

Gender, Feminism and the Girl Child Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

The importance for development of girls' education cannot be overstated. To capitalize on the potential of its people, and ensure healthier, more educated, empowered and productive citizens, Nigeria must invest in educating the mothers of the next generation. Although this problem is recognized, its complexity is widely underestimated and causes are not well understood. This paper reviewed prevailing explanations, which tend to concentrate either on possible gender differentials in educational enrolment in various level of education. It also identified some causes of feminine failure and drop out in schools and further looked into findings of education and major educational policies till date. The paper concluded that, the Nigerian government should as a matter of urgency workout large scale educational activities and strategies for the promotion of women education for enhanced economic development.

1. Introduction

The fact that no nation can develop beyond the level of education of its citizenry has been established at different discussions in and outside Nigeria. As important as education is to national development, it would not fully play its role in development where the women folk have less opportunities to be educated. This is not only based on the numerical strength of the women folk but also because of the socio-cultural and economic roles they play in the society.

Nigeria has the largest population of any African country, some 162.5 million people. Of this magnitude 49% are female; some 80.2 million girls and women (NBS, 2012). So any discussion about Nigeria's future must necessarily entail consideration of girls and women, the role they play and the barriers they face in making the future.

The British Council Report (2012) stated that 54% of Nigerians still live in poverty and the proportion has doubled since 1980 (when about 28% were classified as poor). It went further to say that Nigeria's human development indicators are also worse than those of comparable lower middle-income countries and that 42% of Nigerian children are malnourished from which the averages hide a context that is worse for women and girls.

Furthermore, six million young women and men enter the labour market each year but only 10% are able to secure a job in the formal sector, and just one third of these are women. This situation has dire consequences for human development and conflict mitigation. This is not a problem of northern Nigeria versus southern Nigeria because the statistics are troubling in all parts of the country. It is a Nigeria wide problem which we all, as government, private sector, civil society and families must tackle.

It is no doubt women are Nigeria's hidden resource and investing in women and girls education now will increase productivity in this generation and will promote sustainable growth, peace and better health

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for the next generation. What happens here to women and girls matters, not least for realisation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Gender issues have continued to play a key role in the formulation of public policy, not least in the education sector, where the gender gap in many developing countries with Nigeria inclusive remains a challenge. Since the purpose of policies is to guide action towards some identified practical goals, policies lose meaning when they remain unimplemented. Moreover, it is important to understand the process of policy formulation because it is crucial to the final outcomes. In contemporary educational theory and practice, feminist thought provides invaluable direction on gender policies that seek to enhance inclusiveness and equality in education - so that it does not discriminate against girls and women or any minority groups.

This study is of critical importance because it draws together the literature that references the benefits of girls and women education in Nigeria. It distils from that corpus the key issues that need to be addressed to maximise the potential of girls and women through their education. It focuses attention on critical but little known statistics, which paint a clear picture about the seriousness and importance of women's educational situation.

2. Education, Gender and Empowerment in Nigeria

All three tiers of the state (federal, State and local government) play a role in the provision of education. Results from the Nigeria General Household Survey of 2010 showed that public sector provision of education dominated this sector, although some non-state actors provided complementary services. 51% of students attended state schools, 18.5% were in private schools, and 16.5% were in local governments schools. Religious bodies provided for only 5.4% of students. Much of the country's education is delivered through 54,434 primary schools and 18,238 secondary schools, supported through State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs), to which the 774 local government education authorities report. Responsibility for Adult and Non Formal education is vested with the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non Formal Education. Tertiary education is mainly the responsibility of the federal government. There are currently some 302 tertiary institutions in Nigeria including 109 universities. Of the latter, 36 are run by the federal government and 32 by State governments, while 41 are private. Only 8.1% of 18-35 year olds participate in higher education (Agboola and Ofoegbu, 2010).

The private sector has become a significant provider of education and some estimates show that as many as 9,019 non-government primary schools (enrolling 1,578,635 children) complement the state level provision, providing education to nearly 22 million children in about 55,000 schools.¹⁹ One parent in a Focus Group Discussion in the North-West Region commented: "There is Tom, Dick and Harry Schools everywhere only for the purpose of making money" (Mahdi and Asubiaro-Dada, forthcoming).

