
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE
FORUM FOR AFRICAN WOMEN
EDUCATIONALISTS



Vol. 1 No. 4, December, 2012

Gender Mainstreaming And Universal Basic Education In Nigeria: Issues And Challenges

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Abstract

The paper critically examined the issues and challenges involved in Gender Mainstreaming and Universal Basic Education in Nigeria. Gender, Gender Mainstreaming, Universal Basic Education, Gender Mainstreaming and Basic Education form the sub-sections in this paper. Gender is a societal construction that separates the role expectation of males and females. Gender mainstreaming is a strategy that strives to bridge the gap in hitherto unbalanced relationships of women. The universal basic education that is designed to provide free, compulsory basic education for every Nigerian child of school age from primary to junior secondary level devoid of any bias serves as a veritable tool in bridging this gap. Myriads of challenges stare the programme in the face and these include inadequate instructional materials, overcrowded classrooms among others. It was concluded that gender mainstreaming in basic education is an issue that requires serious attention devoid of lip service and mouth watering policies. It was recommended among other things that girls and women should conquer the seeming inferiority complex and compete aggressively with their male counterparts especially in schools. There should also be adequate sensitization of parents and teachers on the need to do away with stereotyping.

Introduction

Over decades now, gender mainstreaming in educational system has been ignored particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria. Precisely, girls are not given equal treatment in education needs and achievements. It has been argued that a unique focus on girls is insufficient in educational provision even at the Basic Education levels. A cursory study of educational systems, particularly the Basic Education level reveals that inequalities continue to exist between boys and girls despite significant improvements in the absolute status of women and gender equality in most African countries. Girls are educationally, career wise and culturally disadvantaged. Studies have shown that discrimination on the basis of gender results in lower educational, economic slower growth, weak governance and lower quality of life (World Bank, 2005). In curriculum matters, females are usually talked into offering Home Economics, Home Management and Religious Studies while males are encouraged to work hard in Further Mathematics, the Sciences and are shown as professionals in different areas of specialization.

Gender is a societal construct that separates the role expectation of males and females. It denotes the socially defined sex roles, different and unequal perceptions, views, attitudes, values, relevance and rewards among others which the society ascribes as appropriate and

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assigns to men and women or boys and girls through its culture. Gender is portrayed as a good analytical concept that highlights women's roles and responsibilities in relation to those of men. Oftentimes, gender is seen as loosely synonymous with sex and lazily synonymous with women but, Okeke (1999) clarifies that sex is female or male and is biologically determined while gender is culturally determined. Thus, gender relates to certain behavioural characteristics of either sex that are imposed and are manifested in the way they think, feel or act as expected by the society. Gender to this end, is super imposed on sex and includes the connotation of masculinity and femininity which in turn influences expectations, responsibilities, roles and opportunities which the society approves for its members. This has resulted in gender stereotypes which is society's unjustifiable expectations of what a female or male ought to be or do (Benwari and Igwesi, 2009).

The National Gender Policy (2006) confirms that 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 house hold levels), and male children are preferred over the female. The influence of the mother and the father is particularly significant in shaping and perpetrating patriarchy. The mother provides the role model for daughters while the father demonstrates what it means to "be a man" (World Bank, 2005). Gender attributes and roles are not determined by biological sex but historically invented and socially constructed and handed down and therefore can be transformed.

In most societies, gender roles and relationships are unbalanced and unequal in the extent of power assigned to men and women. The imbalance in roles and power creates situations of inequality with the powerful dominating and domineering the powerless (Akani, 2009). Given the fact that roles and powers are assigned by the society, gender biases and disparities are therefore glaringly reflected in the society's laws, policies and social practices which in turn affect the self identities, attitudes and behavior of the people. The end result is a situation of "gender inequality" that favours one gender to the disadvantage of another. Since most contemporary societies are male dominated, they harbour in varying degrees beliefs, mores and practices which objectively promote cultural alienation, economic exploitation, political marginalization and psychological brutalization of women.

As a consequence of these inequalities and inequities, women and girls have suffered deprivation and pain from little or no access to education, lack of economic empowerment or control of material resources and lack of decision making power. The existing gap in gender equality is very wide and has left women disadvantaged in most aspects of life.

