

Language Use as Elixir for Gender Inequality and Discrimination against Women and Girl Children in Nigeria Educational Systems

DIMEJESI, SOPHINA IJEOMA

Email: dimejestsophy910@gmail.com

&

DIKENWOSI, CLEMENT IJEOMA

Email: clementdikenwosi@gmail.com

Department of Languages,

Faculty of Arts, University of Delta, Agbor

Delta State

Abstract

Gender inequality in education as it affects girl children and women have been an age long, highly problematic issue which has persistently plagued the world especially the Sub-Saharan African countries including Nigeria. According to UNICEF, of 759 million youths and adults in the world, two-thirds of them are women. Most girl children and women are denied access to formal education. This in essence implies that boys enjoy quantitative formal education more than girls which of course is an aberration. And the reason for this abnormality is largely due to cultural and societal mindset and erroneous belief and practice that value boys more than girls. This gender inequality is mostly prevalent in Nigeria and it has constituted a bug in the lives of women folks. Women hardly make progress in many areas of life, be it political representation, economic and decision making policies and lots more. Education is power, it shapes people's lives and paves way for someone's progress; and it is the right of every human person irrespective of sex to enjoy and acquire this noble endowment. When therefore, a particular set of people are prevented due to one reason or the other from partaking in what rightly belongs to them, it becomes abysmally wrong and so, needs to be corrected through proper means and which is through language education. This work therefore posits that enjoying indigenous languages to educate and orientate people especially the rural illiterate dwellers can actually bridge the gap of gender disparity against women and girl children in Nigerian populace.

Keywords: Gender, Inequality, Discrimination, Elixir, Language

Introduction

Women have over the years been relegated to the background in most parts of the world. Their rights and quest for exalted positions in the society have always been hijacked by the opposite sex. The problem of the gender inequality has continued to rear

its ugly head and men still have the notion that women are meant for the kitchen alone. Most women are not even allowed to go to school especially in Nigeria; and some out of ignorance, refuse to acquire formal education. Most women are given out in marriage at a very young age. Women often time, are not allowed to be part of decision making and implementation body because of the erroneous beliefs that women cannot make meaningful contributions for national development. According to Oganwu (1996) as captured in Omoregie (2009), the Nigerian women and their counterparts in other African countries, have been debased and dishonoured by the thought that every woman is supposed to consider motherhood as the principal purpose of her existence and is expected to produce children, cook, mend and wash clothes and take care of men and are subordinate to male authority. In other words, girl child education is inconsequential.

It is interesting to know that women outnumber men in any human activities, be it religious or political participation, example, during voting. Women alone constitute 49% of the overall population in the 2006 Nigerian population census, but they are simply used and dumped as little or no electoral positions are reserved for them. Iloegbunam (2006), in buttressing this assertion, said that one of the ironies of history is in the fact that despite the role women play both at home and in the society, they have remained unnoticed and even belittled, because of being mere home makers, and this has grossly affected women's enrolment in school and has hampered their educational pursuit as well. According to Omoregie (Ibid), as captured in the UBE (2000) and National Universities commission (2006), more boys are enrolled in various school levels than girls.

This unfortunate phenomenon of gender parity is not only prevalent in the Sub-Saharan Africa. Israel and some Asian countries are no exception as women and girl children are treated as nobodies. During the feeding of five thousand by Jesus (Matthew 14:21, Mark 6:44, Luke 9:14), it was reported that the number of people fed were five thousand or four thousand men, not counting women and children; excluding women who of course were more in number, because, women will always outnumber men in any gathering of such. Women's education does not matter to them as well. Collaborating, Clement (1963), said "a review of history of education stated that even among the ancient cities of Athens and Sparta, girls were excluded from the education given to boys. The first high school in Boston, USA established in 1821 was only for boys".

