GENDER INEQUALITY IN EDUCATION: DETRIMENT TO ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALs (MDGs)

Musa Umar Babi
Department of Educational Foundation,
Federal College of Education (Technical),
Potiskum.

Fatsuma Sabo Dantamas
Department of Educational Foundation,
Federal College of Education (Technical),
Potiskum.

And

Ifeoma Kate Obiejesi
Department of Educational Foundation,
Federal College of Education (Technical),
Potiskum.

Abstract

The problem of gender disparity in all the socio-economic sectors in Nigeria which education part of is an issue that cannot be over emphasized. Despite all concerted efforts, both National and International to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in many areas, particularly in relation to education, the problem still persists. Thus, gender inequality and women empowerment are some of the major challenges facing the United Nations and the world today. It is against this background that this paper focused on the major causes of gender inequality and its persisting rate in Nigeria. Implications of gender inequality, and the international response to gender inequality with specific reference to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were also discussed. Promotion and enforcement of women right through legislative power where also among the major recommendations of the paper.

There is widespread agreement that women are greatly underrepresented in the Nigerian educational system vis-à-vis economic and social development. Promoting gender equality is now globally accepted as a development strategy for reducing poverty levels among women and men, improving health and living standards and enhancing efficiency of public investments. The attainment of gender equality is not only seen as an end in itself and human rights issue, but as a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development (Federal Government of Nigeria/National Gender Policy, 2006).

However, gender discrimination continues to be highly pervasive, manifesting in different dimensions and in different cultures. Moreover, it has given birth to poverty, degradation, and hopelessness, because of the patriarchal societal structure of the country. Women rank lower than men in all indices of development of the country, and records from the National Bureau of Statistics reveal that there are more poor women in the country than men (FGN/NGP 2008).

Education is universally acknowledged to benefit individuals and promote national development. In fact, "educating girls quite possibly will yield a higher rate of return than any other investment available in the developing world" (Summers 1992). It is also commonly believed that lack of access to appropriate educational and training opportunities perpetuates women's continuing marginalization from social, economic and political power, because, even in the family, the uneducated females are those that are mostly marginalized.

In 1995, Nigeria was among the countries that attended the Conference on Women Gender Equality that was held in Beijing, China, which was aimed at promoting gender equality as a reference point for measuring the achievement of all countries of the world (UN, 1995). The latest attempt was also made in 2003, when Nigeria responded to UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), one of which goals was to eliminate gender inequality and empower women, which has 2015 as its target year. Also, in a bid to pursue it's international and local obligation of ensuring the realization of gender equality (Goals 3 of the Millennium Development Goals), the Nigerian government replaced its Women Policy with a Gender Policy in 2006 (FGN/NGP 2006). Yet the issue is becoming endemic.

This paper therefore, focused on understanding the role of Millennium Development Goals in relation to gender inequality, factors responsible for gender inequality in education and, persistent gender inequality in Nigerian education. Implications of gender inequality in Nigeria were also viewed together with some possible solutions to the problems and some recommendations, which may serve as remedy to the menace.

Understanding the Millennium Development Goals

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) originated from the Millennium Declaration produced by the United Nations. The declaration asserts that every individual has the right to dignity, freedom, equality, a basic standard of living that includes freedom from hunger and violence, and encourages tolerance and solidarity. The MDGs were made to operationalize these ideas by setting targets and indicators for poverty reduction in order to achieve the rights set forth in the declaration on a set fifteen-year timeline (Igbuzor, 2006).

The aim of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is to encourage development by improving social and economic conditions in the world's poorest countries. They derive from earlier international development targets, and were officially established following the millennium summit in 2000, where all world leaders present adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration, from which the eight goals were derived by a group headed by Jeffrey Sachs (Igbuzor, 2006).