Gender Mainstreaming

In view of the fact that gender inequality is real and that most contemporary societies have continued to experience gender relationship that is oppressive to women, gender mainstreaming especially with regard to education emerged as a subject of global debates. The concept of gender mainstreaming is defined by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) as a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the policies and programmes in all political, economic

and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetrated (UNESCO, 1997). Mutunga (2006) views gender mainstreaming as a strategy that strengthens gender equality through policy and resource allocation which reflect the interest of both men and women. Gender equality refers to a situation where men and women, boys and girls are given their due places and equal right.

Masood (2009) throws more light that mainstreaming includes gender specific activities and affirmative action whenever women or men are in a particularly disadvantageous position. Gender-specific interactions can target women exclusively, men and women together or men only to enable them participate in and benefit equally from development efforts of government and or other agencies. Akani (2009) explains that gender equity is neither a fight for female supremacy or equality over the God given leadership role of male in their families nor women liberation. Rather, it is a concept that recognizes the disparity between women's and men's boys' and girls' access to education resources, opportunities and their ability to sharpen their future-a disparity that has traditionally given to men a greater proportion of the benefits and to women, a disproportion of household responsibilities. The case of equality and equity between men and women in the third world countries is still a far cry from normal. The National Gender Policy Section 1.2 points out that despite a general commitment to the principle of non-discrimination as enshrined in section 2 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Nigeria falls short of the desired result of giving males and females equal opportunities to advance socially, physically, educationally, politically and economically. Evidence abound that several negative aspects of gender relatives, such as gender based division of labour, disparities between males and females access to power and resources, and gender biases in rights and entitlements, remain pervasive in Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2006). Badjan-Young in (Nkang, 2009) confirms that more than 20years after the Nairobi Forward Strategies and Beijing Platform for Action, there are still deep seated attitudes and mindsets of men and women which are obstacles to the fulfillment of women's right. Nigeria is a signatory to the Convention of Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and has gone ahead to establish some projects for the implementation of the articles of the Convention but yet to enact domestic laws for the enforcement of the articles.

The 1999 Nigerian Constitution aptly provides for equality of women, guarantees the rights and protects the interest of women having regard to the religious, traditional and cultural norms that govern the society. The practicability of such still leaves much to be desired (Nasir, 2001).

Universal Basic Education

For several decades, education has remained the bedrock for the survival of nations and the weapon for acquiring skills, relevant knowledge and habits for survival in a changing world such as ours today. Training of children in the norms and aspirations of the nations is a veritable tool for national integration and development. Educational reforms or re-organisation of which the Universal Basic Education is one are carried out to enable the

education system cater for future professional needs. Article 26 of 1948 Universal declaration of human right became a springboard of universalizing basic education across the globe. Nigeria in 1976 launched the Universal Primary Education (UPE) which was limited to only primary education. In its efforts to ensure unfettered access to free and compulsory education and exposure of its teeming youths to basic skills and literacy, the Nigerian government in 1999 introduced the universal basic education programme which this time was expanded to include the junior secondary school.

Basic education as provided for in the National Policy on Education (2004) stipulates a nine year duration comprising six years of primary education and three years of junior secondary. It is free and compulsory. It includes adult and non formal, nomadic education, education of migrant fishermen, school dropouts and out of school children. The objectives of the programme among others are:

- ◆ The provision of free, universal education for every Nigerian child of school age.
- ◆ Catering for the learning needs of young persons, who for one reason or the other have had to interrupt their schooling, through appropriate forms of complementary approaches to the promotion of basic education.
- ◆ Ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills as well as the ethical, moral, and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life long-learning.

The UBE which is backed up by the compulsory free Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 is designed to provide free, compulsory basic education for every Nigerian child of school age from primary to junior secondary level. Eleri (2007) asserts that the programme is aimed “at reaching the unreached” and its scope covers all Nigerian children, irrespective of sex and geographical location. Obasi (2011) maintains that the law that gave birth to the UBE programme, both directly and indirectly addressed the issue of inequality of access to education. Children of school age irrespective of gender therefore have the fundamental rights to education at least at the basic level. Consequently, it is a violation of their fundamental right to be denied access to education. Be that as it may, there are still rampant cases of discrimination against the girl-child in educational opportunities. Since the school is an integral part of the larger society, teaching and learning take place within the context of the society. It is therefore not surprising that what the society believes in is replayed within the school system.

