



Myth and Reality on Equal Educational Opportunity, Gender Equality and Issue of Access in Education in North Western Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

It was enshrined in the National Philosophy on Education that provision of equal access to educational opportunities to all citizens both in the formal and informal system as one of the philosophies of Nigerian education despite the fact that Nigerian education system is characterized by some features that hinder the attainment of the claim 'to provide equal access to educational opportunities to all citizens.....'. The paper highlights the Myths of the claim and attempted to expose some factors that militate against 'provision of equal access to education' such as gender inequality. Quota system of admission into tertiary institutions, Socio-economic status, Religious factor, Insecurity and dualistic school system, it also recommends that government should provide every single and individual child the needed human, physical and financial inputs in adequate proportion as at when due, equalize educational disputes and gender inequality by providing enough female schools totally with the past-growing female gender population among many.

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INTRODUCTION

Struggle for quality and non-discrimination in education at all levels has a long history in the world and Nigeria in particular. In United States following *Brown V. Board of Education* (1954) and the ensuing civil rights struggles of the 1950 and 1960s, congress passed Title VI of the civil right act of 1964. This civil right act prohibits discrimination based on race, color, age creed or national origin in any federally funding activity or program. In 1974 congress enacted the equal educational opportunities Act (EEOA) to champion the right of all children to have equal education opportunities.

The concepts of Equal Educational Opportunities (EEO), like the related concepts of equality, justice fairness is a rather appealing pro-concept to which not many people will have objections to have enthroned among men. Perhaps what makes them so readily acceptable and worthy of defense is their vague and protean nature. Akinpelu (2005) says "What I suspect is that while each proponent of Equal Education Opportunity (EEO) thinks and believes that he is defending a concept, he is in actual fact defending a conception; that is his own conception". This implies that EEO is relative; what one person considers as EEO may not constitute such in another person's understanding of the statement.

This Paper is particularly interested in the statement of Equal Educational Opportunity is it a Myth or Reality? Nigeria intended to give equal education to all citizens free from any barriers of gender, tradition, religion, culture or region. The reason is that it was clearly understood that there was regional disparity between northern, southern and western Nigeria that is to say there existed educationally advantaged and educationally disadvantaged states. There was also wider gap between individuals on their socio-economic status.

Nigeria adopts several policies and programs on education but still Nigerian educational system suffers a lot of problems, and national policy on education was severally updated and published in order to meet the prevailing needs. The first NPE was published in 1977; the 2nd and 3rd edition of NPE were published in 1981 and 1998 respectively; while the fourth edition published in 2004 and the current one was also published in 2013. Upon all updating and publications, Nigeria did not achieve its aim of solving educational problems because educational problems are 'perennial' they appear and re-appear; the problems of education inherent since before Socrates, to contemporary Nigerian philosophers to date seems to have common feature, the problem of Gender barriers on education, un-equalised educational opportunity still exists, there's also regional disparity, difference in education of both rich and poor due to their socio-economic status and public-private institutions exist.

The paper argues as to whether the policy of equal Educational opportunities is achievable in reality,

due to fact that in an attempt to equalize education in Nigeria there were regional effort made by the political leaders in Western region led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo which implemented UPE in January 1955, and in the Eastern region of the country led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe UPE was implemented on 1957; even though it was half-free system of education. In Northern Nigeria led by Ahmadu Bello neither proposed nor implement UPE; but gave more emphasis on moral and adult education programmes. The question is, did they succeed in equalising education? Was there gender equality? Does girl-child offered equal chance of accessing and retention up to tertiary level of education? What marks the difference in what was obtainable initially and nowadays in terms of girl-child access and retention (to completion) in tertiary institutions in northern Nigeria? These, among many are what this paper seeks to explore.

Myths and Realities of Nigeria's Struggle for Equality on Education

In January 1974 the Federal Military Government decided to introduce Universal Primary Education throughout the country on a voluntary basis from September 1976 and on compulsory basis from 1979. On Monday 6 September 1976 the universal, free primary education program (UPE) was launched by Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo, at OkeSuna Municipal Primary School, Lagos that is to say from that date, primary education became free and Universal throughout the country, while from 1979, became compulsory.

It was stated in the Nigerian system structured in the National Policy on education (2013 revision) to provide Basic education aged 5-15years. It encompasses kindergarten 1year, 6years primary education and 3years of junior secondary education. Launching of UBE shows that the problem with UPE is that; the re-launching of a similar program to UPE by the Federal Government of Nigeria indicates that there is something desirable which scheme expected to enable Nigerians to achieve.

