

ACCESSIBILITY TO EDUCATION AND GENDER EQUITY IN NIGERIA EDUCATION

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Abstract

Both males and females in Nigeria have a basic human right to be educated. Looking at the Nigerian schools today, although it may seem we have a high enrolment of females, more of them are enrolled at the lower levels of education and a lot of them do not go further than the primary/secondary levels of education, especially in the rural areas. This points to the fact that educating the girl child up to tertiary level particularly, in the rural areas, has not been embraced fully by everyone in society. Perhaps, this is so because of the mindset or social philosophy of parents/guardians and the society in which they live, this is worrisome. Therefore, the researchers looked at the concept of gender and equity in education and some constraints to equal access to tertiary education in Nigeria. The researchers also reviewed some related literature of other researchers and qualitative analysis was carried out. Equity theory was used to guide this research. It was concluded that gender equity is an issue that affects every society, including Nigeria, therefore, it should be taken seriously and looked into in order to either minimize or eliminate it from society. The millennium development program, sustainable development goals and the United Nations Development Goals are all of the notion that women's full and equal representation and participation in all levels of peace, process, security efforts and education should be encouraged. It was recommended amongst others that all stakeholders in the educational sector should ensure that both males and females have equal and fair opportunities to tertiary education.

Key words: Gender, Equity, Accessibility, Tertiary Education, and Gender Equality.

Introduction

Educating girls develops growth rates, encourages independence of the girl child and reduced social disparities. In 2009, the Nigerian Population Council (NPC) observed that women with higher educational qualifications are more likely to be in formal wage employment than those at the level of primary school education. A positive correlation exists between the enrollment of girls in primary school, the Gross National Product (GNP) and increase of life expectancy. Because of this correlation, enrollment in schools represents the largest component of the investment in human capital in any society. Rapid socio-economic development of a nation, has been observed to depend on the quality of women and their education in that country. Education gives women the disposition for a lifelong acquisition of knowledge, values, attitudes, competences, confidence, independence and skills. To ensure equal access to education, the National Policy on education states that access to education is a right for all Nigerian children regardless of gender, religion, and disability. During the 1960s when most African States (countries) began to gain political independence, there was notable expansion of educational opportunities for girls and women in many African countries, including Nigeria. This was partly driven by the recognition of the importance of education in Nation-building and development, as well as the need to address the historical gender disparities in education. During this period, many African governments, including Nigeria's, made significant investments on education, leading to an increase in the number of schools, teachers, and enrollment rates, especially for girls and women. This expansion was also driven by international efforts, such as the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Addis Ababa Conference on Education (1961) which emphasized the importance of education for all, regardless of gender.

However, despite these efforts, gender disparities in education persisted, and girls and women continued to face significant barriers to accessing quality education, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas. At the Pan-African Conference held at Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on March and April, 1993, it was observed that Nigeria was still lagging behind other regions of the world in female access to education. It was also noted that gender disparity existed in education and there was need to identify and eliminate all policies that hindered girls' full participation in education. In Nigeria, many girls do not have access to adequate education past certain age. In 2010, the female adult literacy rate (ages 15 and above) for Nigeria was 59.4% in comparison to the male, adult literacy rate of 74.4%. One can confidently say, it is difference in education that has led to this gap in literacy. This indicates that there is a gender dimension to educational attainment in Nigeria, including tertiary education.

Tertiary education is recognized worldwide as the centre of excellence for the production of individuals with high intellectual capacity to drive social, economic and political development. The national policy on education (2013) on tertiary education clearly stated that; tertiary education shall contribute to national development through higher relevant manpower training, inculcate proper values for individuals survival in the society as well as forge and cement national unity and understanding. Tertiary education is therefore for

qualitative individual and for society transformation through development, national unity and integration.

