

Gender inequality: Issues and challenges in basic Education in Nigeria

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Education, gender, in equality, challenges, enlightenment and responsibility

Abstract

Although every child has the right to education, looking critically at the enrolment and admission in our primary and secondary schools, the ration of male and female shows a significant difference in favor of the male. You will also discover that the rate of disparity is lower in the primary schools than in the secondary schools. Measures such as public enlightenment campaigns, involving the communities in planning and monitoring of schools, plan for the location of schools, increase in the number of female teachers, more schools need to be built in giving some aids/incentives to the girls at most in primary school level will have to be considered to bridge the gap between male and female. It is considered a collective responsibility and effort of government, parents, community and stakeholders to ensure this. It is in view of the above; the paper discusses gender inequality, goals of Basic Education, gender inequality in Basic Education and challenges of Basic Education on gender and finally proffers possible suggestions.

Introduction

Government should take relevant steps to ensure that both men and women enjoy equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities as to guarantee the development of their individual aptitudes and capacities and enable women to participate as beneficiaries and active agents in development. In order to promote equality of women and men, government should ensure for men and women, equality before the law, the provision of facilities for equality of educational opportunities and training, health services, equality in conditions and opportunities of employment, including remuneration and adequate social security.

Education is the gateway to the advancement of any society. It is essential to economic, social and political development. Girls and boys have to go to school and acquire education in order for the society to move forward.

Rufa'I (2000) opined that "Educating the children increases knowledge opportunity to them. In this regard, widening access to education has been a major policy goal in most developing countries for the last forty years". She further went on to say that according to the United Nations charter, one of the basic principles of the Right of the child is that every child (male or female) is entitled to receive compulsory basic education and equal opportunity to higher education depending on individual ability. In Nigeria, the issue is reflected in the new National Polity on Education where it provides for equal educational opportunities for the citizens of the country.

The most important thing is that everybody has to be educated, go to school and acquire education in order to improve his quality of life as a human being. If this is attained, then both boys and girls will be educated, thereby negating the whole issue of parity in schools. Parity in gender as far as education is concerned implies to equal or nearly equal enrolment ratios for all school-age children whether girls or boys. It is a situation where both males and females have equal access or equal opportunity to schooling.

Conceptual Background

According to Rufa'I (2000), "looking at the position of gender in Nigeria and in most parts of the developing world, women and girls are in most cases left in a position of weakness. They are under-represented. Their participation in education is always lower than that of boys. Female dropout rates are somewhat higher than males in most African countries, contrary to the situation in most parts of the world". The concept 'Gender' refers to a system of roles and relationships between women and men that are determined not by biology, but by the social political and economic context.

Aminu, J (1988) sees gender as "process by which individuals who are born into biological categories of male and female become the social categories of women and men through the acquisition of locally defined attributes of masculinity and femininity"

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'equality' as the condition of being equal. However, the Copenhagen World Conference interpreted 'equality' as meaning not only legal equality, the elimination of demure discrimination, but also equality of rights, responsibilities and opportunities for the participation of women in development, both as beneficiaries and as active agents. Equality is both a goal and a means whereby individuals are accorded equal treatment under the law and equal opportunities to enjoy their rights and to develop their potential talents and skills so that they can participate in national, economic, social and cultural development and can benefit from its results.

Disparity in enrolment into the Nigerian schools shows a ratio of 57:43 in favor of boys. With much effort towards girls' enrolment, some states in Nigeria have already attained parity in their schools. As such parity in educational enrolment should be given high priority.

Goals of Basic Education

The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) officially launched the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme on 30th September, 1999 in Sokoto, which marked another giant stride in the history of education in the country. The implication of this is that Nigeria has adopted the World Conference on Education meaning that every child in the country must stay in school for at least nine years before going to either labour market or proceed for higher education on the new 9 - 3 - 4 system. The programme merges the Primary and Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) levels of education where successful students can move to Senior Secondary Schools (SSS) to study either arts or sciences after which they can go to the tertiary education level before going to the market level or post-graduate studies. An unsuccessful student who is unable to go beyond the JSS is to drop out to practice some skills that will give him the chance to earn a living.

