

**FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST FEMALES AND RURAL DWELLERS' ACCESS TO,
AND PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA.**

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ABSTRACT: *The study was a descriptive survey in which Focus Group Discussions were used to get the respondents' perception on the range of factors that militate against the females' and rural dwellers' access to and participation in higher education in Nigeria. The study was carried out in Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU) and St. John of God Secondary School (SJGSS), both in Awka, Nigeria. Four research questions guided the study. The population comprised all the lecturers and female students in two faculties (Education and Engineering) of NAU, all the Junior Secondary School class-3 and Senior Secondary class-2 students and teachers of SJGSS as well as Government representatives and a member of Women-Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Anambra State. The major instrument for data collection was a 4-topic interview schedule, while percentage was used for Data Analysis. Findings from the discussions revealed some family, school, society and self-related factors. Some major recommendations made to increase the access and participation of females and rural dwellers in higher education in Nigeria are; provision of electricity in rural areas, provision of adult literacy programme for women and mothers in rural areas, establishing strategies for eliminating teachers' negative attitude to female students' potentials, as well as launching of education campaign for rural dwellers.*

KEYWORDS: Factors, Females, Rural dwellers, Access, Participation and Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Education is generally conceptualized as a continuous process of learning from birth of an individual to his death. It commences from a child's home and continues even after school to adulthood-till death. Broadly speaking, education is the totality of all the processes by which a child or young adult develops his abilities, attitude and other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to the society in which he/she lives. This shows that education is not just the acquisition of knowledge, but also the utilization of the acquired knowledge. In this regard Egwu (2006:9) opined that "in Nigeria, education should produce thoughtful and caring people, creative, innovative,

skilled and ingenious people, who should soar above mundane things of this world to solve the problems of the society”.

In recognition of the central position of education in the overall development of the individual and the society, Nigeria as a nation bases her philosophy of education on “the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary level both inside and outside the formal school system” (National Policy on Education – NPE, 2004:7). In this regard both Federal and State governments in Nigeria make policies, which will enable or encourage people to be educated irrespective of their gender or ethnic background.

Also, the Nigerian constitution (1999), Stresses the right for education of all its citizens, irrespective of tribe, sex, physical disability or whatsoever. All these show that the people of Nigeria consider Education as instrument par excellence for realizing rapid national development, for reaching social change, and for forging together a nation split by civil war (Csapo, 1981). However, it will be difficult for these objectives to be achieved with the current level of literacy in the country. Of the 140m people in the country, 72% of the males as against 56% of the females are literates (UNICEF in Jatau, 2009), and in certain states (especially the Northern Nigeria), the female literacy, enrolment and achievement rates are much lower.

Some of the barriers to girl-child education in Northern Nigeria, as witnessed by one of the researchers, during his National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) at Kano State, Nigeria Include:

- Most girls/females between the ages of 6-17 years, who are supposed to be in school, are found roaming about the streets hawking fruits and meals, while their male counterpart are in classrooms learning. These girls engage in hawking so as to assist their parents, as a result of the low financial status of the families. (This was witnessed at Bachirawa boy’s Junior Secondary School, Ungogo, Kano State.
- Most marriage ceremonies witnessed in the North have little girls of ages 9-16 years sold into marriage by their parents. Girls go into marriage very early due to the fact that most men in the North want to marry a virgin, and therefore, prefer catching them young (tender) before they loss their virginity (a response from Abdulahi, a Youth of Ungogo town).

Many factors are attributed to why Nigerian women (particularly the girls who would normally be between the ages of 10 to 16 years and by the educational system in Nigerian should be in secondary schools) are behind the men in literacy. These factors include poverty and economic issues, early marriage and teenage pregnancy, inadequate school infrastructure, cultural and religious biases, gender bias in content, teaching and learning processes, and poorly qualified teachers (UNESCO: 1993 in Jatau, 2009). Others are poor parental support for girls’ education, society’s poor attitude toward girl-child education, irrelevance of the curriculum used in schools, poor female participation in studying the sciences, female’s poor self-concept and poor link between education and employment (Jatua 2009). The editorial of Daily-Trust (22nd September, 2008) has it that a recent conference in Kaduna-Nigeria, on girl child education identified low enrolment and difficulty in making female children to stay in school as major reasons for the poor state of girl-child education in the country. A major outcome of the conference was that the problem requires synergy between religious, traditional and political leaders in search for solution. The government of Nigeria and several non-governmental organizations such as the UNICEF, UNESCO and World

Bank have continually expressed their desire to ensure equal opportunity, balance of access and completion of education regardless of gender, ethnic affiliation or religion for all Nigerians. In spite of all these concerted efforts, female education remains a challenging problem in Nigeria. While the problem of access is worse in Northern Nigeria where school enrolment is particularly low and the gender gap between boys and girls is sometimes as high as three to one (UNICEF – Nigeria Country Office, 2007), the problem in the South East, is that of participation and access to some subject areas.