Though, to some extent, some considerable efforts have been made in bridging the gender gap in Israel in recent years. For instance, Hagar et al (2014) postulates that the Center for the Advancement of Women in the Public Sphere (WIPS) was aimed at promoting the democratic and civil status of women in diverse social groups. This body which was established in 2009 has been trying to achieve the objective for which it was formed, but, not so much has been actualized. According to Tamuz (2019), gender equality is far from realized in Israeli society, because, women for instance, earn an

average of 35% less than their male colleagues and are grossly underrepresented in leadership roles across different sectors. Again, Israel's largest gap was in the field of political empowerment where only 22.7% of the gender gap has been closed, Young (2021). This means therefore, that a lot still has to be done to stem the tide.

These of course, are thorny issues that needs to be addressed. In this write up therefore, the researchers go on to probe the root causes of these unwholesome attitudes against women and girl children especially as it concerns acquisition of formal education. Language education has always been a pivotal means of achieving laudable goals. The researchers therefore, proffer an all important and useful panacea of utilizing indigenous languages to stem the tide of this segregational attitude towards women folk.

Conceptual Clarifications

According to Trident Press International (2004), gender connotes sex, a category such as male or female into which sexually reproducing organs are divided on the basis of their reproductive roles in their species. It also implies, (in Sociology), identification of male/masculine, female/feminine, and association with a social role or set of behavioural and cultural traits, clothing, etcetera; a category to which a person belongs on these basis. So, gender in this perspective, means biological and societal division of human persons, into males and females , women and men, boys and girls. Gender also operates as a dimension of social inequality.

Causes of Gender Inequality in Nigerian Educational System

According to Okoli (2007), discrepancies between males and females in access to schooling, school completion rates, and participation in employment opportunities are still more than norm in some regions of the world than other. Limited access to education plagues women in Nigeria as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa. Also World Bank (2003), posits that disparity in access to educational opportunities is a pressing gender equity issue in Nigeria. It is really unfortunate that this ugly phenomenon has not left the shores of Nigeria, and as popular saying would have it, there is no smoke without fire. This means that reasons abound as to the persistent presence of gender disparity in the society. This will be the basis of our discussion in this section.

First and foremost, is culture, religious practices and societal mindsets; most Sub-Saharan countries especially Nigeria exhibit cultural practices that discourage girls from acquiring formal education. They believe that educating a woman is a mere waste of resources since she will marry and relocate to her husband's place, so the parent's believe, which is erroneous anyway, that by training the girl, they will not benefit anything from her and that is why they would not bother sending her to school. Religious practices have to do with certain restrictions on women's freedom. Most Muslims for instance, do not allow their women to go out not to talk of going to school. According to

World Economic Forum (1971), when extremist ideology come into a community and restrict religious freedom, gender inequality gets worse.

Ignorance and Illiteracy: Most uneducated or illiterate parents are ignorant of the benefits inherent in educating female children. Women have very vital and pivotal roles they play in the society especially when they receive formal education. Educated women occupy prominent positions in the society and there is no gainsaying the fact that the parents of such women of substance also have pride of place in the society. For instance, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, a renowned Nigerian economist, now the first woman in the world to be the Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Chinyere Onyenucheya, the first woman pilot in Africa, late Professor Dora Akunyili won 900 awards of excellence in various fields of endeavours. Professor Alele Williams became the first woman Vice-Chancellor in Nigeria. Outside home, we have other amazons like Gold Meir, a labour activist and politician as the 4th Prime Minister of Israel and 2nd Prime Minister in the world. Margaret Thateher became the 1st Prime Minister in Europe, Sally Ride the first woman astronaut in space, a NACA planner and science professor, Angela Merkel, the immediate past Chancellor of Germany and lots more. All these great achievers did not perform magic, it was because they were educated.

Insecurity/Lack of Legal Protection: In most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, especially as it affects Nigeria, insecurity has almost become a norm, a pattern of life that is highly regrettable and unfortunate. There are incessant killings everywhere, school children especially girls are kidnapped and abducted at random. Various terrorist groups in the country including Boko Haram, Fulani herdsmen and other bandits are doing their biddings with impunity. The abduction of over 200 Chibok girls in 2014 is a case point. Leah Sharibu is still in her abductors' camp after she was abducted alongside other girls from Dapchi Secondary School in 2018. Five school girls were reported dead on the day of their kidnap (Haruna 2018). The list is endless. Government at various levels are not helping matters. There is lack of legal protection for these innocent children and as such, no safe learning environment for them. This can constitute fear for even the parents who would not risk sending their girl children to school, thereby creating more gap in gender inequality.

