



Education As A Powerful Instrument For Poverty Reduction Among Women In Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest challenges facing Nigeria today is poverty among girls and women. It is estimated that about 70 percent of the women population in Nigeria are still illiterate compared to the men illiterate rate of 46 percent. The poverty level of women particularly in rural areas, sustained by intricately women socio-economic and cultural factors, has raised issues of equity and /justice. These women are denied learning opportunities which would enable them to improve the quality of their own lives and that of their families and allow them to take part in income generating activities. The paper contends that any meaningful analysis of female poverty must give consideration to women participation in learning programmes. The paper therefore discusses the socio-economic impediments and lack of quality educational provisions and services at basic, primary and secondary levels of education that constitute the factor for women abject poverty in Nigeria. The paper argues that education can be a powerful instrument for poverty reduction among women in Nigeria through the improvement of the quality of the educational provisions and services at the basic, primary and secondary levels of education. The paper therefore made some salient recommendations towards making education a powerful instrument for poverty reduction among women in Nigeria in the next millennium.

Keyword: Education and women, poverty reduction and quality of lives.

INTRODUCTION

Women account for about two thirds of the estimated one billion people in the world living in abject poverty. The poverty level of women, particularly in rural areas, sustained by intricately women socio-economic and cultural factors, has raised issues of equity and justice. In Nigeria, about 70% of the women population is still illiterate compared to the men illiteracy rate of 46% (Odili, Ornotor and Pessu, 2000). These women are denied the learning opportunities which will enable them to improve the quality of their own lives and that of their families and allow them to take part in income generating activities. The part played by education in reducing poverty and opening up employment opportunities that will ensure economic progress and participation in human development is complex. In both theory and practice, women education results in better standard of living, reduction of poverty, increased earning capacity and the overall human development.

Any analysis of female poverty in Nigeria must give consideration to women participation in learning programmes at all levels of education. Research has shown an increase in income of between 10 percent and 20 percent with each additional year of schooling. It is also common knowledge that beyond school attendance, subject choice is a determinant of the returns to education. Women's entry to high paying scientific and technological fields has been hampered by non-selection or poor performance in science and technology. Although education is not a panacea for poverty reduction, it is unquestionably a powerful force for improving the economic status of women and in so doing, reducing female poverty and its tendency towards inter-generative reproduction. This paper discusses the imperative for improving the

quality of basic education, primary and secondary education towards poverty reduction among girls and women in Nigeria.

Education and Women

According to the National Policy of Education (FRN, 2004:8), “education is the most important instrument of change and any fundamental change in intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an educational revolution”. Ojobo (2008) defines education as the transmission of knowledge and skills to members of the society which will help them to be responsible citizens, earn a living and lead a useful, rewarding life. Otti in Onyia (2000), concludes that education is a leading out from something bad and undesirable to something good and desirable notably “ignorance” which causes darkness, primitive life, poverty, disease, slavery, superstition, prostitution, pride and indiscipline. Education can therefore be described as a vital transformational and formidable instrument for the socio-economic empowerment of women and as a result, a means for poverty reduction among women in Nigeria.

Education is the basis for the full promotion and improvement of the status of women educational programmes through efficient and effective learning and training, and empowers women to better understand issues affecting them. Education no doubt, is the beginning point for women’s advancement or empowerment in different areas of human endeavour as the adage says “educate a man, you educate an individual but educate a woman, you educate a nation” Empowering women through education is therefore the most effective way of combating or eradicating extreme poverty, hunger and promoting gender equality and women empowerment as enunciated in articles (1) and (3) of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) of United Nations (2008).

Education can therefore be regarded as the key factor in overcoming the barriers that women face and the basic instrument for poverty reduction among women in Nigeria. According to Mahuta (2010), education not only provides women with the necessary skills to improve their livelihood, but also empowers women to take their right places in the development process of the society. Education is therefore key to reducing poverty. There is therefore the urgent need to re-examine the qualitative and quantitative services in basic education, primary and secondary education for the purpose of using education to achieve poverty reduction and if possible, poverty eradication among women in Nigeria.