Despite the governmental and non-governmental efforts to ensure equal opportunity, balance of access and completion of education regardless of gender, ethnic affiliation, or religion, few girls are being educated. From the few that enter primary and secondary schools the number that enter tertiary institutions is low due to the fact that most of these primary and secondary school students eventually dropout on the way as a results of factors militating against female education. Therefore, the problem of this research (study) was to identify the barriers to education of females and that of rural dwellers as well as the interventions necessary to increase the access and participation of these people to African Higher Education. Rural dwellers in Nigeria are considered as people from marginalized background because in most cases these people lack the basic facilities that are taken for granted in urban areas. This study was aimed at investigating the extent to which family, societal and school related factors militate against female students' and rural dwellers' access to and participation in higher education in Nigeria.

The following four research questions were formulated to guide the study.

- 1) To what extent do family related factors militate against the female students and rural dwellers' participation in and access to higher education in Nigeria?
- 2) To what extent does society related factors militate against female students' and rural dwellers' participation in and access to higher education in Nigeria?
- 3) To what extent do school related factors militate against female students' and rural dwellers' participation in and access to higher education in Nigeria?
- 4) To what extent do self-related factors militate against female students' and rural dwellers' participation in and access to higher education in Nigeria?

METHODOLOGY

The study was a descriptive survey in which Focus Group Discussions were used to get the respondents' perceptions on the range of factors that militate against the females' and rural dwellers' access to and participation in higher education in Nigeria. The study was carried out in Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU) and St. John of God Secondary School (SJGSS), both in Awka, the capital of Anambra State in the southeast geo-political zone of Nigeria. (Note: SJGSS is a Girls-School).

The population of study comprised all the lecturers and female students in two Faculties (Education and Engineering) of NAU as well as all the JSS3 and SSS3 students and teachers of SJGSS as well

as Government Representatives and members of women Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Anambra State. Total population of the study was 2359. The sample of the study stood at 20 students (10 from NAU and 10 from SJGSS), 5 lecturers from NAU and 3 teachers from SJGSS, 2 Government representatives, and 1 NGO representatives. The total sample was 30 and this was drawn through the use of disproportionate stratified random sampling technique. These respondents were engaged in Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) by the researcher in their schools (for students) or in their places of work (for Lecturers, NGO rep. Govt. reps). The FGDs lasted 6 weeks.

The major instrument for data collection was a 4-topic interview schedule which was designed by the researcher in line with the earlier stated questions that guided the study. A cassette record was used for recording the contributions of each the respondent. The FGDs instrument was both face and content validated by two lecturers. They made useful observations on the topics and the likely follow-up questions and these were taken into consideration in producing the final interview schedule. The data collected from the field was organized in frequencies according to the number of respondents that expressed similar opinion and the percentage for each group of scores was calculated.

RESULTS

- The most common family related factors emanating from the FGDs are; parents' low level of Education (100%), early marriage (100%), lack of knowledge of the values of education (93%), parents' negative attitude to girl's education (83%) and parents' poor financial status (73%). (See Table 1 in appendix B).
- The most mentioned societal related factors were; lack of awareness campaign in rural areas on girls' education (100%), the society placing more value on the education of the male child (93%), inadequate scholarship grants and bursary from government and individuals (83%) and limited employment prospects after schooling (76%). (See Table 2 in appendix B).
- The most commonly named school related factors were; high cost of schooling (70%), poor learning environment (90%) and inadequate provision of guidance and counseling in schools (100%). (See Table 3 in appendix B).
- The most commonly mentioned self-related factors were; female students' preference for marriage (90%), fear of not getting married after education (83%), desire to conform to parents and husbands' wish, not to aspire for University education (83%), and teenage pregnancy (80%). (See Table 4 in appendix B).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Parents low level of education, early marriage, and ignorance of the benefits of education especially that of the female were mentioned by all the respondents as family related barriers to the access and participation of females in tertiary education in Nigeria. UNESCO in Jatau (1993) reported similar

findings and concluded that poverty, economic standard of the family, early marriage and teenage pregnancy are factors that hinder girls from participating in school education in developing countries. It is surprising that this situation still holds in some part of Anambra State, the area of the present study because it is one of the few States in Nigeria with high percentage of female literacy. Consequently the fact that a good number of females in this state do not participate in tertiary education is not viewed as a serious problem by most people in Nigeria because females in this State have higher level of literacy than females in other states in Nigeria. This may be the reason for the lack of awareness campaign on girls' education in rural areas as was identified in this study. Most people do not see the need for such awareness campaign. In fact one of the respondents said during the discussion that "there had never been a campaign on boy' education or that of people in urban areas, so girls and people in rural areas should access education like the other people".

This study also revealed that poverty and high cost of education are barriers to the access and participation of females in tertiary education. With almost 70% of Nigerian population living below poverty level, girls are often sent to work in the markets or to hawk wares on the streets to supplement the family income. Most Nigerian parents, especially in large families with limited resources enroll their boys in school rather than the girls. Some parents also keep their daughters out of school due to misinterpretation of religious teaching especially Islamic teaching and also due to cultural bias.