Despite all these programs, policies, effort and provisions made by individual institutions and governments at both state and federal levels, to provide equal access to educational opportunities especially for girl child and to bridge the gender barriers in education; certain problems exist since the inception of education from missionary to colonial masters. Inaugurations of UPE was spearheaded by problem that consisted of rapid increase in the enrolment of the students, shortage of teachers, classrooms, equipment, funds and so on. UBE recommendations seem to be a free balanced meal per day for every child that attends public primary or junior secondary school as enshrined in NPE in order to facilitate UBE was not done in reality.

Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974 is an International Law which prohibits discrimination against faculty staff and students,

including racial segregation of students and requires school districts to take action to overcome barriers to students' equal participation. The Concepts of EEO is a very complex and difficult one to explicate and much ink has been spilled in trying to identify what exactly it means. David E. Cooper (1990) describes it as "a pretty murky one" made up of two equally murky components concepts. 'Equality' and 'Opportunity'. Its sister concepts of 'justice' and 'fairness' or 'justice-as-fairness'; while Richards S. Peter (1967) regards Equal Educational Opportunities as either 'vacuous or patently 'fable', James S. Coleman (1999) describe EEO as a misleading concept.

To Akinpelu (2002) the concepts of EEO like the related concepts of equality, justice, fairness is a rather appealing pro-concept, to which not many people will have objections to have enthroned among men. Perhaps what makes them so readily acceptable and worthy of defense in their vague and protean nature; he concludes by saying that "what I suspect is that; while each proponent of EEO thinks and believes that he is defending a concept, he is in actual fact defending a conception, that is, how own conception".

Awo explained in his view that:

"The educational gap between the western states and the northern states is too wide for comfort... it cannot be closed by trying to halt the forward march of the western or eastern states as someone had suggested... for one thing, this is an impossible proposition. For another, such an attempt would be certain to [provide an emotional reaction of frightful proportions among those affected]. The gap can only therefore, be closed by embarking now, throughout the country, on free and compulsory primary education, free and compulsory secondary education, free and education at post-secondary levels. If we do this now, the exiting educational gap will be permanently closed in fifteen twenty years' time."

The problem of admission into Nigerian universities and the maintenance of adequate standard have been associated with some unpopular politics adopted by the federal government of Nigeria to address the inadequacy in the number of admission policies in the university system. Among the unpopular politics according to Okoro (2008) includes

- a. Catchment area policy which provided that a certain percentage of admission places must be reserved for the indigenes of the area in which universities are located.
- b. Backgrounds factor policy ensured that certain percentage of admission chances were reserved for the indigenes of states considered to be educationally disadvantaged or backward.

- c. Quota system policy provided the allocation of certain percentage of admission places into Nigerian universities based on population, ethnic consideration and states of origin.
- d. Discriminating fees policy provided for lower fees to be paid by indigenes of the localities where university are established.

The quota system of admitting candidates into Federal Government institutions gives room for inequality which affects the much talked about standards in education. It seems there is no definite cut-off lien for all candidates. A candidate from State Y may score 65% and may not be offered admission because there are many others from the same State with higher scores; while another candidate from State X who scored 45% is admitted because only a few candidates from that State scored above 45%. The system seems to negate some of the major National Educational Research Quarterly 2008 objectives such as free and democratic society; just and egalitarian society.

The confusion centers around one issue: the question of whether such equality implies equality of input school resources or equality of result of schooling. The reason that the issue cannot be laid to rest by forcing on one of these definitions in that neither input nor output is viable when taken at the extreme.

If equality of output is taken on a definition then it appears incapable of being achieved, because of the massive unequal influences in the environment of different children; particularly families which differ sharply in what they are able to give to their children educationally, relative weakness of effect school differences.

If an equal input school resource is taken in the definition such equally would be upheld even if the total school resources provided to each child were minimal. But if equality of education opportunity means neither equality of output nor equality of input resources, then what does it means? The answer I have concluded after examining the issue for a long time, is that it is not a meaningful term. It concerned in terms of result of schooling, it is unachievable, and if concerned in terms of input school resources is weak term that offers little constitutional protection.

