

## Review

# Culture and Sex Imbalance in Higher Education in Nigeria: Implications for Development

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**Sex imbalance is a common phenomenon in African education institution. Concern has been expressed on the natural gender role distinction all over the world, which has created gap in opportunities between men and women. This identified gap has constituted what is generally regarded as gender inequality among gender advocates. While a number of efforts have been under way to rectify gender imbalance, much still remain to be done across the educational sectors. Certain cultural beliefs and factors result to sex imbalance in educational sectors and even limit opportunities thereby hindering development. The consequences of allowing large number of girls or boys outside the formal schooling system at every level especially higher education and job opportunities bring development challenges to both current and future generations. The paper examines sex imbalance in Higher education in Nigeria and discusses the cultural beliefs and biases in Nigeria that promotes sex imbalance in the education sector.**

**Keywords:** Sex imbalance, culture, gender, educational institution, higher education

## INTRODUCTION

Sex imbalance is a common phenomenon in African Education Institution. While a number of efforts have been under way to rectify gender imbalance, much still remain to be done across all educational sectors. There seem to be a natural gender role distinction all over the world, which has created gap in opportunities between men and women. This identified gap has constituted what is generally regarded as gender inequality among gender advocates. According to UNESCO, (1995) the gap between the male and female literacy rates is not just about men and women and the educational opportunities provided for them, but it is also a statement about the society's development, and its capacity and willingness to provide such opportunities. The imbalance is noticeable in gender enrolment at all levels and types of education, as well as across various disciplines and programmes, especially at the tertiary level. Approximately one million students enroll in higher education (National Overview, 2008). ... of the young population is . . . While Nigeria has made steady progress, around 40% of girls remain out of school. How many Nigerian males in tertiary institution attend school. . . Over one quarter of boys do not attend school (UNICEF, 2006). Today, such an existing gender gap between opportunities seems to be narrowing. However, inequalities still persist in certain regions of the

world and more prominent in some sectors, of which education is one.

Despite a general commitment to the principle of non – discrimination as enshrined in section two of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, males and females are not given equal opportunities to advance socially, physically, educationally, politically and economically. Evidences abound that several negative aspects of gender relations, such as gender-based divisions of labour, disparities between males and females access to power and resources, gender biases in rights and entitlements, remain pervasive in Nigeria (National Gender Policy, 2006).

Promoting gender equality is globally accepted as a development strategy for reducing poverty levels among women and men, in group health and living standards and enhancing efficiency of public investment. Attainment of gender equality is seen as a prerequisite for the advancement of sustainable development. The focus of this paper is therefore, to examine sex imbalance in Higher education in Nigeria and discuss some cultural beliefs and biases in Nigeria that could have accounted for sex imbalance in the education sector as well as seek implications to development.

## **Purpose of the paper**

The aim of the paper is to examine sex imbalance in admissions into higher institution, staff strength and course of study in Higher institutions in Nigeria.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The paper is explorative in nature. The discussion is based on review of previous studies on sex imbalance. Based on the state of knowledge, cultural beliefs and biases that promotes sex imbalance was discussed. Data was collected through secondary sources.

### **Analysis of current situation of sex imbalance in higher institutions in Nigeria**

#### **Sex imbalance in Higher Institutions in Nigeria**

Education is widely recognized as the gateway to economic security and opportunity particularly for girls and women, men and boys. According to Clark, and Sedgwick, (2004), approximately 1 million students are enrolled in higher education in Nigeria. Higher education ratio for 18 – 25 years olds (approximately 17 million people): 5%. With regard to sex imbalance in education, literature was lacking on the statistics of girls and boys in higher education. However, studies in gender gap in higher education suggest sex imbalance at every sector of higher education in Nigeria (Olugbile, 2010). This could be as a result of expectations, attitudes and biases in communities and families. Economic costs, social traditions, and religious and cultural beliefs limit girls' educational opportunities, while the boys are most times encouraged to attend schooling. The consequence of having large number of girls outside formal schooling system brings developmental challenges to both current and future generations.