Recent studies show that the private sector is larger than the state sector in some poor urban areas. For example, Tooley and Dixon (2005) show that 43% of the schools in three poor local government districts of Lagos State are privately registered, and that they account for 75% of the total enrolment.²⁰ Non-poor households show a growing interest in private education, because they are frustrated by the quality and standard of state provision (Onuka, 2009). Some parents in Mahdi and Asubiaro-Dada's study also expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of education their children receive. In Northern Nigeria, a number of Islamic, Tsangaya or Qur'anic (ITQ) institutions complement public secular provision. The existence of these schools reflects parental demand, but it is not clear what drives it. Much education policy is driven by the federal government. In 1999 the government introduced for all Nigerians of school going age a programme of free but not compulsory education for the first nine years up to junior secondary school (Universal Basic Education).

3. Evolving Education Policies

With regard to women’s education, the evolution of education policies in Nigeria since the 1980s shows some clear patterns. Table1 summarised some of the key initiatives.

Table 1: Key Policy Initiatives with a Gender Focus in Nigeria

Policy Initiative	Year	Intention
Blueprint on Women’s Education	1986	Expanded educational opportunities for women; discouraged withdrawal of girl children from school.
Nomadic Education Programme	1986	Provided primary education to children of nomadic pastoral communities.
National Commission for Mass Literacy and Non-formal Education	1991	Reduced illiteracy by encouraging children to attend school; established functional literacy centres for women.
Family Support Basic Education Programme	1994	Encouraged families in rural areas to accept education for girl children as a way to enhance child health and youth development.
Universal Basic Education	1999	Boosted enrolment by ensuring that all children of school going age had access to primary and junior secondary education.
National Policy on Women	2001	Enhanced access by locating facilities close to communities; enhanced teacher recruitment; provided incentives for girls to study maths and science.
Education For All - Fast Track Initiative	2002	Increased support for basic education.
Strategy for Acceleration of Girls’ Education in Nigeria	2003	Led to the launch in 2004 of the Girls’ Education Project; focused on an integrated approach to achieving gender parity.
National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS)	2004	A poverty reduction strategy that enhanced the integration of women in national development by increasing their capacity to participate in the economy and in employment.
Universal Basic Education Act	2004	Provided pre-primary education; confirmed universal right to primary and early secondary education.

Source: British Council Report, 2012.

As shown in Table 1, one key policy trend is the distinct shift towards mainly free universal education, especially for primary and early secondary education. The 2004 Universal Education Act enshrines this right and also includes pre-primary education. By making education free (at least in intent) the government showed a policy commitment to equality of opportunity. Some of the more targeted initiatives, like the Girls’ Education Project, provided platforms to enhance girls’ education. Current policies reflect the efforts of gender activists in Nigeria. But international initiatives have also moved the gender parity debate to the centre of policy attention. For example local policy papers mention Paragraph 4.2 of the Programme of Action that followed the watershed International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994. This justified investment in education of women and girls in terms of their empowerment and full participation in the development process. Now commonly called the “Cairo Consensus”, the Programme of Action, among other things, set a 20year target for universal completion of primary education and encouraged widening participation in secondary and higher education. Similarly, the Millennium Development Goals focus on gender parity in school enrolment,

with the objective of achieving this by 2015 (Goal 3). After returning to democracy in 1999, Nigeria also signed up to the Dakar Framework of Action that seeks to realise six goals:

- Expand early childhood care and education.
- Provide free and compulsory primary education for all.
- Promote learning and life skills for young people and adults.
- Increase adult literacy by 50%.
- Achieve gender parity by 2005 and gender equality by 2015.
- Improve the quality of education.

The above are impressive policy commitments; however, the outcomes suggest that they are not being implemented effectively.

Education Funding in Nigeria

Due to the complexity of the financial arrangements in Nigeria, it is difficult to see how much has been spent on education (Daudia, 2007; Uzochukwu *et al.*, 2010). However, there is evidence that Nigeria has taken seriously the Education for All (EFA) challenge of Dakar 2000 and has been making investments to achieve it. The available data confirms this. The World Bank (2004) found that total public expenditure on education in Nigeria rose significantly between 1998 and 2001, from 14.2% to 17.5% of total public expenditure. Although this translates to a significant increase in the share of GDP spent on education (from 2.3% to 6.2%), it is still below the 26% threshold recommended by UNESCO. Work done on a sample of nine States in 2006/7, based on data up to 2005, suggests that public spending on education was then between 4.7% and 5.2% of GDP. This is slightly above the median expenditure level for sub-Saharan Africa (4.4%) but still below South Africa (5.4%) or Senegal (6%) (British Council Report, 2012).

The report also showed that much of the funding (43%) came from State governments; the federal government and local government provided 31% and 26% respectively. Of particular interest, however, is the almost equal spread in share of expenditure across the education sector, between primary schooling (32%), secondary education (31%) and tertiary (30%). This implies that much more is spent per capita on tertiary education than primary, because nearly half of all enrolments are at primary level (British Council Report, 2012).