Ohiri-Aniche (2000) observes that gender stereotyping has permeated the school system. For instance, there are subjects in the curriculum and courses still regarded as “masculine” and total preserves for the male, these include Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. There are those termed “feminine” and basically for females such as Home Economics, Education, Nursing, Secretarial Studies, etc. Also the language and illustrations used in some textbooks and instructional materials reflect gender bias. While boys are generally portrayed as intelligent, brave and adventurous, girls on the other hand are shown as timid and shy. Obanya (2003) observes that women and girls have been victim of neglect for too long, and are in dire need of “education surgery” to ensure continued survival. Larger proportion of girls and

women are deprived of educational opportunities. Aluede (2006) concludes that basic education provides opportunity for schooling through which younger generation are incorporated into modern societies and life which inculcate its values, norms and aspirations.

Challenges

The Universal Basic Education Programme like its predecessor is not without its own challenges and if not well managed, it may not be different. Presently, there is an astronomical increase in its enrolment due to its free nature but it is traumatizing to note that there is no corresponding increase in the provision of both human and material resources to guarantee its safe landing. There are several innovations in the curriculum to ensure that the programme achieves the goals for which it was designed-equipping the child with some basic knowledge and skills to be self reliant. Having well trained teachers and in their approved number per class pose a great problem, overcrowded classrooms, poor funding, inadequate instructional materials, poor infrastructural facilities, lack of political will, corruption, poor teacher preparation and performance, non-committal attitude of teachers, unpreparedness of students to learn among others, form the catalogue of the numerous challenges staring basic education in the face. Studies have shown that it is still business as usual in terms of implementation. The old problems still rear their ugly heads thereby impeding effective implementation of the programme (Obasi, 2011). Denga (2006) confirms that old problems continue to be new problems as long as they remain unsolved and lists poor funding as a major challenge.

Gender Mainstreaming and Basic Education

The Nigerian education sector has long experienced yawning and whooping disparities between males and females in terms of access to education. Records show that the female population have been disadvantaged, while their male counterparts enjoy high enrolment at all levels of education. Okiy (2004) reports that in 1997/98 academic year, 41.1 percent of school children at the primary level were females. In 1984/85 session, the same 41.1 percent was recorded for females at the secondary level. The situation she observes was not different at the tertiary level as the female enrolment rate in Nigerian Polytechnics was 30.1 percent in 1990/91, 32.8 percent in 1997/98. In the universities, female enrolment stood at 22.8 percent in 1984/85 session and 33 percent in 1997/98.

Schooling imparts specific knowledge and develops general reasoning. It also induces change in beliefs and values, and attitude towards work and society. When a stunning percentage of a nation's citizenry remains out of school, then the future of that nation remains a mirage and is lost in wild goose chase. In 1948, the General Assembly rose in agreement that "everyone has a right to education" (Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Right). Recently, other declarations to which Nigeria is a signatory emerged. These include the 1990 Jomtien Declaration which specifically tackled the promotion of equal Basic Education for all, the 1991 New Delhi Declaration that required stringent efforts by those nine countries of the world with the largest concentration of illiterate populace popularly referred to as E-9 countries (of which Nigeria is one) to drastically reduce illiteracy within the shortest time frame. This was further boosted by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) now African

Union (AU) that mandated African States to generalize access to quality Basic Education as a foundation stone for sustainable socio-economic development.

These declarations were endorsed unconditionally devoid of any bias, irrespective of gender or affiliation. These provisions and enactments therefore imply that all children must be treated equally without any form of discrimination. On a leveled playing ground, with all the cultural, religious and other restraints removed, good and committed teachers, appropriate facilities and parent's supervision put in place, the sky will not be a limit to the girl-child's academic performance. In the just concluded 2010 West African School Certificate Examinations, the Nigerian Digest of Education Statistics puts the average of the girls' performance in Mathematics and English at 19.52% while that of the boys was 14.22%. However, despite the universally acclaimed equal rights for both the boy-child and the girl-child, disparities still abound in educational opportunities and the Universal Basic Education programme which is aimed at addressing the prevailing gender disparity that has relatively affected the process of manpower generation stands in the gap.