Though a good number of the respondents felt that setting up new school buildings is among the intervention already taken by the government, some still expressed the need for more schools to be built in rural areas. One of the respondents lamented as follows "there is only one school in our community and it is very far from people's homes. Today the students have been on forced vacation due to flooding of streets resulting from the rainy season". Although there is no problem with the payment of teachers' salaries as is the case in some states in Nigeria, the respondents mentioned lack of facilities in schools especially schools in the rural area. Non provision of electricity in these schools is a big problem. Such schools lack teachers in most subjects and there is no way instructional activities can take place in such schools through the use of computer and the other electronic based instructional materials. This implies that students in these rural schools are technologically marginalized.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made:

- Building of conveniences in all schools especially in schools in rural areas.
- Building of more schools in rural areas.
- Provision of computer sets in secondary schools.
- Provision of electricity in rural secondary schools.
- Promotion of adult literacy programmes for women and mothers in rural areas.

- Establishing strategies to eliminate teachers' negative attitude to female students' potentials.
- Launching education campaign in rural areas.

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APPENDIX A

The following topics were discussed at the focus group discussion:

1. The family-related factors that affect the access and participation of females and rural dwellers in higher education in Nigeria
2. The society-related factors that militate against the access and participation of females and rural dwellers in higher education in Nigeria.
3. The school-related factor that affect the access and participation of females and rural dwellers in higher education.
4. The self-related factors that affect the access and participation of females and rural dwellers in higher education.

APPENDIX B

(Note that in the following tables, STU stands for Students; L/T stand for Lecturers/Teachers; GOVT stands for Government and NGO stands for Non Governmental Organization).

TABLE 1: Family- related factors that militate against female students and rural dwellers' access to, and participation in higher education in Nigeria.

S/N	Factors	STU	L/T	GOVT.	NGO	TOTAL	%
1.	Parents' low level of education	20	7	2	1	30	100
2.	Parents' career	12	4	0	1	17	57
3.	Parents' poor financial status	18	4	0	0	22	73
4.	Parental attitude (preference) in educating the male child	16	6	1	2	25	83
5.	Lack of knowledge of the benefits of education	18	7	2	1	28	93
6.	Difficult tasks assigned at home	5	2	0	0	7	23
7.	Early Marriage engineered by the parents	20	7	2	1	30	100

TABLE 2: Society-related factors that militate against female students and rural dwellers' access to, and participation in higher education in Nigeria.

S/N	Factors	STU	L/T	GOVT.	NGO	TOTAL	%
1.	Religion and traditional practices in the society/ community	10	5	1	1	1	57
2.	Cultural prejudices/superstitious belief	10	2	1	1	14	47
3.	Inadequate scholarship grants and bursary from government/individual	20	3	1	1	25	83
4.	Placing more value on a boy's education than that of a girl	19	6	2	1	28	93
5.	Limited employment prospects after schooling	17	4	1	1	23	77
6.	Lack of awareness campaign in rural areas on girl's education	20	7	2	1	30	100

TABLE 3: School-related factors that militate against female students and rural dwellers' access to, and participation in higher education in Nigeria.

S/N	Factors	STU	L/T	GOVT.	NGO	TOTAL	%
1.	High cost of schooling	15	5	0	1	21	70
2.	Lack of female teachers as role models	5	0	0	1	6	20
3.	Poor learning/teaching environment in rural areas	18	7	1	1	27	90
4.	Gender bias of the teachers towards female student	10	2	2	1	15	50
5.	Gender stereotyping in textbooks	3	4	0	0	7	23
6.	Sexual harassment by male students and teachers	10	3	1	1	15	50
7.	Inadequate provisions of career guidance counseling in school	20	7	2	1	30	100
8.	Lack of professionally qualified teachers	7	0	0	0	7	23
9.	Long distance between school and students' home in rural areas	6	3	1	1	11	37
10.	Bullying by fellow male students	13	3	0	1	17	57

TABLE 4: Self-related factors that militate against female students and rural dwellers' access to, and participation in higher education in Nigeria.

S/N	Factors	STU	L/T	GOVT.	NGO	TOTAL	%
1.	The females' lack of interest in school learning	4	3	2	1	10	33
2.	The female students' poor academic performance	9	3	2	0	14	46
3.	Truancy and absenteeism from school by the female students	5	5	0	0	10	33
4.	Pressure from peer group outside school	10	3	1	1	15	50
5.	Dislike of school environment by female students	6	5	1	0	12	40
6.	Female students' preference for marriage	18	6	2	1	27	90
7.	Fear of not getting married after her school education	16	6	2	1	25	83
8.	Desire to conform to parents' or husband's wish not to aspire too high for university education	17	6	2	1	25	83
9.	Fear of being labeled "Acada" or "Bookish" by the society.	15	4	1	1	21	70
10.	Teenage pregnancy	17	5	1	1	24	80