Based on this report, it is enough to say that the absence of gender parity in secondary and higher education implies that the public expenditure system is still skewed in favour of male children.

Gender Disparities in Education

To reap its demographic dividend, Nigeria must invest in educating its youth, particularly girls; but lack of gender parity in enrolment in both primary and secondary education is preventing this (Daudia, 2007). Table 2 below shows that primary school enrolment figures have fluctuated marginally in the recent past. After peaking in 2006, they have remained rather static. This is worrying given that the current net attendance ratio of 61%²⁵ is still below the EFA target, which is to put all children of school going age in school.

Although there was a very significant increase in enrolment from 1990 (by as much as 37%), this achievement must be seen in the context that Nigeria still has more children of primary school age out of school than any other country in the world (Theobald *et al.*, 2007).

Recent data from the 2009 Nigeria Education Data Survey clearly show that some 1.5 million children (8.1% of children aged 6-14) were not in school at the time of the survey. Nearly 53% of those not in school were girls, so almost as many boys as girls were out of school. In addition, internal regional disparities are significant. The figures suggested that nearly every child in the South will at some point in his or her life enter primary school, but only 30% to 40% are likely to do so in some States in the North.

Table 2: National Summary of Primary School Statistics 2004-2008

Year	2004	2005	2006*	2007*	2008*
Total schools	60,189	60,189	54,434	54,434	54,434
Total enrolment	21,395,510	22,115,432	23,017,124	21,632,070	21,294,517
Total male enrolment	11,824,494	12,189,073	12,575,689	11,683,503	11,483,943
Total female enrolment	9,571,016	9,926,359	10,441,435	9,948,567	9,810,575
Total teachers	591,474	599,172	586,749	468,202	586,930
Total male teachers	291,384	294,434	323,798	241,826	300,931
Total female teachers	300,090	304,738	262,951	226,376	285,999
Total classrooms	254,319	254,319	319,590	319,590	319,590
Teacher/pupil ratio	36	37	39	46	36

* (Public Primary Schools Only) Sources: Federal Ministry of Education, Abuja;

Universal Basic Education Commission, Abuja

Although the gender gap is closing, sample surveys revealed that the gross enrolment ratio of girls is still significantly lower than that of boys. The gender-gap for primary school enrolment has improved slightly, but progress has been slow and somewhat erratic as shown in table above. The UNESCO EFA Monitoring Report for 2008 suggested an even greater disparity in the net enrolment ratio between boys and girls in primary schools (68% and 59% respectively) (UNESCO, 2008).

Similarly, girls' completion rates are generally lower than that of boys; some States in the North, such as Jigawa, record girls' completion rates as low as 7.8% (UNESCO, 2008). Various social factors influence the value that parents in different communities attach to the education of their daughters. For example, a girl in North-Central State said: "Some parents prefer their boys to go to school because only sons inherit and carry on the family name" (Mahdi: 2011). There is need for further research and studies to understand these very low completion rates.

However, some recent work suggested that it is the result of a combination of factors. These include: user fees; bullying; lack of water and sanitation facilities at schools; early marriage; and parental disapproval of the secular curriculum (Action Aid, 2011; Hunt, 2008). Evidence from some recent interventions, such as the Girls' Education Project (funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID)), suggested that attendance rates can rise by as much as 30% when issues such as water and sanitation facilities are addressed.

Table 3: Net primary and Secondary Attendance ratio 1990-2010

Year	All %		Female %		Male %	
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
1990	51	24	48	22	54	26
2003	60	35	57	33	64	38
2010	61	44	58	44	64	44

Source: National Population Commission (2011).

Table 3: above shows that many boys and girls do not enroll for secondary education. The net attendance rate for both is only 44%. Despite the long-term trend, which shows a doubling of the net attendance ratio for female students between 1990 and 2010, the data indicated that most do not make the

transition to secondary school. There has only been a marginal increase in the number of girls enrolling for secondary school over the 20 year period. Although there is a policy of free education, there are still some significant costs which deter parents and cause pupils to drop out (Lincove, 2009).