Status of Women Education in Nigeria

A vast majority of women in Nigeria are not empowered as a result of lack of educational opportunities or intellectual poverty. This illiteracy may constitute the reason for women’s abject poverty, marginalization and discrimination in all the facets of development in Nigeria. A critical look at the pattern of women involvement in education in Nigeria reveals low enrolment rates especially in primary and secondary education. For instance, about 70% percent of the women population is still illiterate compared to the men illiteracy rate of 46 percent (Odili, Omotor and Pessu, 2000). Also, about 17 percent of girls’ drop-out of primary schools compared to 15.8 percent for boys and even when girls start school at the same time as boys, they are likely to drop-out before completion (FME, 2007). For example, “the national attendance rates in primary schools are 59 percent for boys and 54 percent for girls, while relatively low in grades 1-5, drop-out rate increase at primary 6, indicating that a large number of pupils are unable to continue to Junior Secondary School” (FME, 2007:12).

Infact gender disparity in education (with girls and women highly disadvantaged) is a well known fact and is a glaring feature of Nigeria’s educational system. A critical look at the educational system from primary to tertiary levels also show that gender inequality exists as more boys are admitted to the university level than girls (Ojobo, 2008). In Nigeria, a lot of girls and women in rural areas are still non-literate and ignorant as a result of poverty and other constraints (FME, 2007). Research evidence has shown that girls and women lack easy access to formal education (Ojobo, 2008). There is therefore the urgent need to provide for special conditions that will facilitate women education especially at primary and secondary education levels towards eventual reduction of poverty among women in Nigeria.

Poverty is defined as the state of being poor (Oxford, 2010). According to Smith (2007), about two-thirds of the Nigerian people mostly, women are poor. He maintains that poverty among women manifests in

joblessness, over-indebtedness, economic dependence, lack of freedom, and inability to provide the basic needs of life for self and family. In Nigeria, people especially women have been fading deeper into poverty due to access to educational opportunities and other constraints. Research carried out by the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (NEEDS, 2005) shows that, about 75 percent Nigerians have income less than \$1 a day and the figure has risen since then. NEEDS also observes that the growing incidence and dynamics of poverty in Nigeria have stratified and polarized Nigerian society between the haves and have-nots, between women and men, between the educated and uneducated and that poor parents beget poor children. The Nigerian girls and women are the worst hit. The challenge of poverty therefore is not only to reform the economy in order to boost economic growth and development, but also to empower people especially women through qualitative and quantitative education which has come to be regarded as a powerful tool for poverty reduction. Poverty reduction among women is the most difficult challenge facing Nigeria today and is the greatest obstacle to the pursuit of sustainable economic growth especially among women in the country. There is a popular notion that educating a woman is key to breaking the cycle of poverty in most societies.

Socio-Economic Perspective

In Nigeria, women are the main victims of poverty in rural areas. While they are usually the last to benefit from economic progress, they nevertheless bear much of the consequences of the country's structural adjustment programmes. Development in Nigeria has been based on qualitative growth theory without adequate concern for the redistribution of income. Not enough has been done or is being done to improve rural education, indigenous technology, rural roads, electricity, potable water, accessible fuel, establishment of markets, irrigation and rural townships, which are areas of rural poor people (Akpakwu, 2002). The impact of any anti-poverty measures will depend on the extent to which government strategies are gender-oriented so that they target the reproduction activities of women. The development of appropriate indigenous technology for example, would not only reduce the burden of women's work but also result in the identification of new marketable products for which women already have the basic skills.

Statistics show a correlation between female education and economic development (World Bank, 2008). This is because firstly, education is a means of reducing inequality because those who are educated can improve for self and families, expect higher salaries, and secondly, when per capital income rises, the opportunities for women increases (UNESCO, 2003). In Nigeria, there is considerable inequality between men and women. Despite the transformation agenda of the Jonathan administration to improve the lot of women and girls, policies and resources have not matched intentions expressed. In Nigeria today, child labour, child trafficking, prostitution, early marriage, child adoption by Boko Haram, and other cultural inhibitions are still preventing girls from obtaining access to education. Although Nigeria has passed the laws against such practices, they have not provided the means for enforcing them effectively. Often, it is non-governmental organizations championed by women which take the initiatives, for example, against child labour, child trafficking, child prostitution and child adoption.

Women living in poverty are usually illiterate and lack the knowledge to improve their lives. The contributions they make to the national economy, often through the informal sector, is difficult to access and is therefore hardly recognized. Yet studies (Nwosu, 2010) show that women are the main producers of food crops for their families and are responsible for the welfare of their households and upbringing of the future generations.

