Education and empowerment of women

Education et autonomisation des femmes

Oyewale Tomori

Nigerian Academy of Science, Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract: African countries have severely undercut their orderly development by not paying sufficient attention to the education of the female gender, who account for almost 50% of the populations in many countries. Denying a person access to education is a violation of the interrelated rights of availability, accessibility, and inclusivity to quality education and suitable learning environment. Education is a means for acquiring relevant knowledge and a tool for empowerment to reduce poverty. Therefore, investing in the education of women who are mothers to all, and girls who are the future mothers, is a route for sustainable development and eventual elimination of poverty. To achieve and sustain these rights for all – girls, boys, women and men- good governance must be instituted in our countries, for the implementation of policies and programmes that will improve the standard of life and living of the society and ensure the full and effective participation of women at political, economic and public levels.

Résumé : Les pays africains ont gravement compromis leur développement harmonieux en n'accordant pas suffisamment d'attention à l'éducation des femmes, qui représentent près de 50% de la population dans de nombreux pays. Refuser à une personne l'accès à l'éducation est une violation des droits interdépendants de disponibilité, d'accessibilité et d'inclusivité à une éducation de qualité et à un environnement d'apprentissage approprié. L'éducation est un moyen d'acquérir des connaissances pertinentes et un outil d'autonomisation pour réduire la pauvreté. Par conséquent, investir dans l'éducation des femmes, qui sont mères pour tous, et des filles, qui sont les futures mères, est une voie vers le développement durable et, à terme, l'élimination de la pauvreté. Pour réaliser et maintenir ces droits pour tous - filles, garçons, femmes et hommes - une bonne gouvernance doit être instituée dans nos pays, pour la mise en œuvre de politiques et de programmes qui amélioreront le niveau de vie et la vie de la société et assureront la participation pleine et effective des femmes aux niveaux politique, économique et public.

The phrase "Knowledge is power" was first attributed to Francis Bacon and appeared as a maxim in his book *"Meditationes Sacrae and Human Philosophy",* published in 1597. However, the first documented occurrence of this phrase is from Imam Ali (599-661 CE) in the tenth-century book Nahj Al-Balagha. He said: "Knowledge is power and it can command obedience. A man of knowledge during his lifetime can make people obey and follow him and he is praised and venerated after his death.

Remember that knowledge is a ruler and wealth is its subject." -Saying 146 from Nahj Al-Balagha.

Ali's concept of knowledge must have been what African men accepted, and therefore they decided to exclude women from acquiring knowledge, concluding that only men should have knowledge and become the rulers whom women must obey and follow. Indeed, knowledge is power, and by directly or indirectly preventing the female population from accessing knowledge through education, women are being rendered powerless. This is tragic, especially as women represent approximately 50% of our national and regional population in Africa.

1 Global population, education and gender parity

In 2015, although women accounted for 49.55% of the global population, 81 countries had more women, while only 36 had a majority of men. In 75 countries, gender parity was within 0.5%. In sub Saharan Africa (SSA), there were more women (50.13%) than men (49.87%), while men in Nigeria accounted for 50.66% of the population; the reverse was the case in Tanzania, where 50.56% of the national population was of the female gender. In many African countries, attention is primarily focused on the education of men. The prevailing culture, in its various forms and dimensions, has been and still is (in many countries) the foundation for denying education to women.

Today, while there is only a marginal difference between the gender numbers in primary school enrolment, the situation deteriorates, especially in Africa, with advancing levels of education at the secondary and tertiary level. The result of this is what has been described as the "education diminishing returns". In 2015, global primary school enrolment of eligible boys and girls was 87% and 85% respectively. In the SSA, 75% of eligible males, and 74% of eligible females were enrolled in primary schools. Variations were, however, recorded from country to country, regarding enrolment in primary schools. For example, in France, the percentage of males (97%) was slightly lower than that of females (98%). In Tanzania, 83% of eligible females, and 78% of eligible males were enrolled, while in Nigeria the percentage of enrolment was 70% for males and 66% for females. At the secondary-school level, we begin to see the onset of the "education diminishing returns", which reach disturbing and unacceptable levels at the tertiary education level. Globally, only 53% of males and 54% of females eligible for enrolment in lower secondary school got enrolled. In SSA, the percentages are much lower than global levels i.e., 32% for both males and females. At the country level, for example, in Tanzania, only 25% of eligible males and 31% of females were enrolled in lower secondary school. Surprisingly, in Nigeria, the enrolment situation (50% male and 49% female) is almost the same as the global enrolment. Secondary school completion rates for males and females are 40% and 37% respectively. A much lower percentage (31% males, 24% females) completed secondary school in SSA. In Nigeria, the secondary school completion rates (57% males and 42% females) were higher than the global or SSA rates. We see further evidence of education diminishing returns with secondary school completion and tertiary level admission rates. Globally, only 40% of eligible males and 37% of eligible females completed secondary education while 33% of males and 38% of females got admitted to universities and

other tertiary education institutions. In Nigeria, while 51% of males and 42% of females completed secondary education respectively, only 11.8% and 7.2% of eligible males and females, respectively, got admission into tertiary institutions. In Tanzania, secondary school completion rates for males and females were 32% and 27%, respectively. Tertiary educational admission rates were 4.8% for eligible males and 3.0% for eligible females. The out-of-school rate for SSA was 21% in primary school, 34% in lower secondary school and 58% in upper secondary school.