With the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals, more vigorous global and national attention are now drawn to pursuing gender sensitive policies. Goal 3 of the MGDs, aimed at achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, is not only of intrinsic value in itself but also central to the attainment of all the other MDGs. The declaration was adopted with a framework of 8 goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators to measure progress towards the Millennium Declaration, as worked out by a consensus of experts from the United Nations Secretariat, International Monitory Fund (IMF), Organisation for Economic Co-orporation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank.

However, as the world approaches the 2015 deadline target of the famous millennium declaration, target and indicators set to attain this goal are fast becoming increasingly disturbing issues. The eight (8) MDGs are:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger: 2015 target: Halve the proportion of the people living on less than $1 a day, and those suffering hunger.
2. Achieve Universal Basic Education: 2015 target: Achieve universal primary completion
3. Promote Gender Equality: 2005/2015 target: Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education enrolment by 2005, and achieve equity at all levels by 2015.
4. Reduce Child Mortality: 2015 target: Reduce by two third the child mortality rate.
5. Improve Maternal Health: 2015 target: Reduce by three quarters the proportion of women dying in childbirth.
6. Combat AIDS, Malaria and other Diseases: 2015 targets: halt and begin to reverse the incidence of HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other major diseases.

7. Ensure Environmental Sustainability: Integrate the principle of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources. 2015 target reduce by half the proportion of people without access to clean drinking water and basic sanitation and by 2020 achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.
8. Develop a Global Partnership for Development.

The MDGs are currently the highest-level expression of the international community's development priorities. They commit the international community to an action agenda, which emphasizes sustainable human development as the key to fulfilling social and economic progress. All 191 Member States of the United Nations have pledged to achieve these goals by the year 2015. The Goals and their targets and indicators have been widely accepted as a framework for measuring national and global development progress (Abama, & Chris, 2009).

The Millennium Declaration explicitly recognizes that the equal rights and opportunities of women and men must be assured. Moreover, MDG 3 specifically addresses the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment.

Gender Inequality in Nigerian Education

Gender refers to society's division of humanity, based on sex, into two distinctive categories. Gender guides how females and males think about themselves, how they interact with others, and what position they occupy in society as a whole. Thus, gender also operates as a dimension of social inequality. This inequality, which has historically favoured males, is no simple matter of biological differences between the two sexes. Females and males do of course differ biologically, but these disparities are complex and inconsistent.

In most of our African societies, the education of women did not receive significant attention and this led to the second class status assigned to women in society. Women are relegated to mere agents of domestic engagements at home, with considerable reproductive roles. This apathy arising from gender inequality has also affected education in Nigeria. As a result, the males have dominated Nigerian schools from primary to tertiary level. The disparity in access to education continues to exist in favour of males, while correspondingly a high illiteracy rate persists among females. The female's literacy rate in 1990 was estimated at about 39.5 percent, which, when compared with 62.3 percent for males, is low. This means that 36.3 million of the estimated 43.9 million women in Nigeria are illiterates (FGN/UNICEF 2003).

The lowest enrolment of girls and the largest gender gaps are inevitably in the poorest and least economically developed areas, especially in rural communities where educational provision is poor, among children of the poorest families, and among children of ethnic minorities (Brock and Cammish, 1991).

Gender roles are attitude and activities that culture links to each sex. As such, gender roles are the active expression of gender identity. The first question people usually ask about a new born child in Nigeria is: "Is it a boy or a girl?" Such a question carries a great deal of significance for the child's entire life more particularly in his/her future educational carrier.

In addition, based on the available statistical data for primary, secondary and university enrolment, it is discovered that, there is higher percentage of male's enrolment than that of females at the different levels of education in Nigeria. Iloegbunam (2006) lamented that, one of the ironies of history is the fact that despite the role women play both at home and in the society, they have remained unnoticed and even belittled. This is borne out of the notion that women's function of being homemakers and caring for children is not important. Women therefore are to be seen and not heard. This has grossly affected women enrolment in education.