However, the extent to which such desirable change in society can be affected through tertiary education depends on the opportunities opened up to individuals to access it. UNESCO (2005) affirmed that education is a fundamental right that should be made equitable and accessible to all while the Federal Republic of Nigeria through the National Policy on education (FRN, 2013) emphasized equal educational opportunities for all citizens from the primary through secondary to tertiary levels.

Conceptual Clarification

Gender equality: A situation in which access to rights or opportunities to be educated is unaffected by gender.

Gender: Either of the two sexes (males and females), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones.

Equality: The quality of being fair and impartial as concerning the treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities.

Accessibility: The quality of being able to gain admission into school or get educated without bias of gender.

Tertiary Education: Education for males and females above school age, including college, university and vocational courses.

Theoretical Perspective

Gender equality addresses the different interpretation that are given to the claim that men and women are equal or ought to be treated equally and the arguments used to advance claims for gender equality.

Equity theory by John Stacey Adam (1963)

Equity theory focuses on determining whether the distribution of resources is fair to both relational partners. According to equity theory, in order to maximize individual rewards, we tend to create systems where resources can be fairly divided amongst members of a group. Inequalities in relationships will cause those within it to be unhappy to a degree proportional to the amount of inequality. The belief is that people value fair treatment which causes them to be motivated to keep the fairness maintained within the relationships of their co-workers and the organization. The structure of equity in the workplace is based on the ration of inputs to outcomes. This theory is relevant to this work in that it explains how distribution of resources should be shared to both males and female partners.

Gender and Justice in Plato

Plato's proposal for the equality of the sexes remains on the most controversial aspects of his argument in the Republic. The status of women in the society depends essentially on the definition of human beings. If human beings are defined by their body, a clear distinction emerges between women, whose role is to produce and raise children, and men, who must work to feed their wife and children, and who must fight to protect them. In Plato, the definition of human beings changes. Human beings are living beings that is, the temporary conjunction of a soul and body. The body, which is made up of the four elements (fire, air, water and earth) and is dissolved after a certain number of years, is merely a temporary element. Human beings are defined by their soul, for the soul is responsible for all the cognitive and physical movements of human beings, and above all, it survives them, and can thus be punished or rewarded in another world. On this earth, the soul, although it remains basically one, is the source of multiplicity of activities grouped around three functions; a cognitive function, which accounts for the knowledge that may or may not imply the body; an aggressive function enabling the defense of the body; and a desiring function, which ensures the nutrition and reproduction of the body. It is the excellence of the activities implemented by these functions that allows individual humans to be divided into the three functional groups that make up society, the producers, whose psychic excellence resides in courage, and the philosophers, whose soul is turned toward knowledge. There is thus a direct relation between the three functions of the soul and the three functional groups- included in the city; it is the soul's excellence that defines the place and role of human beings in society, and no longer their body, endowed with male or female gender. This implies that women may find themselves in the group that defends the city if in their souls, the aggressive function that makes them courageous combatants predominates. It is thus no longer the body endowed with a female sex that makes a difference, but excellence of the soul. For Plato, the fact of being of the male or female sex has no more relevance for the attribution of such- and- such a task than does the fact of having lots of hair or of being bald. Every difference of nature is thus based on the predominance and excellence of a specific part or feature in the soul. Therefore, men and women are by nature the same. The difference lies in the fact that a woman's body is generally less vigorous than a man's, but this is not always the case.

The Concept of Gender and Equity (Equal Educational Opportunity - Fairness)

Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviour and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationship with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.

Gender is hierarchical and produced inequalities that intersect with other social and economic inequalities. Gender based discrimination intersects with other factors of discrimination, such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, educational status, disability and sexual orientation among others. This is referred to as intersectionality.

Gender interacts with but is different from sex, which refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes,

hormones and reproductive organs. Gender and sex are related to but different from gender identity. Gender identity refers to a person's deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may not correspond to the person's physiology or designated sex at birth. Gender inequality and discrimination faced by women and girls put their right to education and well-being at risk. Women and girls often face greater barriers than men and boys to accessing quality education. Gender discrimination is any unequal and unfair treatment including privilege and priority on the basis of gender, while gender inequality is discrimination on the basis of sex or gender, causing one sex or gender to be routinely privileged or prioritized over another. Gender equity and equality are fundamental human right and that right is violated by gender based discrimination.