Table 4: Summary of national secondary school statistics, 2004-2008

Year	2004	2005	2006*	2007*	2008*
Total schools	10,913	10,913	18,238	18,238	18,238
Total enrolment	6,279,462	6,397,343	6,536,038	6,068,160	6,625,943
Total male enrolment	3,593,708	3,543,425	3,642,871	3,460,146	3,682,141
Total female enrolment	2,739,754	2,854,718	2,893,167	2,608,014	2,943,802
Total teachers	154,594	144,413	199,163	207,283	270,650
Total male teachers	99,403	91,080	122,462	136,285	167,527
Total female teachers	55,191	53,333	76,701	70,998	103,123
Total classrooms	98,077	98,077	98,077	98,077	98,077
Teacher/pupil ratio	40	44	32	29	24

* (provisional)
Source: NBS (2009).

4. Reasons Why Girls Drop Out of School?

Several reasons can be given for the low participation of girls in secondary education. The literature identifies a number of factors that deter them from attending secondary schools. Table 5 below summarised these.

Table 5: Factors that Undermine Secondary Enrolment by Girls

Supply Side Barriers (Push Factors)	Demand Side Barriers (Pull Factors)
Distance to the school	Ill health.
Harassment	Onset of puberty, marking the beginning of adulthood and adult roles.
Bullying	Early menarche.
Discrimination or punishment at school	Early sexual debut.
Sexual harassment or other dangers at or on the way to school	Pregnancy or expulsion for pregnancy.
Expectations of doing chores at school (e.g. water collection)	Marriage or expectations of marriage.
Costs, levies and charges	Death of a parent, particularly where the incidence of HIV/AIDS is high.
	Domestic duties, chores, childcare.
	Expectations/pressures to earn money.
	Lack of social or economic opportunities for girls.
	Inability to pay school fees.
	Inability to pay for uniforms, books, etc.
	The family prefers to spend money on the school fees and expenses of male children.
	Hunger

Source: British Council Report, 2012.

Poverty and the Burden of Cost

There is a strong correlation between Nigerian girls' net school attendance and wealth. According to DHS data, in 2003 only 35% of girls in the poorest wealth quintile were in school; by 2008 this had declined to less than 30% (Daudia, 2007). The 2010 Nigerian Education Data Survey (NEDS) results, launched by President Jonathan in 2010, reveal that one in three children of school age are not in school or had dropped out because of the cost.

Although the cost of primary education vary widely across Nigeria, NEDS data show that average expenditure per household is N7, 691. Costs per pupil can be as high as N5,000, and parents in Lagos and Rivers States spend N25,185 and N23,277 respectively (NPC, 2011). Several studies concludes that the poor quality of education increase costs for parents, who are forced to spend more on extra tuition if they wish to see their children pass the national exams. Inability to pay is sometimes punished by preventing students from sitting for their exams (Action Aid 2011; Mahdi and Asubiaro-Dada, 2011).

Formal and informal charges and levies are a key reason why girls drop out of school. The NEDS (2010) results are corroborated by Action Aid's report (2011). UNDP's Human Development Report also refers to the heavy burden of fees and costs shouldered by poorer students. The Action Aid report made the point that "in reality a wide range of levies are charged to families, which constitutes a significant obstacle to schooling". They found that girls linked dropping out with inability to pay and that some girls were obliged to miss lessons because they needed to earn money to make the payments required by their schools. Girls described their shame when they were pointed at or beaten for not paying charges.

ActionAid (2011) reported large differences in the size and types of charge that schools levied in different States. A more recent qualitative Nigeria-wide study (Mahdi and Asubiaro-Dada, forthcoming) investigated the views of students, teachers, parents and politicians and corroborated Action Aid's findings. In one girls' school in the North, the researchers were told that half the students had been sent home for non-payment of fees. In addition to cultural variations in attitudes to education, the study found many differences in the way that Local Government Areas and States managed education, and that this had an impact on how education is perceived. Respondents in Ekiti State, for example, reported that good policies had had a positive impact, by creating a more facilitative environment for girls' education. These policies were enthusiastically supported and endorsed by students, parents and teachers.

Corporal Punishment, Sexual Harassment and Violence

The ActionAid (2011) study found that girls experience "multiple forms of violence" on a regular basis. Sexual harassment and violence were reported by girls in some States and not in others. Another study (Bakari and Leach, 2008) documented sexual harassment of young women students training to be teachers in a Federal College of education in Northern Nigeria. The authors make the point that: "acceptance of institutionalized forms of sexual violence among trainee teachers helps to explain the prevalence of such violence in schools". They report that male staff thought that opportunities to obtain sexual favours were a privilege of their position.

"Corporal punishment is entrenched in school systems and was discussed most by girls in Nigeria. It is often connected to poverty, for example in response to nonpayment of fees and lack of uniform or books, and parents and girls complained about this occurring but appeared powerless to stop it" (Action Aid, 2011).