Other reasons for gender inequality are early marriages, child trafficking and slavery. Most uninformed parents give out their children too early in marriages. Most of them simply do this in order to shy away from the responsibility of training their girl children in school. These girl children according to Dimejesi and Ihezuonu (2020) are denied various rights like formal education, rights to freedom of speech and are rather forced to hawk and marry very early in some parts of this country. There are also the problem of child trafficking and slavery. Female children are most vulnerable. Most of them stop their education half way because of the unfortunate situation they find themselves in. These again, widen gender gap.

Lack of Financial Strength by Parents: Because of the prolonged hardships occasioned by harsh economic exigencies, people find it extremely difficult to eat not to talk of sending children to school. If at all they will send, it is the male children rather than the female ones. Lack of employment after schooling also discourages parents from sending their children especially girl children to school. The last but not the least factor in this discussion is lack of enlightenment through proper means and channel. This means that indigenous languages are not utilized in educating the rural populace on the need to send their girl children to school.

Problems and Dangers Associated with Gender Inequality

Education is power and it is the right of every human person to benefit from it. This requires equal access to good quality education for all, a learning process in which boys and girls, women and men have equal chances of developing their talents; and outcomes that bestow social and economic benefits on every citizen without discrimination. This informs the justification of UNICEF's emphasis on gender equality from the standpoint of basic human rights for boys and girls as a sound development policy with economic and social benefits for all, based on the global and organizational mandate for gender equality in education, to achieve measurable progress towards gender equality through work in education.

Going by the above, it becomes obvious that the negative attitudinal stance towards women's and girl children's education portends a great danger because not being educated will limit their potentials. Education brings with it enlightenment as to how to live a healthy lifestyle thereby promoting and enhancing longevity, engaging women for global action and being highly productive and great achievers. Educated parents bring up children who are as well educated, and this ensures chain of progress. The otherwise brings retrogression and poor quality lifestyle, and also sets the nation backward in industrial development.

Also, there is a saying, "an idle mind is the devil's workshop". The out-of-school girls, in most cases, usually engage in illicit businesses like prostitution, armed robbery, banditry and other unwholesome acts. These are of course dangerous lifestyle and many die untimely deaths, based on contacting diseases like HIV-Aids in case of the harlots and being killed in case of armed robbery.

In fact, there are still more of these problems and for ensuring equity, justice and fair play on the part of the girl children, therefore, there is need to adapt the use of indigenous language to bring about lasting solution so that women and girl children will be adequately represented in the school system and scheme of things in Nigeria.

Using Indigenous Language to Bridge the Gap of Gender Inequality in Nigerian Education System

Several attempts have been put in place by various international bodies so as to eliminate gender inequality in the society especially in the education sector. There have been several declarations, treaties and conventions aimed at reversing the practice of gender discrimination which has put the girl child at a disadvantageous position in many parts of Sub-Saharan countries, Nigeria inclusive. There are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), (1945), Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960), International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Woman (1979), Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), World Economic Forum (1971), Education for All (EFA) 2010 championed by Global Monitoring Report (GMR); all meant for fundamental human rights in all facets of human endeavours especially the right to enjoy formal education by all irrespective of sex. All these however, have not yielded positive results as inequality in education against girl children still persists in most Sub-Saharan African countries.

In Nigeria, little or no attempts have been made to get rid of this gender discrimination in the educational system. National policy on education has not seriously addressed this issue. The writers of this paper are therefore using this medium to proffer solution that will reduce this ugly scenario among the Nigerian populace, and that is language in action.

Language by definition, means a body of words and the system for their use, common to a people who are of the same community or nation, the same geographical area, or the same cultural tradition. Again, language implies a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed) or written symbols, by which human beings, as members of social group and participants in its culture express themselves (Crystal 2021, updated). Language therefore features prominently in all facets of human endeavours; be it education, business, social interaction, religious gathering, etcetera. Language, therefore, is so important that there is no interaction without it.

