

## Equality of Educational Opportunities in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Education as well as its objective is a dynamic instrument needed to meet and satisfy the aspirations of the citizens they are meant to serve. Limited resources and a rapidly expanding child population pose problems of who gets educated in Nigeria. The question of educational imbalance has been a dominant issue which subsequent Nigerian governments have had to tackle since independence. No matter how much they try to spread educational opportunity equitably, a number of barriers have acted to counter government's good intentions. It is even more serious now with the global economic belt-tightening which has many implications for educational practice. This study examined the various dimensions of inequality of educational opportunities and advanced ways of providing educational services to all citizens on equal basis. First it identified the prevailing inequalities, pointing out the respective implications of such inequalities. Then the factors which militate against Nigeria's declared equalitarian objectives are identified as social, geopolitical, economic and religious. It has recommended among others solutions, that very radical reform in our educational practices in order to ensure equal educational opportunity for all Nigerians in the 2020 and beyond.

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**Key words:** Education • Dynamic instrument • Citizens and limited resources

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### INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the fundamental human rights as described by the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Equal educational opportunities are one of the contemporary controversies which have kept both philosophers and sociologists of education very busy in their search for solutions to some of the crises in education. Ordinarily, the desire for equal educational opportunity for all citizens is a very laudable one which should be acclaimed by all those who are concerned with national development. Despite the fact that more than half a century has passed since the adoption of the Universal Declaration, access to education especially for young girls and women has become one of the most challenging issues for developing countries. Nigeria, being the largest nation in the sub-Saharan Africa has reasonably attracted the attention of the international community, becoming the forefront in efforts to fight illiteracy among girls and women.

According to UNICEF the global figure for out-of-school children is estimated at 121 million, 65 million of those schoolchildren being girls. Over 80 percent of these girls live in Sub Saharan Africa with one out of four living in Nigeria. In Nigeria, girls' access to basic education,

especially in the northern states, has remained low. Only 20 percent of women in the North West and North-eastern parts of the country are literate and have attended school. According to reports there is a net enrolment ratio (NER) of 80.6 percent suggesting that a substantial proportion (19%) of primary school age population (6-11 years) is not enrolled in primary schools nationwide. This represents about 5 million Nigerian children aged 6-11 years old that do not have access to primary education.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which was adopted by the UN in 2016, set a 2030 deadline to achieve the goals described among which primary position hold universal access to primary education, gender equality and women empowerment. However, according to the 2017 Gender in Nigeria Report, data suggests that Nigeria ranks 118 out of 134 countries in the Gender Equality Index. This means that Nigeria has to consciously work hard to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as it could not achieve such within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) framework that elapsed in 2015. Also, it has been reported that Nigerian girls drop-out of school earlier than their male counterparts especially in northern Nigeria. Evidence further shows that more than two thirds of 15-19 year old girls in Northern Nigeria are unable to read a sentence.

In achieving greater access to education for women it is crucial that we first understand the factors that contribute in the present situation. 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 society's 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.

Another important factor is poverty. Poor families tend to consider education something of a luxury and in most cases do not have the means to assist their children in pursuing a higher education. Even if they do have the means to support their children, they tend to give an advantage to boys compared to girls since they believe that boys have a better chance to achieve success in society. 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, eliminating female genital mutilation 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.

We need to invest in girls worldwide. Until equal numbers of girls and boys are in school, it will be impossible to build the knowledge necessary to eradicate poverty and hunger, combat disease and ensure environmental sustainability. Millions of children and women will continue to die needlessly, placing the rest of the development agenda at risk. It is extremely important that girls have access to an education. According to UNESCO for every additional year girls go to school, they receive 20 percent higher wages and suffer 10 percent fewer child deaths. Women with some formal education are more likely to seek medical care, ensure their children are immunized, be better informed about their children's nutritional requirements and adopt improved sanitation practices. As a result, their infants and children have higher survival rates and tend to be healthier and better nourished. According to The International Centre for Research on Women, the education that a girl receives is the strongest predictor of the age she will marry and is a

critical factor in reducing the prevalence of child marriage. The World Bank estimates that an additional year of schooling for 1,000 women helps prevent two maternal deaths. Also, each additional year of formal education that a mother completes translates to her children staying in school an additional one-third to one-half of a year.