Both males and females in Nigeria have a basic human right to be educated. For the females, this right has been recognized since the 1948 adoption of the universal declaration of human rights. From the researchers' observation, female education has an important impact on the development of a stable, prosperous and healthy nation state resulting in active, productive and empowered citizens. The concept of gender equity refers to fairness of treatment for women and men according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities (International Labour Office (ILO, 2000)). It is distinct and different from the concept of gender equality, which is the effective equality between men and women, that entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypical views, rigid gender roles, prejudices. Gender equality means that the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered valued and favoured equally, it does not mean that women and men have to become the same, but their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female (ILO, 2000) . the concept of gender equity recognizes that women and men have different needs and power and that these differences should be identified and addressed in a manner that rectifies the imbalances between the sexes. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and educational opportunities. The term 'gender equity' has sometimes been used in a way that perpetrates stereotypes about women's role in society, suggesting that women should be treated 'fairly' in accordance with the roles that they carry out. This understanding risks perpetuating unequal gender relations and solidifying gender stereotypes that are detrimental to women. Therefore, the term should be used with caution to ensure it is not making a reluctance to speak more openly about discriminating and inequality. It can be helpful to look at gender inequality as the end goal and gender equality as the means to get there. Gender equality refers to promoting fairness in education, as well as confronting stereotypes and biases that have historically limited a student's potential. When we achieve gender equality, all students will be free to pursue their education without fear of discrimination or harassment because of their gender. Why confront gender bias in the classroom as early as possible? A survey involving over 2,000 students in their teens found that from their early age, children make assumptions that confirm gender stereotypes, children learn how to think about themselves and others from

the messages they hear in society. And often these messages include stereotypes about gender that stick with them for the rest of their lives. In the classroom, students often encounter implicit or explicit assumptions about gender, students expect an instruction to treat everyone in the class fair, and equally, and our tertiary institutions favour certain students over others, but it is probably impossible not to like some students more than others. Difference in liking may foster differences in interactions, such as allowing certain students to dominate discussions. Even subtle differences in how students are treated may lead to perception of partiality where none exists. To avoid giving the impression of partiality, the instructor should carefully monitor his/her behaviour and interactions with both the male and female students.

Educational equality, also called 'equality in Education', is a measure of achievement, fairness and opportunity in education. Educational equality and opportunity depends on two main factors; the first is fairness, which implies that factors specific to one's personal conditions should not interfere with the potential of academic success. The second factor refers to a comprehensive standard that applies to everyone in a certain education system. These two factors are closely related and depend on each other for an educational system success.

Educational equality's growing importance is based on the premise that a person's level of education directly correlates with their quality of life and that an academic system that practices educational equity is thus laying a strong foundation for a fair and thriving society. Education equity also operates in a historical context; history shapes outcomes in education systems. Gender equity refers to both male and female concerns, yet most of the gender bias is against women in the developing countries like Nigeria, where cultural and societal stigma continue to hinder growth and prosperity for women.

Gender-based inequity in education is not just a phenomenon in developing countries, like Nigeria. An article in the New York Times highlighted how education systems, especially the public schools system tends to cause segregation between genders. Boys and girls are often taught with different approaches, which programs children to think they are different and deserve different treatment. However, studies show that boys and girls learn differently, and therefore should be taught differently. Boys learn better when they keep moving, while girls learn better sitting in one place with silence. Therefore, in this reasoning, segregating the genders promotes gender equity in education, as both boys and girls have optimized learning.

