

# **WOMEN EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: PROBLEMS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY ROLE AND STABILITY**

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## **Abstract**

Education helps men and women claim their rights and realize their potential in economic, political and social arenas. It is also the single most powerful way to lift people out of poverty. Yet, many people — especially women — are still excluded from education in Nigeria. Education should be an intrinsic part of any strategy to address the gender-based discrimination against women and girls that remains prevalent in our society. Hence, this paper offers an overview of women education in Nigeria and its benefits to women, families and the society as a whole. It highlights the ongoing concerns about education in Nigeria. The paper further examines education's links with family responsibilities and employment, two important elements in women's empowerment.

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**Keywords:** Women Education, Family Role, Women Empowerment, Gender Parity and Nigeria

## **Introduction**

The current wave of globalization has greatly improved the lives of women worldwide, particularly the lives of women in the developing world. Nevertheless, women remain disadvantaged in many areas of life, including education, employment, health, and civil rights. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development and the World Bank, 57 percent of the 72 million primary school aged children who do not attend school are females. Additionally, girls are four percent less likely than boys to complete primary schools (Gender statistics, 2010).

While many gains have been made with regards to overall level of education worldwide and more children than ever are now attending primary school (King, 2013), there is still not world-wide gender parity in education. In every income bracket, there are more female children than male children who are not attending school. Generally, girls in the poorest 20 percent of

household have the lowest chance of getting an education (Jensen, 2010). This inequality does not necessarily change in adulthood.

Statistics show that of the 774 million illiterate adults worldwide, 64 percent are women – a statistic virtually unchanged from the early 1990s (Gender Statistics, 2010). The United Nations Millennium Development Goal (MDG) to promote gender equality and empower women therefore uses education as its target and the measure of gender disparity in education as its indicator of progress. Through the efforts of the international community, the UN hopes to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education in all levels of education no later than 2015. What a lofty target to realize!

This begs the questions can this Millennium Development Goal be achieved? What progress have countries made to achieve this goal? And specifically, how far has Nigeria as a nation gone to meet this goal? Nigeria is still among the nations facing many challenges in reaching that target by 2015 as well bridging gender gap in primary and secondary education. It is imperative to say that education plays a particularly important role as a foundation for girls' development towards adult life. At the time ensuring gender equality requires adapting equally to the needs and interests of girls and boys. International human rights law lays down a three-fold set of criteria where by girls should have an equal right to education, equal right in education and their equal rights should be protected and promoted through education (Tomasevski, 2005).

Gender inequality in education is extreme. Girls are less likely to access school, to remain in school or to achieve in education. Despite almost 30 years of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and 20years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), today girls make up around 56 per cent of the 77 million children not in school, and women make up two thirds of the adults who are illiterate. Even girls who do enroll in school may have irregular attendance due to other demands on them, and the fact that their education may not be prioritized. Girls are more likely to repeat years, to drop out early and to fail key subjects, and in most countries girls are less likely to complete the transition to secondary schooling. Inequality in society inevitably has an impact on the provision and content of education. Hence, the need to examine and address the issues surrounding poor education of women in our society cannot be overemphasized.**Nigeria at a Glance:**

### **Women and Education**

Nigeria significantly influences the achievement of the MDGs in sub-Saharan Africa because of its sheer size. Nearly one in every four women in sub-Saharan Africa is Nigerian. Hence, the situation of women and girls in Nigeria has a key role to play in determining the progress of the whole

region. Nigeria has performed poorly in terms of gender equality. According to the 2012 Gender in Nigeria Report, data suggest that Nigeria ranks 118 out of 134 countries in the Gender Equality Index.

At every educational level women earn less than their male counterparts and in some cases men with less education earn more than better educated female peers. Also, Nigerian girls drop-out of school earlier than their male counterparts. Evidence further shows that more than two thirds of 15-19 year old girls in Northern Nigeria are unable to read a sentence.

Of course, these facts are devastating in their own right, but what is more worrisome is that it seems efforts by the Nigerian government for the past 20 years to tackle the gender disparity in education have not had any significant impact. With regard to women's education, Nigeria's education policy has evolved since the 1980s towards a gender focus. Below show some of the key policy initiatives embarked on by the Nigerian government to show policy commitment on education equality.

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

	<b>Policy Initiatives</b>	<b>Year</b>
1.	Blueprint on Women's Education	1986
2.	Nomadic Education Programme	1986
3.	National Commission for Mass Literacy and Non-formal Education	1991
4.	Family Support Basic Education Programme	1994
5.	Universal Basic Education	1999
6.	National Policy on Women	2001
7.	Education For All-Fast track Initiative	2002
8.	Strategy for Acceleration of Girls' Education in Nigeria	2003
9.	National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS)	2004
10.	Universal Basic Education Act	2004

*Source: Gender in Nigeria Report, 2012.*

### **Women Education, Family and the Nigerian Society**

At anytime in any context, women are critical actors in the education process. The roles of women in schools are often defined in terms of their 'natural' affinities with children and their innate love for teaching and nurturing, as well as their ability to do it.