2 Education diminishing returns and gender disparity

Why do we have the phenomenon of diminishing education returns and why in particular is the education of women neglected ? Several factors are responsible for the educational diminishing returns: poor standards and low quality of education, especially in SSA.These factors include:

- High school fees,
- Family commitments
- Illness/disability, chronic diseases-HIV/AIDS
- Working to contribute to family needs
- Political instability and violence
- Poor governance and misplacement of national priority
- Ineffective teaching and lack of learning materials, poor learning environment,
- Gender bias,
- Negative cultural values,
- Early marriage,
- Sexual harassment

Women are more adversely affected than men, and sometime affected solely by some of the reasons given above – working to contribute to family needs, gender bias, negative cultural values, early marriage and sexual harassment. The religious concepts about women being the weaker sex and under the rule of men have limited the role of women to sexual and commercial labour – satisfying the sexual needs of men, working in the fields, carrying loads, tending babies and preparing food. When there are insufficient financial resources for school fees, the boys get the preference as girls are less valued culturally and may even be forced to an early marriage to obtain the resources (bride price) that may end up paying for the education of the boy child.

Education is a means of acquiring relevant knowledge and a tool for empowerment to reduce poverty. Investing in the education of women who are already mothers and of girls who are the future mothers is a route to sustainable development and

eventual elimination of poverty. When we deny a person access to quality education, we prevent the person from :

- acquiring a decision-making ability, which enables a person to arrive at a valid and honest conclusion after weighing the options;
- seeking the truth and take decisions relying on observable evidence;
- acquiring the skills and ability to use tools and machines which have wide applications in one's society;
- developing the ability of effective communication through writing, in order to share information, opinions and conclusions;
- adapting to societal change and staying in harmony with the environment.

Denying a person access to education is a violation of the three interrelated rights required to provide education for all. These are :

- accessibility, that includes all males and females
- quality education which is child-centered, relevant and embracing a broad curriculum, appropriately resourced and monitored, and :
- a suitable learning environment that is consistent with human rights, equal respect for culture, religion and language and free from all forms of violence.

There must be uninhibited and free application of the three rights listed above.

These interrelated rights were specified and must be addressed jointly in order to provide education for all. To achieve and sustain these rights for all, there must be vigorous advocacy for the institution of good governance in our countries, to ensure the implementation of policies and programmes that are beneficial to the society, improving the standard of life and living of the society. Poor governance is the most effective driver of underdevelopment, poverty, and inequality. Poor governance is the most potent weapon needed for the failure of the SDGs. Therefore, we as scientists need to work with the government, using the SDGs as the framework for action. We must cooperate and collaborate with our governments to ensure equal opportunities for the full and effective participation of women at political, economic and public levels.

Unequal opportunities between women and men hamper women's ability to lift themselves out of poverty and to secure improved options to improve their lives. Education is the most powerful instrument for changing women's position in society.

3 Documents consulted in preparing this summary (reading guides for interested readers)

[1] World Bank (2015) School enrolment series -Primary Secondary and Tertiary - https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.NENR?view=chart

[2] UNESCO- Gender Equality in Education:
http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/gender-equality-education

[3] https://photius.com/rankings/2017/population/sex_ratio_total_population_2017_1.html

[4] UNICEF – Goal: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women." UNICEF – UNICEF Home. Web. http://www.unicef.org/mdg/gender.html

[5] UNESCO (2007) A Human Rights-Based Approach to Education for All. United Nations Children's Fund. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization www.unicef.org/publications/files/A_Human_Rights_Based_Approach_to_Education_for_All.pdf

[6] UNESCO. (2008) Education for All by 2015: Will we make it? Global Monitoring Report. New York, NY UNESCO/SS/1. UNESDOC database: http://www.ungei.org/resources/files/154743/textsuperscript\%7Be\%7D.pdf

[7] Pachaiyappan, P. (2014) Education: A tool for empowerment. Journal of Education and Practice. vol. 5, No.30, 187-190. ISSN 2222-1735 (Paper) ISSN 2222-288X (Online) http://www.iiste.org

[8] Terway A., Dooley B. and Smiley A. (2009) Global Educational Trends Ten Key Issues EDUCATION POLICY AND DATA CENTER Making sense of data to improve education https://www.epdc.org/sites/default/files/documents/Global_Educational_Trends_1970-2025.pdf

[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_education_in_Nigeria#cite_note-education-40