The absence of sex education, guidance and counseling along with an erosion of traditional social and moral values, have resulted in a growing number of pregnancies among school age girls which in turn lead to the abandonment of schooling. It is estimated that about 18 percent of the female population between the ages of 15 and 19 give birth each year in Nigeria (Akpakwu, 2009). Many poor parents are opposed to the education of girls since they consider that any benefits from the investment made will accrue to the men they marry but not by their immediate families. Some parents are particularly concerned that the school environment does not appropriately guard the moral development and behavior of girls (Akpakwu and Kwaghngu, 2006). In addition to the negative attitudes of parents towards girl

child education, the cost of schooling has been prohibitive for many households. If choices are to be made, then boys, considered as future bread winners, will be given preference for schooling over girls.

Basic Education

Education can reduce poverty among women in many ways. The very poor are usually illiterate or have a low level of formal education, suffer from poor health and inadequate nutrition, have large families with high infant mortality rates and low life expectancy. The education of mothers, rather than health care and income, accounts for most of the differences in child mortality and life expectancy rates. Women who have had a number of years of schooling have fewer children, are able to contribute to the family income, know how to prevent illness, improve the health and nutrition of their families and encourage their girls to attend school (Subbarao and Raney, 1993).

While education will eradicate or reduce poverty without economic policies allowing for a redistribution of wealth at national and state levels in Nigeria, investment in the education of girls and women is a major prerequisite for overall human development and nation building. In Nigeria, much progress has been made by the federal and state governments, UNESCO, UNICEF, ILO and women NGOs in the education of girls and women but there are still challenges to universal female education. Girls and women are prevented from going to school because of some cultural inhibition \in many part of the country. Girl trafficking, child labour, prostitution and child adoption are still prevalent and accounts for a reasonable number of girls and women not going to school or dropping out of school. Early pregnancies for both married and unmarried girls have prevented them from continuing education beyond the primary and secondary levels. The girls and women lack the means to support themselves and their children.

Despite the attempts to eradicate illiteracy in Nigeria, there is still cause for concerns. The continued high growth in population continues to hinder progress. The need to fetch fuel and water and time-consuming food preparation practices are women's chores which leave them little time or energy to attend literacy classes or other out-of school programmes. The large number of local languages in Nigeria and lack of clear language policy have impeded the implementation of effective literacy programmes. The print media has not undertaken a sufficiently aggressive and pro-active marketing strategy to encourage reading for information and pleasure, hence the small gains in adult literacy that could have helped to reduce poverty, has not been effectively utilized.

The above situation points to the inescapable fact that in the 21st century and beyond, much leaves to be done in the provision of qualitative and quantitative basic education towards poverty reduction among girls and women in Nigeria.

Primary Education

Perhaps the primary level of education is the most important as far as women education is concerned. This is because it is the stage at which the proper foundation for girls and women empowerment for sustainable development through education is laid. However, the picture of girls and women education at the primary level is not very encouraging and hence the level of abject poverty among girls and women in Nigeria. Most of the girls do not attend school beyond the primary level of education. Millions of girls most of them between the ages of 11 and 13 years above leave primary school each year with few earning skills and little or no knowledge of the social and economic conditions of their country which they live in (Nwosu, 2010). About 17 percent of girls' drop-out of primary schools compared to 15.8 percent of boys, and even when girls start school at the same time as boys, they are likely to drop-out before completion (FME: 2007). For example, the national attendance rates in primary schools are 59 percent for boys and 54 for girls (FME, 2007). Although progress is being made in the enrolment of girls in primary education, the school-life expectancy rate for girls has remained low. To achieve parity in enrolment for boys and girls by the end of this century, will require an enrolment growth rate far beyond the present situation. It is through proper and consistent attendance in primary schools that girls and women can attain the level of education that is needed to empower them towards meaningful poverty reduction.

