and identity beyond those that are linked with child rearing and family. The United Nation platform for action (1995) noted that "literacy of women is an important key: investing in formal and non-formal education and training for girls and women have proved to be best means of achieving sustainable development and economic growth..."

Gender and Sex Defined

Gender and sex are two different yet closely related terms. Since the 1970s, scholars in the field of sociology have called attention to the fact that a lot of discrimination that women face on the ground of their sex is baseless. Ogbondah (2003) gave a distinction between sex and gender defining sex as biologically determined and gender as socially determined Characteristics of men and women. It therefore means that whereas sex roles are biologically determined, gender roles are roles which a particular society has determined and assigned to each sex. In other words, sex role is a function which a male or female assumes because of the physiological or anatomical differences between the sexes.

There are biologically determined roles which can be performed by only one of the sexes. For example the male impregnate the female and the female becomes pregnant, bears children, breast feeds the child. These roles are not exchangeable because they are biologically determined. (Adelore 2001). Sex roles are the same and universal in all societies of the world and can never change with history.

Gender on other hand is socially constructed and transmitted during the process of socialization. Gender thus has socio-cultural and psychological rather than biological connotations. Okeke (1995) as cited in Egunyomi et al defined gender in terms of femininity and masculinity. According to him, masculinity characteristics in Africa for example include bread winner and head of family, strong vigilant and adventurous, never crises or displays emotions and engages in male's games such as wrestling. Feminine characteristics on the other hand include taking care of domestic chores, very emotional, engages in female games such as dancing.

The examples given here can differ from society to society. They may change with history and can be performed by both sexes. In modern Nigerian society there are evidences of the traditional African gender stereotypes for example the husband is regarded as the bread winner and head of family. Men usually control Nigerian politics and thus govern and rule the country. Men are mostly captains of industry, commerce and banking. They work as generals in the army, engineers, pilots, while women work as teachers, nurses, secretaries, caterers etc. At the end of working day, husbands relax to watch the television, listen to radio or read newspapers, while wives look after the home and do all the domestic chores including the preparation of food for the husband.

Gender stereotyping also permeates the school system, manifesting in both direct and subtle ways. Some school subjects including Science, Technology and Mathematics are tagged masculine while feminine subjects include Home Economics, Secretarial Duties and Literature. Most Nigerian textbooks and readers betray a gender bias in both language and illustration. Boys are generally portrayed as brave, intelligent, decisive and adventurous while girls are portrayed as shy and timid. Classroom interactions between teachers and pupils also favour boys to the detriment of girls, thus in mixed schools, class monitors and school captains usually appointed by teachers are boys. Most teachers in institutions of higher learning are males leaving girls without role models to inspire female students to achieve.

Education of the Girl-Child

A child is a boy or girl from birth to the age of full physical development. Within this period the child is dependent on his parents or guardian for all basic needs of his or her life. A girl child is a female child (Ahiakwo, 2000). A girl child of today is a future woman and a mother, a home maker, a leader and a co-builder of society.

Education can be seen as an instrument that shapes an individual and enables him contribute effectively to his development and the development of the society (Eboh, 2001). Maduewusi (2001) sees education as key to development. Education is a very important and potent ingredient for changing a woman's life. Women education is acknowledge as the cornerstone of development and economic progress. Despite the above assertions, there seems to be discrimination against female education world wide. Odimegwu and Okemgbo

(2000) observed that in Sub-Sahara Africa, societal and parental discrimination against girls in education is reflected in lower rate of social enrolment for girls. It is estimated that there are about 26 million girls out of schools and over 90% of Africa countries have lower female enrolment rates. (Fadere, 1999).

In Nigeria, much effort has been made to improve women access to education. This is confirmed by Ogbondah (2003) who observed that educationally, the women have achieved a lot in the 1990s and the awareness have even extended to the rural women through the Better Life Programme for Rural Women and Family Support Enlightenment Programmes where the adult education programmes played a predominant role in educating the women fold who have been engaged in petty trading, business, subsistence farming, etc. Despite the efforts of the Federal Government to upgrade the rate of female enrolment in formal education and the improvement and achievement made by women, the rate of female enrolment as compared to that of male is still low.

Between 1999 and 2005, there had been a steady increase of access in the UBE programme for both sexes, although this continues to be in favour of boys as could be observed in Tables 1-3 below:

Table 1: Primary School enrolment by gender 1999-2005.

Year	Male	Female	Total	Female
1999	10,058,434	7,848,894	17,907,328	43.8
2000	10,738,029	8,413,413	19,151,442	43.8
2001	10,583,411	8,457,812	19,041,223	44.4
2002	11,015,011	8,791,071	19,806,082	44.4
2003	14,366,513	11,338,280	25,704,793	44.1
2004	11,824,494	9,571,016	21,395,510	44.7
2005	12,189,073	9,926,359	22,115,432	44.9

Source: Federal Ministry of Education Statistics, Abuja 2007.