Obasi (2011) observes that women are given fewer educational opportunities than men in Nigeria. This manifests glaringly in the lower literacy rates for the adult female population when compared to men. Baklit and Okoye in (Okoye, 2004) attribute this occurrence to factors such as *male chauvinism, child labour, early marriages, religious and socio-economic factors* which combine to increase drop-out rates of girls to as much as 36 percent even before completion of primary school education.

Igun (2004), quoting the United Nations Population Development (UNDP) states that Nigeria's development is very slow and one of the reasons for this is her focus on the male members of the society rather than both sexes in educational activities. This unfair treatment of the girl-child is at variance with her dignity as a person. In reaction to the gap in educational opportunities, Ehiamefor in (Akpa, Udoh and Fagbamiye, 2005) points out that equity in education presupposes that education is not available to all groups in the community as a result of several variables such as income level, attitude of parents, level of understanding of people, traditional beliefs and other environmental barriers. Thus, equity is aimed at increasing the participation of groups and removing the barriers that hinder their involvement.

In Akwa Ibom State for instance, the Government tries to enforce Free and Compulsory Basic Education, sets up monitoring team to check, arrest children of school age who hawk during school hours and prosecute parents of such children. It has gone ahead to abolish the house-help syndrome in the State in which the girl-child bears the brunt of being given out as house-help in exchange for paltry amount of money to ameliorate the suffering of family by placing food on their table. The girl-child to this end serves as the sacrificial lamb of the family. The government enacted the Akwa Ibom State Basic Education Law and it came into force on July 12, 2005. In spite of these efforts, the girl-child is still engaged in street-hawking and child molestation due to poverty. Nkang (2009) corroborating this fact observes that some of the Nigerian children roam the streets, looking miserable and wearing the pain they feel for the

future they could have but do not think they would have. Some of them are engaged in street hawking, child prostitution, child molestation and rape. Others are used as house-helpers. A sample of statistics (FOS) shows that in Akwa Ibom State, poverty level increased from 32.0-67.7 percent between 2002-2006; and from 42.7 to 65.6 percent nationally between, 2002-2006.

If the above situation is not properly addressed, then parents' compliance of Government's enforcement of Free and Compulsory Education in the State may not be total. The free and Compulsory Basic Education in the State when properly implemented, will be a very potent instrument for gender mainstreaming in the provision of educational opportunities for the Nigerian child. The greatest weapon of this programme in addressing the existing inequality is its compulsory stance.

To this end, it becomes a grave obligation on the part of the parents, guardians, societies, communities to ensure that children of school age are in school. Okiy (2004) concludes that the compulsory nature of the UBE programme will ensure that more girls are enrolled in the Primary and Junior Secondary Schools which according to her, are vital stages that lay the foundation for the educational attainment of children.

Conclusion

Gender mainstreaming in basic education is an issue requiring serious attention devoid of lip service and mouth watering policies. It involves applying principles of fairness and justice to correct the gender imbalance that had previously existed in the educational arena. Educated women as well as men are well equipped to bring about positive change in the social life of the community, to contribute positively as members of the society and to revive eroded and bastardized moral values. Gender mainstreaming in basic education will afford women the opportunity to be free from ignorance, poverty and oppression.

Recommendations

The importance of gender mainstreaming in basic education cannot be overemphasized. To this end, the following recommendations among others are made.

- ◆ A start-off point towards mainstreaming is the importance of conducting gender analysis and utilizing the findings to balancing gender relations.
- ◆ A girl-child grows up with the inferiority complex of a lesser being. Girls and women should conquer the seeming inferiority complex and compete aggressively with their male counterparts especially in school.
- ◆ Curriculum planners should be able to provide a gender sensitive curriculum that will integrate the special needs of women as they emerge.
- ◆ There should be adequate sensitization of parents and teachers on the need to do away with stereotyping.
- ◆ Leveled playing ground should be provided for both sexes to harness their potentials.
- ◆ Gender mainstreaming should entail fundamental alterations in power relations between the genders in the distribution of social resources and in cultural mores.

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