The gender imbalance in higher Education is acute in virtually all African countries and in most disciplines. The goal of the National Gender policy is to build a just society devoid of discrimination, harness the full potentials of all society group regardless of sex or circumstance, promote the enjoyment of fundamental human rights and protect the health, social, economic and political well being of all citizens in order to achieve equitable rapid economic growth, equitable an evidence based planning and governance system where human, social financial and technological resources are efficiently and effectively deployed for sustainable development (National Gender Policy, 2007).

Despite reported progress, there is still a persistent gap between women and men's access to education. Combating the high rate of illiteracy among women and girls remains an urgent global need. According to

UNESCO institute of statistics, it is now estimated that two thirds of the world's 875 million illiterate adults are women. Over the past 20 years, significant progress has been made with regard to sex/gender disparity in higher education. It is of particular interest that in countries where tertiary education has expanded significantly, women's school enrolment has increased more than men's.

The higher education sector, being a part of society is very much influenced by the existing gender categories and stereotypes of the society. The power division of society between men and women is reflected in academic. Even though the academia perceives itself as progressive part of society which is the key for innovations, the reality looks different. However, in recent times, it seems that the number of women in tertiary education exceeds the number of men in south east. Even though women make a big number of the students population, they are rarely present in the higher circles and leading positions. Those women in higher positions earn less money and are often subject to discrimination. Gender inequality in education has a direct impact on economic growth lowering the average quality of human capital. This appears to be an important factor contributing to African's poor growth performance over the past 30 years (Kang and Mason, 2001). Klassen (1999) identified a strong association between gender inequality in higher education and how it influences human capital.

Today's situation in higher education is far away from an equal participation of women and men in the different stages of the higher education career. Even though women make a big number of the student population, they are rarely present in the higher circles and leading positions. Those women in higher position earn less money and are often subject to discrimination. The distribution of power and financial means is not the same for women and men as well as the personal benefits that result out of the education. This is a direct result of the biased situation in society, which has a lot of benefits reserved for men but also due to the old structures and the atmosphere within the institutions of higher education. Higher education plays a key role in shaping society and building active citizens. A lot of people who will take powerful roles in a society have a background in higher education. This implies that higher institutions should make deliberate efforts to encourage gender equity so as to enhance societal development.

#### **Sex imbalance and Staff Strength in Higher Institutions in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society, where men dominate all spheres of women's lives. Women are in the subordinate position and male children are preferred over the female (World Bank 2005: 6). As in other male

**Table 1:** Showing Academic Staff by Institutions and Sex in Nigerian University, 2007/2008

Institution	Male	Female	Total
UNN	1017(73%)	367(27%)	1384
FUTO	452(83%)	93(17%)	545
ESUT	210(66%)	110(34%)	320
IMSU	314(87%)	47(13%)	361
Ibadan	1091(82%)	243(18%)	1334
Calabar	460(82%)	102(18%)	562
Port Harcourt	416(88%)	57(12%)	473

Source: Personnel Department /units of the universities 2007/2008

dominated societies, the social relations and activities of Nigerian women and men are governed by patriarchal systems of socialization and cultural practices which favour the interests of men above those of women. Consequently, a high percentage of women's employment is restricted to low income-generating activities, concentrated within the lower levels of unregulated, informal sector, which are not adequately represented in positions.

The gap separating men and women in the job market remains wide in many countries, whether in developed or underdeveloped. With marginal variable between many countries like Nigeria, women who have a lower employment rate are unemployed longer, paid less and have less secure jobs. Young women, particularly pay the price of job market flexibility. There is a striking under-representation of women in academic and management posts (Lund, 1998). While women are entering academic as students, they are still concentrated in the care giving and service areas and are a minority in higher education where power is exercised and decisions are taken. They suffer discriminations first for being women and are more likely to be offered low paying or low status job.