Table 2: Junior Secondary School enrolment by sex 1999-2005

Year	Male	Female	Total	Female
1999	1,143,080	1,042,894	2,185,974	47.7
2000	1,264,903	1,012,388	2,277,291	44.5
2001	1,431,633	1,148,535	2,580,168	44.5
2002	1,746,909	1,203,828	2,950,737	40.8
2003	2,083,699	1,600,945	3,684,644	43.4
2004	1,972,637	1,535,291	3,507,928	43.8
2005	1,984,387	1,339,776	3,624,163	45.2

Source: Federal Ministry of Education Statistics, Abuja 2007.

Table 3: Senior Secondary School enrolment by sex 1999-2005

Year	Male	Female	Total	Female 1999
1999	903,528	755,083	1,658,611	45.5
2000	997,227	829,827	1,827,054	45.4
2001	1,115,360	905,577	2,173,533	41.7
2002	1,201,219	972,314	2,173,533	41.7
2003	1,579,165	1,247,634	2,826,799	44.1
2004	1,567,011	1,204,623	2,771,634	43.5
2005	1,559,038	1,214,380	2,773,418	43.8

Source: Federal Ministry of Education Statistics, Abuja 2007.

If it is a fact that women contribution to national development is indispensable and education is known to be a veritable tool for individual and national development, why the so much disparity in gender enrolment in all levels of education?

Barriers to Girl-Child Education

Certain factors have been identified to be responsible for this disparity which discriminate against girl-child in education. Eboh (2001) noted that these factors have resulted in lower female enrolment rates at all levels of education and their lower educational achievement. Some of these factors are cultural and traditional practices, home background, religion and poverty.

Omolewa (2008) opined that society and its cultural beliefs are not helping matter. She noted that some Nigeria societies believe that women should not be seen or even heard and access to education will make them to be heard or seen. Others believe that educated women do not make good housewives or mothers. Some fear that they may not even get husband to marry them. All these have provided excuses for parents not to invest in their daughters' education, instead they are sent out for early marriage. Traditional burden imposed on women and the belief that tradition must be upheld also limit females access to education. Amao-Kehinde (2001) observed that girls between the ages of 6-12 years tend to be given more responsibilities than boys. Time spent on household duties reduces study time for young girls. For adult women, being saddle with housework and children find little time or feel too exhausted to attend adult literacy or other education programme (Omolewa, 2006). Some parents also create disparity in the home by saddling the girls with work which will not give them enough time to read all in the name of preparing her for her role in the kitchen (Omolewa, 2008). In some parts of the country where female seclusion is practiced, women have less access to education because many parents feel reluctant to send their daughters to school.

In Nwankwo's (1999) view, home background can make or mar the child. In some families according to him, preference is still given to the schooling of boys to that of girls. To some families, Nwankwo noted that there is little or no point spending their money educating women since they are often considered as other people's property. Thus, it is believed that there is no need to make sacrifices to send the girl child to school. This actually affects national development, considering the high population of female in Nigeria (Maduenwusi, 2001).

Nwankwo (2007) also noted that sometimes, when parents could not cope with economic pressures in the home women (girls) will be withdrawn from school to give way for the boys who are regarded as the breadwinners. Eboh (2001) observed that the girl-child is used most often to fight poverty in the family by

withdrawing them from school to do street hawking, prostitution or begging or given out in early marriage. Ezema (1999) pointed out that men are ever anxious to get their daughters married off in order to use the bride prize to solve problems.

This does not only prevent females from achieving self-fulfillment, it also impedes the progress of the society. For the women to participate and utilize fully their potentials in national development, they should be given more opportunities to have access to education.

Implication of Girl-Child Education in National Development

The future of the society or nation lies in the hands of mothers who are the first teachers of their children. The girl-child is the future mother who moulds or builds the nation through the children she brings up. Eboh (2001) opined that the way she cares for the child determines what kind of person the child becomes and the kind of person the child becomes (emotionally) is directly related to his or her contribution to societal development.

Education has made women to know that health is wealth and for this reason educated mothers strive to bring up healthier children. They make maximum use of medical services available to them for the benefit of their households. Education has made women to take better care of them and to produce the number of children they can take care of spacing them as they want. Education has made women understand the importance of keeping home environment clean. The environments of many homes in the society now are kept very clean and this has contributed to the good health many people are enjoying these days.

There is awareness now on some of the cultural practices which denied children and mothers of nourishing foods which likely contributed to some deficiency diseases children were suffering in the past. Such cultural practices that eggs make children steal and therefore children should not be given eggs or that pregnant women should not eat snail because it makes them give birth to children that produce much saliva or that only the head of the family should eat the lion share of meat or fish used in cooking food while the women eats very little or not at all and children to eat without meat or fish is no more upheld.

