

## GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN NIGERIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

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### **Abstract**

The researcher decided to carry out this research because women have seldom been discriminated against. Many training opportunities as well as career ladder have been either close to women or considerably less open to women than men. In Nigeria, it is believed that women's place is in the kitchen and therefore they need not be educated. It is a general belief that the female always survive without formal education. The only hope for the male child is to be educated. If this problem of discrimination is eradicated, it would help women appreciate their values so that they would not be discriminated against in their day-to-day life, and illiteracy too would be eradicated.

**Key Words:** Gender, Discrimination, Education, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

The word 'gender' is a generic term, normally used to indicate the distinction between humans on the basis of the masculinity/femininity dichotomy. It is commonly used co-terminously with 'sex' to connote or denote the male-female divide in the society. It is also regarded as a socio-cultural construct that assigns roles, attitudes and values, considered appropriate for each sex. This stereotyping has also led to the dogmatic propagation of gender bias as an accepted pattern of behaviour, which has crept into all aspects of our lives, including education (Obielumani, 2010).

This goal is very important towards Nigeria's achievements, since the female gender constitutes more than half of the world's population, including Nigeria. In fact, in most parts of the world today, the female sex is discriminated against not only in education but also in other facets of life. The female sex is discriminated against at work, leisure and at home. The position individuals hold in the society and educational system are influenced by their sex. Different treatment of sexes and sex roles stereotyping begin in early childhood. The child learns gender differences from adults' cues supplied either consciously or unconsciously, and this begins with the family. Boys are encouraged by their parents to be more physically active while girls are encouraged to be affectionate and tender. Parents quickly come to the aid of their daughters but insist that their sons handle problems themselves. Independence and initiative seem to be encouraged more in boys than in girls. According to Haffman (1927), girls are not so much trained in dependency as they are deprived of independence training.

Even a child in pre-school tends to have more stereotyped notion of sex role than older children. In the elementary school years, children continue to learn what it means to be male or female. Schools often foster gender discrimination in a number of ways. Before 1920, most books produced stereotyped roles and gradually women were omitted altogether. Even when women are portrayed in books, they are shown in the home behaving passively and expressing fear or incompetence while the males are portrayed more dominant and adventurous and often rescuing the female.

Teachers often unintentionally perpetuate sex discrimination in classrooms. According to Spender and Sarah (1980), in secondary schools, boys have learnt to dominate the mixed classrooms and girls have learnt to accept a lower proportion of teachers' attention. While some classrooms are co-educational, many activities within the classrooms are sex-linked. Girls and boys who go into the same classroom system come out with different experiences, interest, achievement levels and expectations. The explanation for these differences is attributed to social system. Societal systems are dependent on schools to pass along crucial beliefs and values. Among these are sex role behaviours and expectations. This occurs through courses and curriculum.

Most school curriculum reflected a distinction in sexes, domestic economy and needlework, being available only to girls. All students should have a full and equal opportunity to learn in school. Many training opportunities as well as career ladder have either been closed to women or considerably less open to women than men. Therefore, the study will focus on the experience of male and female in the educational system and how this influences the status of men and women in the society. Also, meaningful education and national advancement cannot take place in its entirety if women are grossly under-represented in this sector.

### **The Nature of Gender Discrimination**

Gender discrimination exists in most parts of the world today. It is a universally acknowledged truth that societies had always been inclined to discriminate against the female half of the human race. It begins as soon as a child is born. There is much happiness and celebrations when a male child is born because of the importance attached to sex. This is due to cultural beliefs in the society. Culture is the means by which humanity controls and regulates nature. The universal evaluation of culture as superior to nature is the basic reason for the devaluation of women. Women are seen as closer to nature than men and therefore are inferior to men. Women produce children; women are mothers and wives. They do the cooking for men and subordinate to male authority. They are largely excluded from high status occupations and from position power.