Fifty one years after independence is long enough for a country to sit back and assess its developmental strides. It becomes necessary therefore to look at the educational services as provided for in its developmental programmes whether it will be possible to provide it equitably in the 2020 and beyond to all Nigerians irrespective of tribe, class, religion, gender or geographic differences.

### **Definition and Clarification of Concepts**

**Concept of Equality:** The Declaration of Rights of Man (1789) states “men are born and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights”. The American Declaration of Independence (1776) also asserts “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”. Despite these great pronouncements, what seems obvious is inequality of men as against their equality. Reason adduced is that men are unequal in height, intellectual abilities, size, physical strength and even moral capacity. Two individuals born at the same time and day may not be said to be equal as one can be congenitally defective while the other is not. It is established that the social and physical environment of two individuals born on a particular day and time, enhance or reduce their equality or inequality at birth. This goes to show that the statement that all men are born equal is spurious.

The concept of equality can only be discussed in a mathematical or scientific sense, where  $7 + 1 = 8$  simply means that the numbers on the left hand side of the equation are equal to the number on the right hand side. Using a weighing balance we can also adduce that the weights on the two scales of the balance are exactly equal when equilibrium is reached. We also discuss the equality of men under law, where all citizens of a country are treated alike under law. Even at that we notice that wealthy men and women in every society have better chances of hiring the best lawyers in order to get better justice. Economic equality also attempts to expunge all differences in wealth, allotting to everyman and woman an equal share in worldly goods [1]. But David Hume [1] counters Bryce view by stating that “men's different degrees of art, care and industry will immediately break that equality. Or if you check these virtues, you reduce society to the most extreme indulgence”. According to

David Hume, economic equality means “the provisions of adequate opportunities for all; the right to work, to adequate wages, to reasonable hours of labour and leisure and to self government in industry so that everyone may have a fair start in life”. This agrees with what [2] says “that no man shall be so placed in society that he can overreach his neighbour to the extent which constitutes a denial of the latter’s citizenship”. According to him “equality is not identity of treatment. Fundamentally, it implies a certain levelling process”.

Even in our everyday experience, inequalities stare us in the face very glaringly. Also, as Aristotle pointed out, the principle of distributive justice is the mundane notion that distinctions should be made if there are relevant differences and that they should not be made if there are no relevant differences, or on the basis of irrelevant difference. Equalitarianism has often run into problem in their attempts to implement the equality principle. For example, material things can be easily distributed both unequally and equally with certain pre determined rules for distribution. But education is a lot different from such common place things that can be easily distributed among people discretely. How, for example do you equalize educational opportunity for the brilliant child and the confirmed imbecile? How do you equalize educational opportunity for the physiologically normal child and the patently disabled one? Even on a wider scale, how do you equalize educational opportunity for a very bright, progressive and forward looking society and a patently backward, inward looking and culturally deprived one? These are issues which border on our interpretations of the concept of equality.

Equal educational opportunity may operationally be explained to mean equal access or the means to formal education. This equality is regardless of differences in location, sex, social standing, ethnicity and even religion. The marked differences which actually confront us in our daily lives and in all spheres really cause us some discomfort when we talk about equal this or that. It is often pointed that although everyone has equality before the law, courts do not discriminate against anyone on irrelevant grounds. In fact, we know that the affluent members of society generally have easier access to first class, legal luminaries who generally have a way of influencing the course of justice in their favour as against a poor man who cannot afford the service of a brilliant attorney at law. In this instance, how do you equalize justice for these entirely different individuals? It is obvious therefore that if equality was all that was valued in a society, there would be almost no limit to the demand

for such frivolous egalitarian extensions. Arrangements would therefore have to be made to remove such obvious inequalities as family background, social standing, wealth and the type of school, sex and a host of other individual differences. In short, we might find that such arrangements infringe recklessly on individual liberties and freedom almost to a point of ridicule [3]. The concept of equality as it applies in other facets of human endeavour may not be practicable in education particularly with respect to its distribution and the intrinsic value which individuals and societies attach to it. Again our individual interpretations and understanding of education and its role in society go a long way in creating bottlenecks for its equalization.