Table 1 shows a persistent under-representation of women in the above listed universities in Nigeria. Some of the universities lack gender discrimination and have affirmative action initiative to promote gender mainstreaming. However, there is reluctance to remedy the under-representation of women in higher education through quota programmes. Male staff and students argue that the university environment should remain neutral and should be based on ability. Management is still viewed by many as incompatible with women's lifestyles.

### **Gender and Admission into Higher Institutions in Nigeria**

There do not seem to be problems with gender inequality at the entrance of higher education. In a lot of countries, the number of females slightly exceeds the number of

male students in the first cycle, which still cannot be seen as a reason for neglecting gender inequalities or even thinking that this fact might lead to gender equality. The choice of the subjects is still motivated by gender stereotypes. Usually, a pre-decision is already made in school. When children choose their subjects in secondary education they are influenced by what their teacher, family and friends think. Teachers and their behaviours at school have impacts on them.

According to Agbor (2009), statistics on enrolment of students into Nigeria universities from 2002 – 2007 according to regions or zones in Nigeria established that the South – East zone has more of her young men and women admitted to Nigerian universities than either the South – West or South - South; “quota” system. The South-South has been next to the South – East in the number of university admissions in all the years except 2006 and 2007 when South – West made a nominal gain. Within the South – South, it is interesting to note that Delta State is on top. However, in spite of the fact that Delta and Rivers have more of their young men and women admitted than Kwara and Kogi put together, no numbers will be appropriated from the South-South into South-East, in as much as in the same token, no remnants of Kogi and Kwara states will be consigned into South-West.

It is discernible that in the years from 2003 until 2007, the South – East has continued to lead the South-West in university admissions. Evidence show that there has been steady increase in admissions into universities from the south-south geographical zone of Nigeria between 2000 and 2004. From 12,335 in 2000 it rose to 34,518 in 2004. A variation in the trend was noticed in 2001 when 22,302 candidates were admitted. The males continued to dominate in admission. The dominance was prominent in all the six states with the only exception being in 2002 admission for Akwa-Ibom with 50.2% for females as against 49.8% for males (Agbor, 2009).

Of all the states in the zone, only Delta and Rivers consistently had female enrolment rate of slightly above 40% for a period of five years (2000-2004) (JAMB, 2009). Enrolment of female students in the nations' higher

institution has risen from 7.7 percent in 1960 to over 45% in the 2008/2009 academic session (Olugbile, 2010). Furthermore, more women are enrolling for university education in the country. The number of females has increased from 41.73% in 2001 to 43.09% in 2005 (<http://www.punchontheweb.com>).

According to National university commission (NUC) (2009), the number of females in the university in Nigeria as at 2008/2009 academic session has risen to about 47%, Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (2009) reported that the number of applicants to the nation's university rose from 348,619 in 2008 to 514, 616 in 2009. Statistics obtained from the academic unit of some university in Nigeria in University of Lagos, 11, 713 students in the institution during 1986/87 session, only 3,359 were females. The number of females rose to 17,920 leaving the male with the remaining 20, 909 during the 2008/2009 session.

The situation at the University of Ibadan is also similar. The university has 3,230 females students out of its 8,770 student population in 1986/87 session. In its 2007/2008 academic session had 7, 456 females as against 11, 387 male students. Unconfirmed reports also stated that more than half of the over 30, 000 students at the University of Nigerian Nsukka were females. Findings at the University of Maiduguri, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Kaduna State and the University of Illorin revealed that males were still dominating females in enrolment. Universities in the South east geo-political Zone of the country had almost a 50-50% of male female enrolment figure (Olugbile, 2010).

### ***Gender and Course of Study***

Men and women need to restore a balance in the choice of professions. Although young women are increasingly choosing typically male professions, they remain over-represented in traditionally female jobs such as secretaries, nurses, and are under - represented in job with responsibility and the professions. Some courses related to nursing, language, home economics and teaching have been viewed as feminine. More girls have been traditionally encouraged into them. The boys found in these courses have been seen by teachers as minorities and in some cases treated as such (Onwukwe, 2008). Women are not often found in the science and the technological fields, yet there is no evidence that these fields require special brains not possessed by women. Careers in these fields used to be the preserve of men until some "aggressive" females decided to break the barrier and demand the chance to practice.