Culture regulates our life at every time from the moment a child is born until he dies. There is constant pressure upon that child to follow certain types of behaviour that other men have created for us. The female child is given out in marriage at an early age. This is why Afe (1980) sees the diminished and relegated position of women as a result of society's unpalatable attitude towards the development of the feminine personality. The effect of such an attitude is persistent imbalance in the development of sexes in the society. However, with the advent of formal education, which made former traditional and authoritarian society more liberal, there has begun seriously too in certain areas the development of the female personality.

Pearson and Anyanwu (1991) hold the view that the quality of pupils' performance at school depends on the home background. They opined that there should be an intensified effort to make the home literate through Adult Education so that parents would be more inclined to stimulate the education of their male children as well as female. Bond (1973), quoting Lord James of Britain, said that 'the effectiveness of Britain's educational system depends largely on its being supported by the parents and the community'. The influence of the home (parents) and community greatly dictates the female education.

In all societies living close to the survival level, male infants are valued more highly than female infants. This is basically for economic and security reasons. If there is a local school to go to, boys will get first priority. Education, as it is generally believed, will enhance their earning power, best of all by getting them a wage-paying job in the city, they will be able to support the family more adequately and provide for the parents at old age. As perceived by many literate people living in more affluent circumstances, this treatment of girls is unfair and cruel. Nevertheless, it reflects the hard economic and cultural facts of life in poverty-stricken contexts. And this is bound to persist as long as extreme poverty continues to affect lives of millions of families in the developing world.

Two female academic, among others, commented on the plight of women as victims of educational imbalance in the society. Mrs. Abimbola A Omololu, in her paper to the five-day (September 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>, 1969) National Curriculum Conference, commented on the existing inequality in the education of our boys and girls. She said that 'women in Nigeria were and are still not held in high regard'. Any amount of money could be spent in educating the male but money spent on the female who will later end up in the kitchen is regarded as a waste. Another contributor to the National Curriculum Conference ó Malama, H.I. Kaita - lamented the continued denial to exercise voting rights by women. She concluded that the emancipation of women in the North requires that they be educated on the same place as their male counterpart. While the investment of the male is non-hesitant, that of the female who is regarded as a second fiddle is given second thought. Permitting females' access to education serves as an important indicator to social progress. Kane (1995) noted that there are strong research indicators supporting the claim that investing in the education of females is the 'single most cost-effective investment to improve standards of living in developing countries', especially the poorest countries. The general obstacles to educational development include wide-spread poverty, lack of qualified personnel, gender, and apartheid against women, rapid population growth and foreign debt repayment bodies (UNESCO, 1995; UNISEF, 1997). It is argued that in Nigeria, women could hardly boast of any economic power without men with the bulk of women's work remaining unnoticed. With the multiplier effects of educating women, they can also control their fertility. Buttressing this, Collough (1980) indicated that the interactive effect of schools in various aspects of social policies reinforce the economic case of investing in female education.

### **Causes of Gender Discrimination**

Adams and Bjork (1975) opined that one of the most persistent obstacles to an adequate development role of female education in many countries is the tendency for cultural beliefs to stand in the way of extending education to women. To the best of the knowledge of these two writers, the belief is widespread that the woman's place is in the home and formal education of unlikely to aid in fulfilling these basic needs. In fact, it is often feared that education of women will weaken the family, rearrange the hierarchy in the

family and village. Thus, the above view was supported by reference to Ashley Montagu's description of the almost non-literate people to view women as inherently inferior to men.

Utah (1982) in his opinion, says a lot of wrong had been done by religious organisations in the early days of their coming to Nigeria. The Missionaries believed that the women needed training for environmental sanitation, care of the home, clearing surroundings and child-rearing. To them, all these were enough and the country should accept them as a way of life.

Education has a much more direct and powerful bearing on the social position of women according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Hence, equal educational opportunities are the greater importance in raising their status. Nevertheless, even when equal access to education exists, there is a great difference of opportunity between sexes. In countries where illiteracy is still widespread, it is more common in women than men. In India for example, the literacy rate is nearly 34% among women.

Chinua Achebe (1979) in his article stated that when children are of school age, the picture that emerges is the familiar preference to send boys rather than girls to school. This is particularly noticeable where the economic resources to train all the children in a given family is not available; the female child is made to understand that primary six education might in fact be too high an expectation for her.