**Concept of Education:** In the context of this paper, education will be viewed in its wildest sense as a lifelong, cradle to grave process of enculturation, a life-long process of developing the individual capabilities through acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values both for their own benefit and benefit of the society. From the point of view of the writers, for example the educator or the education agency, this very broad concept of education can be said to embrace learning resulting from both the formalized and systematic efforts to inculcate behaviour patterns from the educationally informal circumstance. In other words, education embraces both formal and informal education. Formalized and systematic educational efforts will be taken to include both in school education efforts channelled to all levels of educational institutions from primary to tertiary and systematic efforts channelled to out-of-school or adult education programmes; literacy programmes, agricultural extension programmes, public health programmes, science and technology programmes and the like.

**Concept of Educational Opportunities:** Opportunity has been defined as “a favourable or advantageous combination of circumstances”. In that light, educational opportunity can be seen as a combination of educational circumstances whereby the individual is enabled to engage in a process of developing his/her capabilities through acquisition of skills, attitudes and values both for his/her own benefit and for the benefit of his society.

**Equality and Education in Nigeria:** The concept of equality of educational opportunities is itself a special concept which according to [4] means several things which include:

- Providing a free education up to a given level which constituted the principal entry point to the labour force.
- Providing a common curriculum for all children, regardless of background.
- Providing that children from diverse backgrounds attend the same school.
- Providing equality within a given locality, since local taxes provided the source of support for schools.

The history of early western education in Nigeria dates back to the days of early missionary activities. The activities of these missionaries were concentrated along the Atlantic coastal towns of Nigeria with a very gradual process of incursions in to the hinterlands [5, 6]. This was the genesis of the geographic inequalities which has eaten deep into our educational system in Nigeria. Even where the early missionaries made efforts to break through the lines of inequalities, their efforts were stoutly resisted by those who placed little or no value on the process and products of western education. There were serious misgivings concerning the worth of western education particularly in the Muslim north where the Islamic culture and education had strongholds. So while the north was advancing with its Islamic education, the southern part of Nigeria was making tremendous progress in western education [7]. Looking at education whether western or eastern, as a process of initiation and socialization into what a community considers to be worthwhile, it becomes clear that it is almost impossible to bring about worthwhile products by methods which are morally neutral [8]. Being educated for example marks a group of achievements which are internally related to present or distribute on equal basis. [9, 10] also agreed that equality, whether in wages, taxation, voting rights, justice and above all, education is not easily attainable in modern societies because of the high degree of stratification particularly in modern capitalist societies. In accepting stratification as necessary and desirable however, a modern day government normally tries to ensure its citizens' equal opportunity for upward mobility - an equal chance which ultimately leads to further inequalities because the means for competition are not equally distributed [11].

The Nigerian government has declared in its 1981 National Policy on Education its resolve to provide education to all its citizens as a means of an equalitarian end. In other words every Nigerian is expected to enjoy some educational service up to a certain level. The implication is that Nigeria has accepted education as a

means to the realization of equality objective. The widespread schooling provision which accompanied the Obafemi Awolowo Action Group government of the Western Region of Nigeria in 1955 was a turning point in the equalitarian role of education in Nigeria.

Through the Universal Free Primary Education (UFPE) in the then Western Region a large percentage of the population had the opportunity for education and general enlightenment programmes. A large number of people in the process became qualified for participation in the overall governance and this further enabled the appropriate authorities to instill the necessary equalitarian ethics in the younger generation through civic courses and other socializing mass oriented programmes. School itself has also been identified as one of the main agents of stratification in modern societies [12]. It therefore follows that the amount of schooling available to the average citizen and the degree to which recruitment to specialized positions is based on academic achievement will determine in large measure the extent to which equality in education is actually realized in that society [13]. The situation in Nigeria which makes the call for equal educational opportunity for all Nigerians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century very critical is very clear:

- Nigeria is a very heterogeneous country with well over two hundred indigenous ethnic languages. One of the places where some direction could be given to the linguistic chaos is the school system; hence the English language still predominates in schools in spite of the provisions for indigenous languages in schools, especially for instruction.
- The Nigerian government and its economy are so bureaucratized that the only means of entry is through a high performance in some competitive public examinations like the civil service examination. It is also the school system only that can ensure some equalitarianism in selection and recruitment.
- The Nigerian government's determination to develop and modernize cannot be achieved except through some high level scientific and technical skills, which can be acquired through some institutional training programme like the ones generally offered through the conventional school system.