People that speak the same language feel at home and are comfortable with each other. Employing indigenous languages for instance, makes it even better because being the language of indigenous environment, people understand and assimilate more when instructed. According to Chinweude (2018), an indigenous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people. It is the language spoken uniquely by an indigenous community or country. It is a language of a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for generations, Government policies and programmes reach the grassroots with the use of indigenous language.

It is therefore the postulation of this paper that people should be educated on the dangers of not having girl children being fully represented in schools. Illiterate parents, particularly rural dwellers should be enlightened through the use of indigenous language which they understand. Using foreign languages such as English in educating these illiterate rural dwellers will be a complete waste of time, energy and resources because no positive results will be achieved. Local language experts should therefore employ different means such as jingles, radio broadcast seminars community or village meetings where every interaction will be in local or indigenous language to emphasize on the need to release their girl children to acquire formal education. Illiterate, rural, young women who out of ignorance, refused on their own to go to school should also be enlightened through this proper means.

With the use of indigenous language, maximum results will surely be achieved. Gender gap will be reduced and there will be equity, justice, fair play and of course, human capital development. The nation itself will witness affluence and economic growth because everybody irrespective of sex will contribute to its industrial development

Recommendations

The following suggestions if adhered to will also ameliorate the situation:

1. Indigenous languages should be enshrined in the curriculum by National Policy on Education and make them compulsory to be taught at all levels.
2. The Nigerian school curriculum should be made attractive and enticing, making students practical and creative and exhibiting various skills. This will encourage parents to send their children to school irrespective of gender.
3. Adult education should also be enshrined in the curriculum, and indigenous languages used in implementing them.
4. The curriculum planners in the Nigerian Educational System should endeavour to meet up with global standard. The nation's curriculum should be practical oriented and not just learning to pass exams. According to Amadioha (2004), the curriculum should be designed in such a way that the students should have creative thinking, general practical abilities; and also be able to observe, analyse, interpret and record results. This will make the learners to compete favourably with other nations of the world not just producing mediocre.
5. Again, the curriculum planners should reduce the number of subjects or courses offered at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of institutions and enshrine only those that will actually showcase the talent of individual student. When a learner

is exposed to more than 20-25 subjects or courses in a session, it becomes a big burden and being productive becomes a problem. In the western world, a child can offer about 5-7 courses or subjects and they become manufacturers, inventors and nation builders at very tender ages.

6. Parents should try as much as possible to make use of indigenous languages as common mode of interaction with their children.

Conclusion

A lot of contributions have been made by individuals, corporate and international bodies in an attempt to do away with gender inequality in women and girl children in the education sector, especially in Nigeria. Many treaties, conventions and declarations have over the years been put in place. For instance, Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960), Education for All (2010), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), (1945), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), and lots more, but all to no avail. Both the local and international bodies have failed to recognize and utilize an all-important tool or panacea that will drastically reduce this vice in the society. They have failed to make use of the local or indigenous languages to reach out to the rural illiterate populace who always constitute the majority in any country or community.

Furthermore, gender inequality in Nigeria still persists despite numerous scholarly suggestions. Males consistently out-number females in tertiary institution enrolment especially in science related courses like medicine, engineering, agriculture and the likes. In line with this assertion, Olumuyiwa (2019), having carried out over six years findings and analysis between 2010-2015 opines that the male gender has continuously dominated the admissions into higher education. It therefore means that concerted efforts still have to be made by various stakeholders like the Ministry of Education, Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board and others in order to bring lasting solution to gender discrimination in various spheres of life especially the educational sector.

Finally, the researchers posit that concerted efforts by all and sundry to stop gender disparity is highly essential and it can through social media campaigns, continuous scholarly findings and publications, enlightenments especially in the rural areas geared towards creating awareness of the importance of girl child education. All these and lots more will ensure that equity, justice and fair play reign in the society.

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