Nonetheless, men still dominate women in every country in the world, Nigeria inclusive; resulting in widespread discrimination against women and girls. The impact of unequal power relations and discrimination is often felt most severely when material poverty exists, as this increases vulnerability. Inequality in the Nigerian society inevitably has an impact on the provision and content of education, as well as on the ability of girls to enter, and remain in, school.

In our society there are some limitations for women to progress in education and to be considered outside their family roles, expectation and responsibilities. Reinartz (2002) argues that balancing work and family is a major hurdle for working women. Hence, family responsibilities influences the careers and education choices of women who mostly have disproportionate work in care if children and the home.

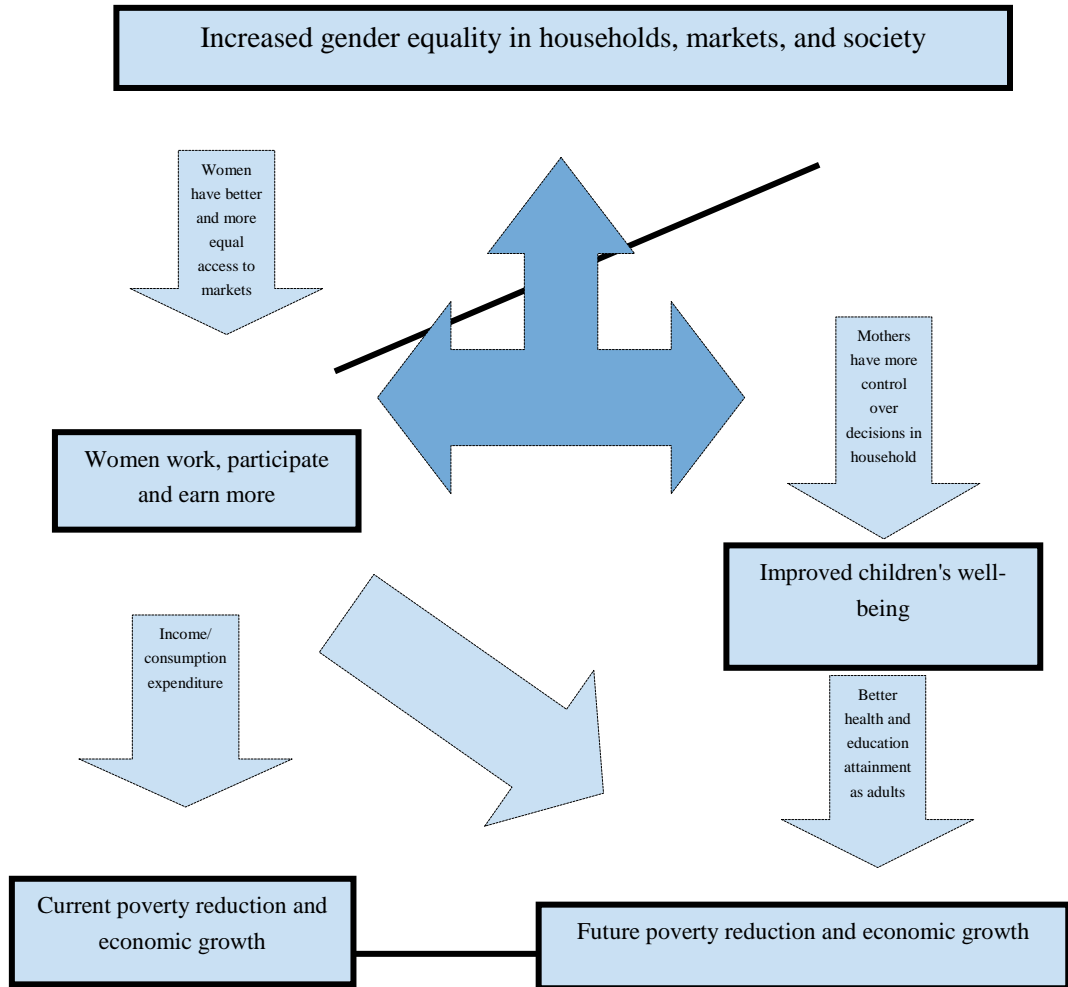
The tradition, customs, socio cultural values, ethics, motherhood instincts are some of the factors influencing gender bias in the education sector. Cultural and social beliefs, attitudes and practices prevent girls from benefiting from educational opportunities to the same extent as boys. The achievement of girls' right to education can address some of societies' deeply rooted inequalities, which condemn millions of girls to a life without quality education – and, therefore, also all too often to a life of missed opportunities. Education is seen in some societies as a fear of change and now with globalization, the fear becomes even greater- fear to lose the cultural identity, fear of moving towards the unknown or unwanted.