The choice of subjects or course in higher education is strongly connected to the sex of the students (Guanawardena et al., 2002). Even though the number of female graduate in mathematics, science and technology has slightly increased during the last few years, mostly,

men enroll in such subjects. In Nigeria, more than 80% of the students in "education" and health and welfare are women (Agbor, 2009). In some countries, the participation of women in this levels decreased by nearly 30%. As a result, women do not have access to higher position in the same manner as men and therefore have less access to money and powerful jobs. The choice of subject discipline should be led by a genuine interest in the field. This is only possible if the future possibilities of women and men within a specific area are equal. These preconditions will be eliminated when neither sex has to explain or justify their own choice of subjects.

### **Cultural and Socio – Cultural Factors that contribute to sex imbalance in higher institutions in Nigeria**

The pride of any society lies in its culture since no society in the world could be considered great without reference to its tradition and culture (Mbakogu 2009, citing Babaghian, 1970). Nigeria is a multi-ethnic country with different cultures among the ethnic groups. The peoples way of life, thoughts and beliefs have in some way promoted positive change, growth and progress in the nation, while in some other way have also hindered progress and growth. Culture is one basic assessment of whether a society is either developing slowly or rapidly. Rapid development of a society is dependent on the quality of human resources which is also determined by the quality of education obtained by them.

However, development is the qualitative and quantitative positive transformation of the lives of a people that does not only enhance their material well – being but also ensures their social well being including the restoration of human dignity (Mbakogu, 2009). The assertion is that development is a warm gradual and considerate process in its attempt to alleviate man's economic and technological standard or conditions without disregarding or disrespecting any aspects of man's existing social, cultural and political values. Any successful development task has its roots in a people's culture.

Disparity in educational opportunities in Nigeria is the result of factors such as socio – cultural, socio-economic, customs and local traditions. Such include:

(a) Quest for money: A social barrier for boys to access education and dropout of school is as a result of quest for money.

(b) Illiteracy among parents in Nigeria: Some parents especially in the rural areas still have not realized the importance of education for girls. They still believe it is waste of resources since the girl will be married into another family. Investments in female education are of particular interest and importance to development because available estimates suggest that the rates of return on investments in female education in terms of economic productivity are at least as high as the rates on

investments in male education. There are positive effects of women 's education on non-market factors related to human resource development in terms of health, nutrition, and children's education and population growth, reductions in fertility and infant and child mortality (Behrman, 2003). There is a widespread perception that better educated women are more able to process information and use goods and services effectively.

(c) Distance of schools from home could make parents feel reluctant in sending their daughters to school. Mothers in particular, tend to express fear of what could happen to their girls on the way to school especially at this time where both the young and old engage in social vices such as kidnapping, rape and ritual killing among other factors. The mothers prefer to keep them at home for safety and for commercial as well as domestic purposes thereby denying them access to school as well as usefulness to the society.

(d) Socio-Political Influences: Education is regarded by Nigerians as the main instrument for social, political and economic development of the nation. Thus, the strength, security and well being of Nigeria rest squarely on the quality of education provided for the citizens. It will continue to be a great asset to many as a steady source of manpower supply for the national economy (onlinenigeria.com).

(e) Opportunity costs: The opportunity costs of parents sending their children to school are the children's time that could have been of economic importance to the family either in terms of income generating activities or in supporting the functioning of the household. As a result, those boys or girls, whichever, are denied access to school.

## CONCLUSION

The paper established that existing literature has emphasised sex imbalance in admissions into higher institution, course of study and in the staff strenght of higher institutions. This result to limiting opportunities thereby hindering development. The paper adds to the limited literature providing the socio cultural factors contributing to sex imbalance in higher institutions in Nigeria. Materialism or quest for money, illiteracy among parents, distance of schools from home, and socio-political influences contribute to disparity in educational opportunities in Nigeria.

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