At the primary level for example, [10] argued that education should be available to an entire age-group regardless of parents' ability to pay school fees and regardless of a child's sex, religion and even intellectual ability. This argument removes almost all obstacles to equalitarianism. Thus the more school places there are the

more equalitably the different categories of the population are represented in the classrooms and the lower the schools fees the more equalitarian the primary school system tends to be. Experience has shown however, that the lower the school fees are in most school systems the lower the quality of the resulting education except perhaps in the Unity Schools where the federal government's generous subsidy allows school fees to be relatively low and yet the quality is high.

[14], however considers all equalitarian efforts by emerging nations, most especially the third world countries, as a waste because inequalities are an integral part of our human existence. Specifically, he argues that it is a futility to attempt to multiply the opportunities for access to schooling as advocated for by [10], because it does not necessarily increase equality of opportunity. Experience has shown that the level of criteria for success generally moves steadily higher as soon as more opportunities are created in whatever form.

The result is that it is always been beyond the masses and in the process further widening the inequality gap. [15] and [16] had noted that each expansion of educational access has always been accompanied by a corresponding educational differentiation which required entirely different educational programmes for different students - a complete negation of the equality objective.

A classical example is the establishment of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) which was meant to serve an equalitarian purpose of levelling the opportunity for entry into Nigeria Universities - through its University Matriculation Examination (UME) system. But the caveats of the UME have long been evident in the widespread poor performance of the candidates from year to year [17]. It is common knowledge that candidates had to have attended high brow, good quality secondary schools or some special and privately funded preparatory coaching classes in order to be able to pass the University Matriculation Examination (UME). Unequal abilities and other inequalities have made it almost impossible for the JAMB to level the chances.

In fact this is further accentuated by the action of each university which, in order to discriminate between the good and the bad candidates, arbitrarily raises the cut-off mark to a level that is generally far above the ability of most candidates. And only recently, a new filtering process - the Post University Matriculation Examination (P-UME) was introduced to further de-equalize the entry opportunities for all university degree seekers. The various schools of basic studies and the individual universities? pre-degree programmes may well be very

germane to the equal educational objectives. From the foregoing, it is clear that stratification in all ramifications - along income, educational and status lines appears to be an inevitable part of modernization in any modern society - but the gap between the haves and have-nots tends to be especially pronounced where a handful privileged people enjoy unlimited affluence while the mass of the population remains at subsistence or near subsistence level. This does not augur well for the healthy development of any society; rather, it portends a very volatile situation. Like the phenomenon of armed militancy or kidnapping which have kept the law enforcement agencies on their toes in the last decade.

#### **Obstacles to Equal Educational Opportunity in Nigeria:**

Nigeria is evidently a capitalist state and in most capitalist nations, children from middle and upper class homes have built-in advantages for securing access to the best of schools. For example, almost all the universities in Nigeria have special schools both primary and secondary which are by far different from the public schools in the same towns which the universities are located. Even the military have their own special command schools located right within their barracks for their children. In addition, the Corona schools, the Unity schools and a long array of other privately owned schools are dominated by children of the rich upper class parents, academicians, top flight military personnel and the top echelon of the state and federal civil service. This arrangement simply ignores the equal educational opportunity arrangement. It is a kind of survival of the fittest where the equalitarian objective appears to have been jettisoned. It is commonly said that knowledge is power and so, the children of those who possess power have been blessed with the easiest access to knowledge and thus to future power and ultimately the best in life. Equal education has also been seriously hampered by differences which have resulted in the area of location, gender, socioeconomic, cultural ethnic origins and social status.

**Place or Location Factor:** Children in urban centres have generally been known to have better access to better schooling than rural children of even equivalent intelligent quotient (IQ). In several parts of the developed world, the situation is however reversing. The inner city centres of most urban sprawls are being deserted by the upper and middle class citizens with their families. The better schools and facilities are also shifting to the suburbs. In developing countries however, only very few good schools are located in the rural areas. In fact, the

general neglect of the rural areas prevents teachers from accepting posting to rural areas [18]. Even budgetary allocations aggravate these disparities because the schools in the urban centres are close to the seats of government whose funds get to much easier. In the words of Coombs [19], the prevailing dual urban/rural education system in low income countries deprives a large majority of rural youngsters of even a full primary education, let alone a chance at a secondary or higher education. It is mainly the children of the poorest families in the rural areas and urban slums who account for the astronomically high figures of non-school goers and early drop-outs.