As Abba, A. H. (2004) pointed out "the concept of Basic Education is synonymous with the term 'education for all' which implies the provision of basic education for all children, youth and adults for the improvement of their quality of living".

The programme/scheme is intended to provide free, compulsory and qualitative education at primary and junior secondary schools and other aspects of basic education.

The overall aim is to make basic education accessible to all target groups. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme/scheme has a number of objectives, principal among them as highlighted by Abba, A. H (2004) are as follows:

- i). the provision of free universal education for every Nigerian child of school age.
- ii) Reducing drastically the incidence of drop-out from the formal school system, through improved relevance, quality and efficiency

- iii) catering for the learning needs of young people who have had to interrupt their schooling through appropriate forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education , and
- iv) Ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative life skills as well as the ethical moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning and a strong commitment to the vigorous promotion of education.

Abba (2004) further stressed that “for all intent and purposes, Universal Basic Education (UBE) is a reform measure which is aimed at addressing inequality in educational opportunity at the basic level and improving the quality of that provision”

Gender Inequality in Basic Education

According to Taiwo and Akin-Aina (1999:19), gender refers to the social differences between men and women that are learned, changeable over time and have wide variations within and between cultures. It is a socio-economic variable used to analyze roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs of men and women in any context.

Inequality amounts to state of being unequal, example in status, rights and privileges. It connotes some discriminatory practices with respect to rights, privileges and status accorded to persons.

Gender inequality in education refers to the disparities in access to education between males and females. In Nigerian context, it refers to the fact that females have disproportionately low levels of access to all subsectors of educational system vis-à-vis their male counterparts. In other words, more men enroll and graduate from the nation’s primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. Hence, although women constitute about 50% of Nigerian population, their levels of participation in the educational programme of the nation is not proportionate to their size in the total population (Tahir, 1999). This goes to show that women population is not giving as much support commensurate to their number as they are ought to give towards the enhancement of educational sector of the country.

Bridging Gender Inequality through Basic Education

The National Policy on Education describes education as the most important instrument of change and an instrument par excellence for effecting national development. This is to say that education is a vital part of human existence. It is the wheel of progress and means to social change. Education is the complete development of man such that he becomes functionally useful to himself, society and humanity at large. Education is the aggregate of all the process by means of which a person develops abilities, attitudes and forms of behavior of positive value in the society in which he lives.

Basic Education in its generic sense is fundamental and basic to human and overall societal development. In fact the extent of development of societies has been associated to the extent of the literacy of its citizenry. The National Policy on Education gives credence to this assertion when it stated that:

“Basic Education is longer a private enterprise but a huge government concern”.

This obviously indicates/underscores the assertion that women as a group constitute valuable resources of talent and energy and therefore need sound education. This statement is appreciated more when one realizes that Basic Education should be a birth right ad not a privilege of every child. As a matter of fact, Basic Education is one of the first steps in a process of enabling women to take control over their own lives participate on an equal basis

in society and eventually free themselves from economic exploitation and from being oppressed. (Anyanniyi, 1999).

Basic Education therefore is an effective instrument for development of any country, a strategic tool for liberating the masses of people from ignorance, disease and poverty, a dynamic force for ensuring progress and overall betterment of the people and that equality of educational opportunity is the only guarantee for building an egalitarian society.