Furthermore, the gender disparity is exacerbated by the powerful economic and social rationale for investing in the education of sons rather than daughters, as daughters are perceived to be less valuable once educated, and less likely to abide by the will of the father, brother or husband. The plight of women, in terms of education is compounded by this negative attitude of parents toward female education (Oniye, 2010).

Another implication for poor education opportunity for women is involvement in low paying ventures. It has been noted by Oladunni (1999) that because of societal stereotype and stigmatization on certain professions and subjects as the exclusive preserve of men and or women most Nigerian women have been forced into less paid jobs (teaching, nursing services, agriculture, small scale food processing, secretariat duties, clerical duties, note- counting in banks, cleaners and middle level professional occupations). In most societies, both the public and private sectors continue to be dominated by men, leading parents to ask themselves: why bother educating our girls if they will never make it anyway?

In answering this question, it is important to understand the gender empowerment-growth-poverty eradication cycle as shown below.

**Figure 1:** The Gender Empowerment-Growth-Poverty Eradication Cycle



*Source:* Morrison et al (2007: 2)

The focus on poverty reduction enables the right to education to be a powerful tool in making a change in the lives of girls and women. Educating girls and women is an important step in overcoming poverty and ensuring economic development. An educated woman is an empowered woman and more marketable in terms of employment. Better employment in turn implies more earnings for the family as a whole, as well as improved children's well-being. All of which contribute to poverty reduction and economic growth.

Education helps women take advantage of opportunities that could benefit them and their families, preparing women for the labor force and helping them understand their legal as well as their reproductive rights. Basic

education provides girls and women with an understanding of basic health, nutrition and family planning, giving their choices and the power to decide over their own lives and bodies. Women's education leads directly to better reproductive health, improved family health, economic growth, for the family and for society, as well as lower rates of child mortality and malnutrition. As women education increases, fertility, population growth, and infant and child mortality fall and family planning as well as health tend to improve significantly.

Evidence shows that although most women in Nigeria may know little about modern contraception, more-educated women tend to use and know more about them; the proportion of women who use family planning and child care increases with level of education as shown below.

**Table 2:** Mother's Education and Family Size

Mothers' Education	Family Size
No education	6.9
Primary	6.3
Secondary	5.9
Higher	4.9

*Source: Gender in Nigeria Report, 2012*

Educated women generally want smaller families and make better use of reproductive health and family planning information and services in achieving their desired family size. Women with more education also tend to have healthier families. In Nigeria, evidence shows that there is a correlation between mother's education and child nutrition and growth.

**Table 3:** Mother's Education Level and Use of Family Planning

Mother's education level	Ever used family planning method?		
	Never used	Have used	Total
No education	91.54	8.46	100
Primary	68.51	31.49	100
Secondary	61.45	38.55	100
Higher	37.51	62.49	100
Total	70.83	29.17	100

*Source: Gender in Nigeria Report, 2012*

**Table 4:** Mother's Education Level and Child Care

Mother's education level	Full vaccination of child			Place of delivery		
	No	Yes	Total	Home	Health facility	Total
None	50.2	49.98	100	88.59	11.41	100
Primary	24.60	75.40	100	59.52	40.38	100
Secondary	11.80	88.20	100	33.98	66.02	100
Higher	3.89	96.11	100	10.10	99.90	100
Total	30.56	69.44	100	62.29	37.71	100

*Source: Gender in Nigeria Report, 2012*

According to the 2012 Gender in Nigeria Report (as shown in Table 5.), Nigerian women with less education were less likely to receive antenatal care: Only 25 percent of Nigerian mothers with no education received antenatal care, compared with 95 percent of those with higher education or 80 percent of those with secondary school education.

**Table 5: Mother's Education Level and Antenatal Care**

Mother's education level	Antenatal care uptake		
	No	Yes	Total
None	75.49	24.51	100
Primary	40.51	59.49	100
Secondary	20.54	79.46	100
Higher	5.51	94.49	100
Total	40.30	50.57	100

*Source: Gender in Nigeria Report, 2012*

In the Nigerian society, education is a crucial factor in determining age at marriage and birth, because women generally give birth soon after marriage. Hence, women with no education that marry at 18 years will most likely give birth at 19-20 years, whilst the educated ones that marry between 25 -30 years and would deliver later. With child birth at a later age, fertility and overall population growth is reduced.