Many decades ago, almost all women were full time house wives except those that were involved in farming activities. In recent times however, educated women are competing with their male counterparts in labour market and are contributing immensely to the economic advancement of their families and the nation. Most educated women are more interested in their children education. They want their children to do better academically than they did.

Women are now found in high positions such as managerial positions, administrative positions, politics, lecturing, banking, etc, combining these with their roles as mothers, wives and home makers. In fact, it is education that empowers these women to be able to play all these roles. If a girl-child today is given good education she will be a good mother, a good wife, an important member of the community and a good nation builder. This is why Aloh (1999) noted that educating women is the greatest investment any nation can provide to ensure national development considering the diverse roles women play in the society. This confirms the truth of the saying "train a man and you train an individual but train a woman and you train a nation". Ipaye (1986) observed that expansion of educational opportunities be made available for girls. He advised that the magnitude which points to the girls as the inferior sex has to be changed since it had affected people's opinion about the educational opportunities provided for the females.

Nigeria's Commitments to Gender Equity in the School System

The Federal Government of Nigeria has taken a very strong position on the general principles of equality and human rights. Section 18 of the 1999 Nigeria constitution, dealing with the functional principles of state policy reflects Nigeria's commitment to equal educational opportunity and specifies that:

Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy and to this, government shall as and when practicable provide: free, compulsory and universal primary education, free university education and free adult literacy programme.

In the same vein, the revised edition of the National Policy on Education (2004) stipulates that Nigeria's philosophy of education is based on the integration of the individual into a sound and effective citizen and equal educational opportunities for all citizens of the nation at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The Nigerian government is signatory to the UNESCO convention against discrimination in education. Article 10 of the convention states that parties should:

Take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education, which includes some curriculum, examination and standards for teaching and scholarship... including life long education, equal participation in sports and elimination of stereotypes content.

In the year 1980, Nigeria government was signatory to Lagos plan of Action which put particular importance on female education and the role of women in development process. The Federal Government of Nigeria is also party to the convention on the Rights of the child (adopted by UN General Assembly in 1989), and the Declaration of the world summit for all which underscored the principles of equal rights of girls to education (FGN, 2004).

The OAU International Conference on Assistance to African child (November, 1992) which the Nigeria government was party to, reaffirmed the commitment of the children's summit and the World Conference on Education for African Girls. The world summit for children calls for an end to gender apartheid. Nigeria, moreover, took part in the Pan African Conference on Education of Girls and the Ouagadougou Declaration which, among other things, called upon governments "to give priority to equity (and equality) and to define a target improving girls education within the framework of national development plans (UNESCO/UNICEF 1993).

The Nigerian government has also ratified both the International Conventions of Civil and Political Rights and the International Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination against women, popularly referred to as Women's Convention. By ratifying Women's convention, it implies that Nigeria recognizes that gender inequality exists and it promises to generate the necessary political will to redress all forms of discrimination based on sex. Article 2 of the charter on Women's Convention Commits all parties to:

Pursue by all appropriate means without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and to this end undertake:

- (a) To embody the principles of the equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate means, the practical realization of this principle;*
- (b) To adopt appropriate legislative and other measures, including sanctions which are appropriate prohibiting all discrimination against women.*
- (c) To establish legal protection of the rights of women on equal basis with men and ensure through competent national tribunals and other public institutions the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination.*

Although the signing and ratifying of international instruments do not themselves guarantee gender equality, they never-the-less provide a point of reference for the mobilization of efforts directed towards ensuring the achievement of equality in education. They also reflect a commitment to support women's struggles for ensuring gender equity in all spheres of life.

Conclusion

We have established in this presentation that education is a vital force for development and that the uneducated and under-educated girls in Nigeria are robbed of the opportunity to improve their lives and contribute maximally to our national development. The implication is that the uneducated Nigeria women have been denied of their fundamental human rights. Remarkable efforts had however, been made by the Federal Government of Nigeria through its political commitment and educational programmes at ensuring gender equity in the formal school system. The Nigerian government nevertheless, as a matter of urgency should workout large scale educational activities and strategies for the promotion of women education.

Recommendation

- 1) Illiterate fathers should be made to understand other roles of their female children in National development other than bearing and rearing of children. It is believed that the illiterate father have majority of the female population since the illiterates form the majority of Nigerian population.
- 2) Government should make provision for educational materials, school meals, uniforms, to make free education truly free to girls from poor homes.
- 3) Empowering NGOs and Local Communities, women organization and PTA for advocacy, programme development and execution in favour of girls.
- 4) Engaging successful women as "role models" to organize talk shows, counseling and discussion groups in their localities.
- 5) Providing gender awareness training for teachers and teacher trainers.
- 6) Discouraging trafficking and sexual exploitation of girls.
- 7) Ensuring that girls who dropout of school as a result of pregnancy are provided opportunity to continue with their education after delivery.

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