Amazigo (1984) identified that attitude of society and consequently the influence of parents and their attitudes to the education of their female offspring from her childhood as being very responsible for low rate of female education. There is also the fear of some parents that while away from home, their daughters may lose their virginity, get pregnant, which in some cultures reduces their prospects for marriage.

There is a consensus of opinion among researchers that the critical mass of educated females that need to serve as role models to produce and nurture the kind of self-actualised women that will up-turn the career and labour market in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are presently not on the ground. Government lack of commitment to female education is a minus to bridging this inequality and gap. The problem of female access to education has been blamed also on externalised policies from some international agencies. Lumumba (2000) observed that despite their nominal political independence, most African countries have designed their domestic policies under the guidance or influence of external powers. Thus, while gender equity has been a source of domestic debate and production of policy documents, the economic reforms of SAPs have negatively influenced domestic policies to social programmes like education and health that affect disproportionately women.

### **Ways of Checking Gender Discrimination in Education**

For the problem of gender discrimination to be completely curtailed:

- The government and the public must do everything within their powers to increase the number of girls in all schools.
- The content of primary and secondary grammar school education must be reviewed so that girls are not made to specialise at every early stages as housewives. This is a scientific age and there must be more opportunities for girls to learn science in secondary schools.
- Efforts should be made to bridge the gap between educational opportunities for women and men. This can only be achieved now by spending more money on

women's education by way of extra scholarship in secondary institutions and increased grants-in-aid, particularly for science teaching in girls' secondary schools.

- Incentives must be given to women by way of employment and promotion opportunities to encourage them to learn and take up interesting and challenging careers which will give them the security and the income they need for their general upkeep.
- Legislation should be enacted or promulgated in favour of female education.
- Parents, especially the literate ones, should be enlightened on why it is necessary to educate their female children. Lectures should be held to make people aware of the implications of gender discrimination.
- Formal and non-formal education and training for girls and women must be vigorously pursued by governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Finally, all ideologies or practices that see the woman as some sort of accessory of men, a servile maid to do man's dirty jobs should be discarded and stopped. Organisations like Forum for Women in Politics and the Beijing Conference should create awareness in the females that they are essential tools for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace. Non-discriminatory education benefits both girls and boys. Equality of access to and attainment of educational qualifications is necessary if more women are to become agents of change.

### **Conclusion**

Gender discrimination is a problem that has eaten deep into the society. Women are seldom allowed to do their work; training opportunities are less open to women than to men. There is no contesting the fact that there is gender inequality and stereotyping that is skewed to the disadvantaged of the girl-child and women in our society. It is a problem that requires a proactive solution not only from parents, government, the educational system, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) but all and sundry in the society. Gender discrimination exists in all facets of life. Women are discriminated against in education because it is believed by most illiterate parents that the female child can survive without formal education. This is because she eventually gets married and the husband is expected to provide for her needs. The female sex also is seen in the society as a weaker sex and therefore women are pushed towards career that do not attract them. Women should be given the chances to prove their worth in the society.

The customs and beliefs of the society which see female sex as a subordinate to the male sex are also a contributory factor to gender discrimination. Women who venture into professions like engineering, medicine, architecture and other science-inclined professions are looked upon in the society as being masculine, because such jobs are believed to be solely for the male sex. In a nation where female education is taken seriously, the returns on investment and the multiplier effects on the nation will be very high. Educate the women and you educate the nation.

### **Recommendations**

The research reveals that there is gender discrimination in our society today. In an attempt to reduce this problem, everybody in the society has a role to play. The followings are some ways to eradicate the problem of gender discrimination in education.

- Women should be seen as human beings and they should be given the opportunities to prove their worth.
- Women should be given equal education opportunities so as to raise their status. There should be equity employed in the admissions of girls of school age in all primary and secondary schools.
- Parents should be enlightened on why it is necessary to educate their female children.
- Parents who withdraw their female children from school should be prosecuted.
- The government should enact laws against early marriage.

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