Challenges of Gender Inequality in Basic Education

Some practices in the Nigerian society leave no one in doubt about the prevalence of discriminatory treatments meted to persons on the basis of gender. Some evidence abound to buttress this point are:

- Economically, men are regarded as the bread-winners of the family, while women (suppose are the bread eaters). In the light of this expression, most men exercise more economic power and are accorded higher economic status than the women. Men engage in different types of labour with varying degrees of sophistication, and thus are more abundantly remunerated unlike most of their female counterparts who engage in menial jobs with little economic value. For instance, a preview of the executive officers and cleaners/messengers in most places of work shows that whereas men dominate the former, women dominate the latter. Most work done by women are either poorly remunerated or are generally unpaid for. Such work includes household chores, reproductive work, agricultural work and a host of others.
- In the social sense, men and women do not attract equal social status. In Nigerian society, a male child is priced higher than the girl-child. Most polygamous families or cases of large family size are usually attributable to the efforts by couples to beget some male issues in the face of earlier female children. Evidences have shown that most cases of family instability or divorce have their roots traceable to absence of male issues in the family.
- In the religious circle, gender inequality also manifests itself. In some denominations, the women do not ascend to some echelons of the religious hierarchy.
- At the education sector, until recently, the education of the female child was seen as an anathema. This new was noted on the conception that it is unwise to train somebody who would one day be given out in marriage to another man. It was indeed perceived as an economic waste to the parental family to educate a female child. In those days, Basic Education was the sole right of the male child while the females had their places reserved in the kitchen. A similar trend is still in place in the northern states of Nigeria based on religious reasons.
- Another dimension to this discriminatory practice in the field of Basic education is with respect to the courses offered by male and female students. There is this retrogressive speculation that mathematics and sciences courses are for males while females are better in the literary arts and home economics. At the instructional level, particularly in secondary schools, the teachers attitude sometimes tend to suggest that males must be good in sciences, while females could perform poorly in sciences without an alarm.
- In the field of government appointments and executive positions, women have not been getting their fair share. According to the Nigerian Report of the World Fourth

Conference on Women (1995) “out of over forty Directors General (DGs) in the Nigerian Civil Service, only about six of them were women by 1990”

The scenario is the same at various levels of government. At the tertiary institutions, the very few females who had scaled through the hurdles of securing some executive posts had given very good account of themselves as people who could compare favorably with their male counterparts or even excel.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the various governments at all levels, UN International Agencies, Sectoral Agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations and individuals should come together strongly to eliminate all these forms of inequalities and embark on gender sensitive policies and strategies in order to monitor gender and development goals.

The issue of disparity is still a problem in our schools and society. It was found that the rate of disparity is lower in the primary school than in the secondary school. As such, strategies will have to be employed to fill the gap between the admission rate of girls and boys. The ratio of primary school enrolment is 4:5 while that of the secondary school is 1: 3 in favour of the boys. Female must realize that something is done for its own sake. They have to understand that they need to be educated to be better human beings.

It helps them to be better of their lives and that of their families such as the type of foods to cook simple hygiene and bringing up of their children.

Recommendations

Based on the existing disparity among the school children in the primary and post primary schools, it is a fact that no society can develop by educating only the female members of the society. Serious consideration should be given to policies designed to remedy existing inequalities in school participation rate. Since access to education is fundamental to the survival of any society, there is need to improve mechanisms to meet basic education needs to allow more and more children their right to education.

As pointed out by Rufa’I (2000), the following strategies are recommended:

1. Public enlightenment campaign on the need for female education not only in the primary schools but in the secondary schools and beyond through radio, television and newspapers etc.
2. Sensitize the communities on the benefits of educating girls and women.
3. Urge the communities to plan, manage and monitor basic education programmes.
4. The number of male teachers has out-numbered that of the females. There is need to increase number of female teachers to attract more girls in the schools.
5. Initiate some incentives for girls in schools at least in primary secondary school levels.
6. Plan the location of schools to give equal opportunity to all school age children especially girls.
7. The government should build more schools for girls in order to improve the number of those admitted into the schools.
8. The idea of girls not continuing with their education should be discouraged to allow them study up to and beyond the secondary schools.
9. Women are to come together to form a body that will monitor and coordinate the issue of girls’ education.

10. Parents should not only encourage their girl –child to read and be well educated but also sensitize them to doing professional courses that should place on the same pedestal with their male counterparts.

These strategies could only be achieved through the government’s political will and the cooperation of the parents and other members of the society.

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