In terms of women education's link to employment, ensuring women's education in the society increases their earning capacity that is, they become more marketable and employable as shown in Table 6 and 7. Also, increases in girls' secondary school enrollment are associated with increases in women's participation in the labor force and their contributions to household and national income. Children — especially daughters — of educated mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school and to have higher levels of educational attainment. Hence, the positive cyclical effect of women education in the society cannot be over-emphasized.

**Table 6: Mother's Education Level and Employment**

Mother's education level	Women currently working?		
	No	Yes	Total
None	41.81	58.19	100
Primary	26.65	3.35	100
Secondary	47.62	52.48	100
Higher	37.88	62.22	100
Total	40.56	59.44	100

*Source: Gender in Nigeria Report, 2012*

**Table 7: Mother's Education Level and Cash Earnings**

Mother's education level	Work for cash earnings		
	No	Yes	Total
None	17.12	82.88	100
Primary	25.93	74.07	100
Secondary	25.52	74.48	100
Higher	6.89	93.11	100
Total	20.98	79.02	100

*Source: Gender in Nigeria Report, 2012*

### **Relationship between women education, family stability and sustained national development**

At present, the forces which combine to hamper women education, family stability and sustainable development in Nigeria could be viewed broadly to include denial of equitable access to and participation to functional education, early marriage, confinement to solitary living, subjugation by culture to accept choices forced on women, discrimination and harassment at work, political disenfranchisement from elective and political appointment and exposure to cruel mourning rites upon the death of their husband (Oniye, 2000). These cultural barriers and environmental manipulation create inferiority complex in many Nigerian women. Oniye (2010) further ascertained that through the traditional socialization process of our cultural society, women tend to accept negative self-fulfilling prophecy, stereotyping and stigmatization. All these predispositions transmit negatively on the family role and responsibilities, which invariably interplay adversely in the national agenda. Women and development rather than women in development becomes an apparatus for gender issues.

Contrary to the current trend, intensive efforts to foster a gender-inclusive culture from the family level through education, across the board up to higher education, in order to promote sustainable human development need to be vigorously pursued. The legislative arm of government must be precise on the principle of gender equality in education by creating viable channels to the legal rights of women.

Generally speaking, improving access to and the quality of education is the most rewarding investment a country can make. Investing in female education will accelerate Nigeria's economic and social development by enhancing human capital, slowing population growth, and alleviating poverty. According to Agbakwuru (2002) education equips one with marketable skills thereby lifting the possessor up from the poverty arena. Essentially, through education, the individual learns good health habits, principles and practices which promote healthy living and longevity as well as acquire marketable skills that confer economic power on the educated.



## **Conclusion**

The past 20 years have witnessed improved- but not sufficient - enrolment of the female population in higher education. However, a closer analysis of higher education statistics reveals the different nature of the problem in different socio-cultural and economic contexts. A number of cultural barriers still exist in the Nigerian society which seriously impedes women's development as citizens and professionals. Efforts to improve female education in Nigeria needs to go beyond rhetoric and should involve policies and programs with measurable results. Efforts to ensure that education is made accessible to low-income families and rural populations, with special attention and sensitivity to women/girls is paramount if family stability and in turn national development is desirable in Nigeria.

## **The way forward**

Below are some recommendations for women education, family stability and national development in Nigeria to thrive.

1. Both the policy makers and school administrators need to promote the principle of equality between women and men in school curricula, educational programs and teaching activities. In order to realize the above stated the steps highlighted below are necessary:
  - introduce the issue of gender equality in teachers' training programs;
  - include information and knowledge about the family, gender equality, duties of women and men in the family and shared responsibility of all family members for its proper functioning in sexual education programs.
2. Both the various governments (national, state and local) and non-governmental agencies should set up programmes that carry out and popularize through the media educational and information programs on promoting equal status of women and men. It is necessary to improve networks for utilizing findings of research and studies on gender-based issues to raise social awareness on the issue of equal rights and opportunities in education and employment. These can be done through the following ways:
  - use the media to promote international documents pertaining to women's rights and gender equality;
  - disseminate data and findings of studies providing information on the situation of women and men in Nigeria- support research institutions conducting such studies.
3. The policy makers in education need to develop practical oriented mechanisms targeted at ensuring equal access to education for women and men (in all types of schools and at all levels) and

taking particular account of the situation in rural areas. This can be achieved through the following ways:

- provide specialized school and vocational counseling, free of stereotypes reinforcing the segmentation of the labor market and feminization of some of its sectors;
- introduce the broad profiles of vocational education for girls and boys (at all levels) to facilitate adaptation to the changing conditions and needs of a local labor market;
- ensure that women who dropped out of school because of family responsibilities are provided with opportunity to complete their education;
- ensure full and equal participation of girls and women in extracurricular activities and school facilities, such as computer or vocational classes, or business management training;
- ensure equal access, for girls and boys, to physical activities, recreational and sport classes, run both at and outside of school;

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