Therefore, Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society, where men dominate all spheres of women's lives. Women are in a subordinate position (particularly at the community and household levels), and male children are preferred over the female. The influence of the mother and the father are particularly significant in shaping and perpetrating patriarchy. The mother provides the role model for daughters, while the father demonstrates to sons what it means to 'be a man' (World Bank 2005:6).

Factors Responsible for Gender Inequality in Education

The high illiteracy rate among females in Nigeria is a consequence of historical, social and cultural antecedents such as stereotyping and early marriage. The interplay of such practices has tended to relegate women to the background in the education, social, political and employment sectors.

There seems to be one underlying causative factor: It is the general preference by parents of male children to females. This higher level of preference is based on the traditional practice that male children will succeed their fathers and sustain their family name. In addition, considering the limited resources of families, such families prefer to lavish such meagre resources on their male children instead of female children that will become wives to other men and will no longer bear their family names.

Factors arising from an economic circumstances have been well researched; poverty is clearly the most serious barrier, combined with social and cultural conventions which dictate that a woman's

place is in the home, as mother and housewife. Where parents cannot afford to send all their children to school, boys are inevitably given priority, as future breadwinners. Girls are kept at home to look after younger children, cook and clean and sometimes help the mother in farming or market trading.

Similarly, as girls reach puberty and marriageable age, parents are reluctant to let them travel long distances to school, especially in insecure rural areas. Fear of the shame of pregnancy outside marriage is a strong reason for parents to keep daughters at home.

In addition to barriers to girls' education which stem from economic and socio-cultural factors, there are other significant barriers within the school system itself. In parts of Africa and Latin America, schools have become violent places where girls are at risk of verbal and sexual harassment, physical violence, and rape. Punishment of the perpetrators of such crimes, whether teachers or students (usually male), is rare whereas social condemnation of the victims (usually female) is depressingly frequent. Many countries, in sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria operate a policy of expelling pregnant schoolgirls.

The gender gap also increases as young people move up to the educational ladder. So that even in countries where there is little or no gap at primary level (as is the case in many parts of East Asia, Latin America, and Caribbean), the gap starts to appear in secondary schooling and is generally very marked out at the university level. In some countries only 30 percent of students in tertiary education are female (UNDP, 1997).

More also, Gordon (1995) stated other barriers to girls' achievement which have tended to be ignored derive from gender stereotyping in the curriculum, especially in textbooks, where girls tend to be portrayed as passive, modest, and shy, while boys are seen as assertive, brave and ambitious. In addition, different subject choices may be available to girls and boys (Mathematics and Science subjects for boys, Home Economics and Languages for girls). Teachers may show differentiated attitudes towards male and female students (a boy needs a career whereas a girl needs a husband). They tend to be dismissive and discouraging towards girls and to give more classroom time to boys, who are usually more demanding. Even when girls are encouraged to pursue a career, they are expected to opt for the 'caring' professions, in other words teaching and nursing. Moreover, the 'hidden curriculum' of school practice reinforces messages about girls' inferior status on a daily basis and provides them with a negative learning experience, thus creating a culture of low self-esteem and low aspirations (Gender and Development 1998).

Implications of Gender Inequality in Education in the Nation

The impact of gender inequality in education depends on the size of the

differential and the disadvantaged sex involved at any level of education, which according to our results is mainly the female gender. Thus society will be richer in high level manpower the more women have access to education, because educating a female (a girl child) is educating the nation. Nations where women are denied access to education will continue to wallow in poverty and poor health. It takes education to imbibe health-culture and good sanitation.

In addition, gender equality is recognized as key in achieving all the eight Goals (WHO, 2002). The MDGs are about creating more dignified living conditions for all, but approaches to development that ignore gender dimensions risk leaving existing inequalities unchanged or only slightly improved for half the world's population. It is imperative that politicians, decision-makers and all other relevant actors remember that women and men live different lives, and that women's lives are often subjugated for no other reason than that they are women.

According to Iloegbunsim (2006), in his article Right of a woman as a panacea for repositioning women education in Nigeria, he said "education, is a weapon for social development, equity and justice. Providing women with equal opportunity for education would foster the repositioning of women socially, economically and even politically since women are mothers of tomorrow's nation".