Factors that inhibit Equality on Educational Opportunities

According to Godpower (2015), Equality in educational opportunity emerges in the presence of some interacting factors some of which are:

i. Socio-Economic Status

Substantial evidence from developing countries shows that the socio- economic status significantly influence educational outcomes, this is mostly obvious with enrolment and achievement pattern that are associated with socio economic status. The assessment of learning

achievement which is a good measure of educational quality indicates that most developing countries lag behind countries in subject such as Reading, mathematics and science Birdsall, Levine & Ibrahim Nigerian situation provides a good case study of inequality that can be applicable to several regions of developing nations, especially Third World Countries. Although the competition for success in education credentials (such as GPA, test scores, examination result) is taken seriously in Nigeria, there is also a wide perception that the burden is disproportionately on the poor's academic ability. There is a popular perception that future destination such as admission to selective schools and labour market success is highly dependent upon "who you know" rather than exam scores you obtain. The wealthy are likely to have connections and they can use their influence to secure better positions for their children.

ii. Regional Inequality in Education

The potentially explosive nature of the educational disparity between the Northern and Southern States of Nigeria is one that any average Nigerian is very much aware of. What does not seem to enjoy common agreement is the means to redress it.

Aluede (2022) opined that the study of regional inequality in Nigeria and in many developing regions is hardly complete without tracing the evolution of education to map out how different regions responded when Western education was introduced in the country. In Nigerian missionaries introduced the first formal Western education and they became the major distributors of education throughout the colonial era and early periods after colonization. As a result, coastal areas in southern Nigeria and other parts of western Africa with more missionary settlements had greater access to education than the northern parts that were remotely located according to Aguolu (2019) The spread of Western education in Northern Nigeria who are predominantly Muslims become difficult due to their religious belief that western education was anti-Islam and it would corrupt the discipline of the children.

iii. Dimension of Gender Inequality in Education

Many scholars have successfully argued that addressing gender gap in education is the critical step towards reducing unequal educational outcomes around the world Mc Dong all Much evidence shows that persistence gender inequality hinders growth and development in education in the world and it was also observed that the discrimination against women in education and employment is not only devastating on humanitarian ground, but also a major hindering factor for economic, development. However limited access to education for girls in Nigeria and in many other developing countries persisted and continues to be a major concern for policy makers and the international communities. Despite the significant progress in the

expansion of education in most developing nations, female still lags behind in enrolment and achievement at all levels of schooling. Undoubtedly, it was agreed that female population is greater than the male but the schools provided are not enough to accommodate all the female students.

iv. Dualistic Nature of Schooling

A situation in this country where great and large varieties occur in school plants and facilities, in the distribution of amenities still in our primary school one finds pupil sitting on ground without chairs, in the provision of teaching and non-teaching staff, there are inadequate instructional materials like textbooks, chalk and chalkboard etc cannot be said to be parading equal educational opportunities. In Nigeria we have all kind of schools, private schools, public schools, single schools, single sex schools, urban schools, rural schools, local schools, foreign school etc. Given this diversity in schools types and environment, one would not expect all schools to have exactly or precisely the same treatment and the same kind of effect on keeping the pupils they have admitted in schools. Since the type of school a child attended has an effect on his academic performance both in the present and in the future grades, this is why it is necessary not only to provide the child the opportunity of equal access to education but also equal or may be equivalent access to every needed resources; the question is that is it possible in Nigerian schools?

Some schools consist of a single room in which children of all ages are mixed with a barely literate teacher and others are huge enterprises with highly trained staff from the world leading universities. Some of these schools are run like prisons with rigid routines that determine what every child is doing almost every minute of the day. In the same vein others are more like asylums, with constant battles to maintain order and no sequential activity that lasts for more a few minutes. Amaele (2005) was quoted as saying "The school premises are enough to lure a willing soul to reading. With big trees to provide breeze and shades from the tropical sun of Lagos, airy classroom and the beautiful surrounding the school contrasts sharply with the dilapidated, dirty and repulsive building of the public schools".

Where then is the rationale in forcing the children to go schools at the primary and secondary level with UPE now re-named UBE scheme i.e. 6,3,3,4 and 9-3-4, when the output from certain tagged educationally advantaged states cannot be admitted into Nigeria's next higher level; when the Government which is parading equal Educational Opportunities is the same one that is operating Quota system and Catchment Area in admission and placement?

v. Admission Policy

The problems of admissions into Nigerian Universities and the maintenance of adequate standard have been

associated with some unpopular policies adopted by the Federal Government of Nigeria to address the inadequacy in the number of admission policy in the University system. Among the unpopular policies include:

- a. Catchment area policy which provided a certain percentage of admission places must be reserved for the indigenes of the areas in which universities are located.
- b. Backwardness factor policy ensured that a certain percentage of admission chances was reserved for the indigenes of States considered to be educationally disadvantaged or backward.
- c. Quota system policy provided the allocation of certain percentages of admission places into Nigerian Universities based on populations, ethnic considerations and State of Origin.
- d. Discriminatory fees policy provided for lower fees to be paid by the indigenes of the localities where Universities are established.