**Sex or Gender Factor:** For various cultural reasons, equal educational opportunity has been hampered by differences in sex. The discrimination which women have had to experience stems from a deep seated cultural attitude toward women. The role of women in Nigeria and in fact Africa as a whole is intimately linked to their reproductive function. Traditionally, the woman is expected to marry early, procreate and rear as many children as “God gives” her. Girls are traditionally socialized early in their lives into the key roles of mother, house keeper and so on. Over 80 percent of all African women live in the rural areas under the condition that are inimical to good and equal education. Particularly, all activities, including education which conflict with child rearing and early marriage are deliberately discouraged. This ultimately limits their access to good employment opportunities, health facilities and education. Since the 1980s however, there has been a tremendous and steady growth in the percentage of women enrolment in almost all levels of education.

**Differences in Socio-Economic Factors:** One of the most serious obstacles to equal educational opportunity is the socio-economic factor which generally manifests itself in income! wealth, racial, ethnic and occupational differentials. [19], reports that in virtually all nations today, including Nigeria, children of parents who are high in the educational, occupational and social scales have a far better statistical chance of attending good secondary schools, the best colleges and even the best universities than equally brilliant children of low income workers, illiterates, peasants and other rural dwellers. In fact children of the latter group are always over represented in the poorer public schools like the commercial, vocational and all the other ill-equipped schools which go by all manner of names. The initial advantage enjoyed by children of some educated parents through nursery

education, tends to broaden with each successive school year and level of schooling. The private primary and secondary schools are the main breeding grounds for the striking inequalities that manifest themselves in the universities where able and motivated children whose parents can afford to enrol them have been guaranteed admission places. The less fortunate children of the lesser mortals must make do with the dregs, the less prestigious, all corners and in most cases often lower quality public schools.

**Strategies for Equalizing Educational Opportunity for All in the Year 2020 and Beyond:** Even though real evidence of inequalities stare us in the face everywhere in Nigeria, only a little is known quantitatively. There is the need to be definite about the figures of the actual number of schools in the rural areas vis-à-vis the urban centres will guide the appropriate authorities in making provisions for facilities. Reliable hard data is difficult to find to guide good planning towards equitable distribution of men and materials. Areas which have been designated educationally disadvantaged will have to receive more attention from the three tiers of government.

More effort is also required in the present campaign by the UN in its Education for All (EFA) programme and in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Emphasis should now shift specially to education for rural women - both old and young through some special provision of incentive to the teachers who will be deployed to the rural areas. Radical reforms in education financing are also called for. These could be through generous scholarship programmes for all. Nursery education should be encouraged. So far, there is no evidence of direct government involvement in pre-primary education. The effects of the various continuing education centres, adult education programmes and migrant education for both cattlemen and fishermen should be complemented by government and well meaning individuals. All kinds of powerful interest groups which presently exercise some covert control over the implementation of our educational programmes should be broken. Due to their paranoid fear of the effects of equal education on the status quo, they have very subtle ways of controlling the machinery for its implementation. This should be broken. Finally, there is an urgent need for a liberalization of government machinery for enforcing education laws and financing. The spate of industrial actions currently going on the growth of education should give serious concern to government and all educators. Education is definitely an essential service, requiring special attention by way of

funding, provision of men and materials and general management. Nigeria will need to reorder her priorities and divest her financial resources from Governance, Defence, Abuja and other white elephant projects and debt servicing to the overall development of education.

**Recommendations:** For the country Nigeria to achieve equalization of educational opportunities by the year 2020 and beyond, the following recommendations are made;

- Equal access to education implies that equal educational opportunities can only be obtained if we have a complete state system of schools and education is free and universal.
- The country must ensure that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equal access to appropriate life-long and life-skills programmes.
- Elimination of gender disparities in primary education by ensuring full and equal access and achievement in basic education of good quality.
- There should be improvement in all aspects of quality education and ensuring academic and moral excellence at all levels of education.
- Availability of facilities and other necessary resources. All these issues have a long term implication for entrenchment of equalization of educational opportunities and quality education in Nigeria by the year 2020 and beyond.

### CONCLUSION

It has been pointed out that the inequalities which have been identified are an integral part of existential life. The extent to which to expect equal distribution of the various elements of education has also been pointed out. Knowing how slow the process of change in education and in human beings normally is, may be, what Nigeria would need to do is to double present efforts. Equalization of educational opportunities implies the provision of free, universal education, a common curriculum for all children irrespective of background and a common school system. Otherwise, education for all Nigerians by the 21st century may just be a mirage.

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