Constraints to Equal Access to Tertiary Education in Nigeria

Female education can increase outputs levels and allow countries to attain sustainable development equity in education of women also reduces the possibilities of trafficking and exploitation of women. Even though this is factual about equity in education; there still exist some constraints to equity and equal access to tertiary education in Nigeria. The long term social and economic consequences of having little education are more tangible now more than ever before. Those without the skills to participate socially and economically in society generate higher costs of healthcare, income, support, child welfare, and social security. While higher education has been improved in the past fifty (50) years, this has not translated to a more equal society in terms of academics. Girls in Nigeria face sets of barriers to equal

educational opportunity. These include child marriage, domestic labour and human trafficking. According to Nwogu (2015), Nigeria is a source transit, and destination country for women and children subjected to trafficking in persons. It further states that trafficked Nigerian women and children are recruited from rural areas within the country's borders; women and girls for involuntary domestic servitude and forced commercial sexual exploitation and preference is given to education of male children over females. Uketor (2010), observed that tradition and religion of some parts of Nigeria favour the education of male children over that of females. Ehiamentor (2005) reported that the number of females that took the 2004 University Matriculation Examination (UME) was 352,834 compared to 438,703 in 2003. This is a drop of 195%. This implies that traditional and religious beliefs adversely affect the female children's access to higher education compared to their male counterparts

Socio-Economic:

Poverty can negatively affect high quality education in any country. This is the reason some students drop out of school while others cannot proceed from one level of education (lower) to another level (higher). This affects the girl-child more than the boy child. Some parents would prefer the boy-child more than the girl-child to proceed to higher levels in education, while the girl-child is groomed for early marriage or just drops out of school. This is the situation in our rural areas. Some of the girls may desire to go further in their education, but since they are dependent on their parents or guardians financially, they cannot further their education. Onah, et al, (2021) explicates how various negative attitudes including gender bias and negligence towards the girl child education in Nigeria has exacerbated poverty, illiteracy and untold hardship on the citizenry. Gender equity besides being a fundamental human right, is essential to achieve peaceful societies, with full human potential and sustainable development (United States Development Goals).

Social philosophy looks at the identities, relations, and power structures within the society or world. Some social philosophy is concerned with what makes our social world- what social kinds, such as race, gender or class. For the purpose of this paper, the researchers looked at social philosophy as how our society, parents and guardians or the individual himself looks at gender equity. Some members of society like parents/guardians etc. may not be fair in their reasoning or belief in equity in education. They would prefer to encourage the male-child to go from one level of education to another (higher level) but for the girl-child, they would prefer she stops at the primary or secondary level of education. They would rather prefer to push their daughters into early marriages than for them to further their education to tertiary level. But for the male child, the reverse is the case. This is typical of parents/ guardians in rural areas. Despite the fact that the United National Development Program (UNDP) believes that gender inequalities and discriminatory attitudes and practices that hold women back, must be confronted and eliminated if we are to leave no one behind, yet gender inequality exists in our society.

Conclusion

Tertiary education is a veritable tool on the training of the manpower needs required for an all-round development of the country. The extent to which Nigeria can benefit from this is highly dependent on the access to tertiary education opened to its citizens. Equal educational opportunities for all citizens guarantees equitable access for citizens irrespective of the diverse backgrounds and gender, to participate fully in the development of their country. An all-round development can forge equality, unity, peaceful co-existence, and security in a heterogeneous country like Nigeria if gender and equity are well reconstructed in our tertiary educational system. If provision for grants and scholarships are made for girls and females who are underprivileged for their education, this will go a long way to bridge the gap between the education of males and female in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. All stake holders in the educational sector should ensure that both males and females have equal and fair opportunities to tertiary education, for all-round development of the country.
2. The government should strive in its effort to abolish all forms of inequalities and discrimination in accessing enrolment in Nigerian tertiary institutions.
3. Government should develop and implement policies that promote gender equity, such as anti-discrimination policies and sexual harassment policies.
4. There should be provision for grants and scholarships to support girls and women who cannot afford education.
5. The government should engage with communities to promote accessibility and gender equity in education and challenge harmful gender stereotypes.

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