Recent studies by Mahdi and Asubiaro-Dada documented the kinds of physical punishments reported by students, teachers and parents across Nigeria. Their respondents cited examples of teachers meting out severe, violent and degrading punishments. They also discuss some of the informal and unwritten "rules" that govern relations between boys and girls in and around schools. They refer to "no go" areas for girls that are defined and enforced by boys and may include girls' exclusion from areas of the classroom or school.

The respondents also talked about age hierarchies that permit older students to inflict violence on their juniors. These examples underline the importance of understanding, challenging and changing

informal rules that are oppressive and teaching girls and boys about power relations between the sexes and between age groups (Mahdi and Asubiario-Dada, forthcoming).

Under-Performance in National Examinations: Poor Teaching Quality

Apart from gender disparities in enrolment, data also suggested that many secondary students underperform and do not obtain the qualifications that are expected. Table 6 illustrated this for the six years for which data were available.

Table 6: Statistics of NECO Examination Results, November/December 2003 to 2007.

Year	Number of candidates who sat the examination			Candidates with a minimum of five credits (including English & mathematics)			Candidates with a minimum of five credits (including English & mathematics) (%)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Male & female
2003									
2004	212,196	122,395	335,311	16,388	17,275	33,663	7.70	14.11	10.04
2005	171,020	122,863	293,883	31,646	29,066	60,712	18.50	23.66	20.66
2006	149,018	117,887	266,905	19,117	18,083	37,200	12.83	15.34	13.94
2007	164,450	208,746	368,598	27,567	21,819	50,783	16.76	10.45	13.78
2008	214,095	149,836	363,931	16,403	5,100	21,503	7.66	3.40	5.91

Source: JAMB (2008)

As shown in Table 6 above, the figures suggested a decline has occurred in the number of female candidates who meet the threshold of five credits, including credits in English and Mathematics, which are crucial to further education and training in Nigeria. Not much work has been done to understand this under achievement but there are suggestions that it could be due to a combination of poor quality teaching, bullying in schools, and lack of regular attendance as a result of domestic and other health related issues (Action Aid, 2011).

Table 18: Admission Statistics into Nigerian Universities by sex, 2000–2008

Year	Sex	Applications by gender	Total applications	Admissions by gender	Total admissions
2000	Male	238,456	416,291	26,665	45,766
	Female	177,835		19,101	
2001	Male	743,725	1,056,617	54,972	90,769
	Female	312,892		35,797	
2002	Male	580,338	994,380	31,942	51,845
	Female	414,042		19,903	
2003	Male	603,179	1,046,950	59,742	105,157
	Female	443,771		45,415	
2004	Male	486,539	841,878	69,715	122,492
	Female	355,339		52,777	
2005	Male	526,281	916,371	45,256	76,984
	Female	390,090		31,728	
2006	Male	456,953	803,472	52,413	88,524
	Female	346,519		36,111	
2007	Male	911,653	1,302,529	64,706	107,370
	Female	390,876		42,664	
2008	Male	598,667	1,054,060	-	113,100
	Female	455,393			

Source: JAMB (2008)

Further ethnographic and qualitative work is required to gain a better understanding of classroom cultures and environments that encourage girls to drop out. A similar pattern of gender disparity is repeated in tertiary education enrolment, where male students dominate (table 7 below). One explanation for this decline is poor quality teaching (Onuka, 2009). DFID's Education Sector Support Programme undertook a Teacher Development Assessment Survey in 2009 and found that very few teachers reached required levels of competence in Mathematics and English. However, though the quality of teaching is important, by itself it cannot explain the gender gap.

Table 7 shows that, although the number of young women admitted into university has more than doubled, the gender gap is widening. In comparison with 2000, significantly more men are now admitted into university than women. No detailed studies have been done on the barriers to tertiary education across Nigeria, but the disparities in higher education may be a function of inadequate funding (Agboola and Ofoegbu, 2010). Further studies is required to understand the costs involved in higher education as well as the distribution of places by social and economic class, and region. This would make it possible to analyse the effects of poverty on access to higher education.

5. Conclusion

This paper has established that education is a vital force for development and that the uneducated and under-educated girls in Nigeria are robbed of the opportunity to improve their lives and contribute maximally to our national development. The implication is that the uneducated Nigeria women have been denied of their fundamental human rights. Remarkable efforts had however, been made by the Federal Government of Nigeria through its political commitment and educational programmes at ensuring gender equity in the formal school system. The Nigerian government nevertheless, as a matter of urgency should workout large scale educational activities and strategies for the promotion of women education.

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