Secondary Education

Women who have benefited from secondary education are less likely to be subjected to poverty than those who have not. Despite the realization of the social and economic importance of secondary education for girls, it is the level that girls are more disadvantaged in Nigeria (Ojobo, 2008). Girls' performance in secondary education is related to conditions in the school and to the education environment. In some African countries like Malawi and Kenya, it has been found that girls perform better in single sex schools than in co-education ones (Subbarao and Raney, 1993). In Kenya, intelligent girls did as well as intelligent boys if they were provided with similar learning facilities. In the same instances, it has been established that girls did better than boys in many external examinations. These suggest that girls will do well as boys when the educational situation is equitable and gender-sensitive in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, secondary school opportunities have been fewer for rural girls. Good secondary schools are costly, and are located mainly in urban areas. In addition, rural girls are too poor to afford secondary schooling, more restricted by traditional cultural values and hence are more likely to enter into early marriage than those in towns, and can easily be lured into child labour, trafficking and prostitution (Oforka, 2010). It is also important that the various governments provide adequate security in girl schools to ward off the Boko Haram insurgency that has made the adoption of girls and destruction of school properties their ultimate objectives for the sole purpose of killing western education especially in the North Eastern parts of Nigeria.

If education is to be used as a powerful instrument for poverty reduction among women in Nigeria, then there is the urgent need for governments at federal and state levels to increase the quality and quantity of educational provisions in secondary schools for girls and women especially in the rural areas. This can be achieved through innovative programmes like female Secondary School Assistance Project as in Bangladesh where efforts have been made to overcome steep financial barriers and cultural resistance to girl's schooling (Sabbarao and Raney, 1993). Many parents cannot afford to send their daughters to school. Even if the parents have the money, they prefer to educate their sons instead. The various governments and spirited international and national associations should assist to finance girl's and women's secondary education through being responsible for many of the costs of girl's attending secondary school, including full tuition and examination costs, as well as most of the fees charged for textbooks, stationary, uniforms, transportation, and other services.

The challenge of poverty is not only to reform the economy in order to boost economic growth but also to empower women through education as a means of poverty reduction in Nigeria. Doing so calls for quality and functional education at primary and secondary levels which must attack poverty among women on all fronts at the same time.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlighted the socio-economic, cultural and educational factors that constitute the reason for women abject poverty in Nigeria. The paper identified lack of educational opportunities and poor educational provisions and services at the basic, primary and secondary levels of education as being responsible for women poverty in Nigeria. It concludes that the improvement of quality educational provisions and services at the basic, primary and secondary levels of education can make education a powerful instrument for poverty reduction among women in Nigeria. Salient recommendations towards making education an effective instrument for poverty reduction were made.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the greatest challenges facing Nigeria today is poverty reduction among women. It is obvious that the only powerful instrument that can be used to achieve poverty reduction in Nigeria is education. If education is to perform this role, the following recommendations are made for implementation.

1. To reduce poverty among girls and women through education, government at all levels in Nigeria should implement in concrete terms, the resolutions and recommendations concerning women's right to education of many international conventions, such as The World Conference on

- Education For All in 1990 at Jomtien, The World Summit for Children in New York in 1990 and the Pan African Conference on the Education of Girls.
2. Steps should be taken to reduce the cost of schooling to families through the provision of free tuition and free meals for girls in primary and secondary schools.
 3. Non- governmental organizations and women's groups and organizations should continue to assist both national and organizational efforts to reduce female poverty. Their experience and knowledge of local problems make them more aware of the needs of rural women than those employed in central administration.
 4. Basic education is a human right which none should be denied. Educational planners and administrators should give priority to the reduction of poverty by taking gender issues fully into account in developing strategies that promote female attendance, completion and scholastic success especially in primary and secondary levels of education.
 5. At the centre of the poverty issues is the need to break the cycle of poverty as an inheritance. Here, quality primary and secondary education with its potential for improving incomes and productivity is essential to making the break.
 6. Educational policies should favour increase in female teachers through teacher training programmes for female teachers. Quota policies which favour the recruitment of female teachers should be encouraged.
 7. Award of scholarships, stipends, and production of gender-sensitive learning materials should be put in place.
 8. Most of the fees charged for textbooks, stationary, uniform, transportation and services should be the responsibility of governments since girls and women from poor background cannot afford them.
 9. Parents should be meaningfully involved in the promotion of girls' education.
 10. School curricular and learning activities for girls in primary and secondary schools should assist in providing them with the learning experiences and knowledge that will promote their personal development, their understanding of legal rights and of their right of access to social services, and their understanding of sexual equality.
 11. Policies should be put in place to stop the socio-economic and cultural factors that inhibit girls and women education particularly in primary and secondary schools.
 12. Adequate security should be put in place for all primary and secondary schools to ward off the menace of the Boko Haram insurgency from adopting school girls, women and complete destruction of school properties.

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