Akani believes that the above policies resulted in the reduction of admission standards and this allowed poorly qualified candidates to be admitted into Nigerian Universities. This is because the policy conferred on the various categories of persons the rights of admission whether qualified or not. Furthermore, the quality of University education in Nigeria has consequently been lowered as a result of the Federal Government admission policies which apparently de-emphasize quality. Ndiomu also expressed disenchantment for the admission policy of the Federal Government which prompted him to state thus: The quota system of admitting candidates into Federal Government institutions gives room for inequality which affects the much talked about standards in education. It seems there is no definite cut-off line for all candidates. A candidate from State Y may score 65% and may not be offered admission because there are many others from the same State with higher scores; while another candidate from State X who scored 45% is admitted because only a few candidates from that State scored above 45%. The system seems to negate some of the major national Educational Research Quarterly 2008 8 objectives such as free and democratic society; just and egalitarian society. The points highlighted so far indicate that the process of admitting students into Nigerian Tertiary institutions has some in-built problems that prevent some qualified candidates (most of which might be female) from being admitted. This situation consequently affects the chances of girl-child from accessing not to talk of retention in these institutions.

It has been identified that the quest for 'the provision of equal educational opportunities' in Nigeria has been a bedeviling issue in the education system and it has been challenged by some features inherent in Nigerian education system such as Gender disparity in the provision of female schools in some part of the country, Socio economic status that hinders the

opportunity for the children of the poor masses to attend school, dualistic nature of Nigerian school system which subject the opportunity to access to education to an individual economic class and admission policy.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this analysis, it can be concluded that girls 'access to and retention in tertiary education in Tertiary institutions in North western Nigeria are still constrained by multiple interrelated factors. Economic hardship, cultural norms, and institutional challenges collectively hinder many young women from pursuing or completing higher education. While some progress has been made through institutional support programs and awareness campaigns, the persistence of poverty, insecurity, and traditional gender expectations continues to pose serious barriers. Ensuring equal educational opportunities for girls therefore requires a combined effort from government, institutions, communities, and families. Strengthening existing support systems, creating a safer and more inclusive learning environment, and addressing deep-rooted cultural attitudes are vital steps toward achieving gender equality in tertiary education.

Recommendations

It is in the light of the above discussion that this paper makes the following recommendations:

- i. Equal Educational Opportunities should better be seen and organized in such a manner as to provide every single and individual child the needed human, physical and financial inputs in adequate proportion and as at when due i.e. to say a government which is interested in providing all citizens with equal access to education will be obliged to create an environment conducive to educational competition as between one school and another.
- ii. To equalize educational disputes on gender inequality enough schools must be provided in order to meet the past growing female population.
- iii. In order to avoid dual school system of education in Nigeria it is recommended that either private schools should be abolished or abandoned or public schools should be upgraded with all the necessary equipment to enable them compete favorably with their private counterpart.
- iv. Addressing Social, Cultural, and Economic Barriers: The government and nongovernmental organizations should provide scholarships, bursaries, and financial support for girls from low-income families. Awareness programs should also be introduced to discourage early marriage and promote the value of girls' education.

vi. Improving Institutional and Environmental Conditions: Tertiary institutions should provide adequate hostel facilities, ensure campus safety, and enforce strict antiharassment policies to create a conducive learning environment that supports female retention.

vii. Strengthening Family and Community Support: Parents and community leaders should be sensitized through campaigns and workshops on the importance of girls' higher education. Religious and traditional leaders should advocate for gender equality in educational opportunities.

viii. Enhancing Institutional Support Initiatives: Institutions should expand mentorship programs, career counselling, and awareness campaigns targeted at female students. Establishing female-friendly resource centres and peer support networks can further improve retention rates.

Implementing Practical Approaches for Improvement: Government agencies, development partners, and tertiary institutions should collaborate to provide transportation subsidies, scholarship schemes, and safe hostel accommodations. Community-based sensitization should also be intensified to challenge negative cultural stereotypes and promote girls' education at all levels.

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