Possible Solutions to the Problems of Gender Inequality in Education

In order to eliminate the issue of gender inequality in education in Nigeria, the following conscious efforts should be made:

1. Parents and Guardians should be sensitised on the relevance of formal education for their wards, particularly the Girl-child. This will go a long way in erasing the prejudice they have against the girl child education.

2. Brilliant girls should be encouraged through the award of scholarships, grants and other forms of sponsorship to continue their education to the university level.

3. The present school curriculum must be made to suit the interest and aspirations of the girl child educationally.

4. Religious organizations should be made to establish both primary and secondary schools where the girl child will be given functional education.

5. The girl child should be taught about entrepreneurship, so that after schooling they can be gainfully employed.

Conclusion

Gender equality in education promotes harmony. It allows everyone to be aware of what is happening within his/her environment and allows individuals to progress. On the other hand, gender inequality within the structure of a given

society, creates problems and breeds poverty, which ultimately slows per capita income and development. The primitive ideology that exists in Nigeria that prevents girls from attending school resulted from ignorance and lack of foresight. Therefore, a good educational policy should be implemented to promote equality across the board. This is the essence of what a democratic society should be. Family status and income should not preclude a child from attaining educational goals. In order for the targets of the MDGs to be realised, comprehensive approaches that acknowledge the links between gender inequality and violence against women must be developed and implemented. Unless prevention and awareness of violence against women is integrated into all MDGs, sustainable development will continue to suffer and the ambitious Goals agreed to by the international community will remain unattainable.

Recommendations

Below are some recommendations which will serve as remedy to the problems of gender inequality in our educational system:

1. All cultural and traditional practices, which may tend to enhance gender inequality in education should be discouraged at all levels of education.
2. Government (federal, state and local) should give financial assistance through scholarships or bursaries to female students.
3. Educate the parents and the general public so as to bring about a change in attitude towards women education. The non -governmental bodies (NGO) should be assigned to do this by the government.
4. The governments should promulgate laws against early marriage that hinder the females to read and pursue education.
5. Also laws should be promulgated against using the females to be hawkers in the street where many are exposed to danger of early sex that lead to unwanted pregnancies that force them out of school.

Finally, let there be a rule on quota system of 50:50 in admission of males and females to all institutions of learning from primary to tertiary level. That means ratio of admission should be 50% females to 50% males in all levels.

Reference

Abama, E. & Chris, M. A. K. (2009), Violence Against Women in Nigeria: How the Millennium Development Goals Addresses the Challenge *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 3 (3)

Brock, C. & Cammish N. K. (1991), *Factors Affecting Female Participation in Education in Six Developing Countries*. London: Education Research Serial No. 9, ODA.

Federal Republic of Nigeria/National Gender Policy, (2008) *Survey Report on The Preparedness of Government Institutions and Partners to Implement The National Gender Policy*. Abuja: Tonem Publicity & Publication Ltd.

Federal Government of Nigeria/National Gender Policy, (2006). Abuja: Cokeson Graphics.

F.G.N/UNICEF. (1993) *Situation and Policy Analysis of Basic Education in Nigeria.* National Report Lagos, Federal Ministry of Education and Youth Development.

Gordon, R. (1995) *Causes of Girls' Under-achievement: The Influence of Teachers' Attitudes and Expectations on the Academic Performance of Secondary School Girls*. University of Zimbabwe, Faculty of Education, Harare. Human Resources Research Centre,

Igbuzor, O (2006). *The Millennium Development Goals: Can Nigeria meet the goals in 2015*. A paper presented at a symposium on MDGs and Nigeria: Issues, Challenges and Prospects, organized by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria *(ICAN).* Abuja District, on 27 July 2006 at Sheraton Hotels and Towers, Abuja.

Iloegbunam, N.E. (2006). Rights of women as panacea for repositioning