Original Research   **Open Access**

Women Education and National Unity in Nigeria

Etuk Grace Reuben[*]
Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Calabar, P. M. B. 1115, Calabar, Nigeria

Bassey Ugo Samuel
Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Calabar, P. M. B. 1115, Calabar, Nigeria

Abstract

Nigeria is a perfect example of a plural society, characterized by divergent sociocultural groups. Unfortunately, divergent groups also imply divergent interests. As a result, conflicts have featured prominently in the country, as each group struggles to project its own interests. This makes national unity a pressing need, to guarantee that against popular views, Nigeria will not disintegrate, even in the face of the diversities characterizing it. To achieve unity in Nigeria, several strategies have been adopted, but women education has hardly been given a consideration as a mean to achieving this all important need in the country. Therefore, taking cognizance of women's peculiar roles in society, this paper analyses the need to harness their capacities in such roles via education, to facilitate the achievement unity within the entity called Nigeria.

Keywords: Women; Education; Women education; National unity.

1. Introduction

Women occupy a crucial position in every society. However, for centuries, they remained voiceless, with their potentials largely untapped. In Nigeria, like other African societies, the situation is worsened by the patriarchal structure of this part of the globe.

To build women's capacity and have them lend both their voices and efforts towards the building of society, educating them is paramount. For a country like Nigeria, which is highly plural, educating women will among other things facilitate unity in the midst of the country's diversities.

Considering the fundamental place of unity for the sustenance of the entity called Nigeria, it is necessary to accord women education as much importance as other institutional arrangements on ground for the achievement of national unity. When this is achieved, unity among the divergent groups in Nigeria will take a speedy turn in a positive direction.

2. Conceptual Clarification
2.1. Education

Formal definitions of education have been given by various scholars. Onwuka (1981), considers it as embracing the entire social process by which individuals acquire ways, beliefs, and standards of society. In Mboto (2002) it is defined as a dynamic process of acquiring new skills and values to enable the individual function effectively in the society, while Igbo (2003) conceptualized it as the transmission of knowledge, skills and values, which an individual needs to master his physical and social environment and adapt himself to the remedy of the society which he is a member.

It has been stressed in the National Policy on Education (2004) that education fosters the worth and development of the individual, for each individual's sake and for the general development of society. Education is therefore of peculiar relevance to society, to the extent that the level of progress of a society at any time will be dependent upon the prevailing educational patterns and goals. Similarly, Haralambos and Holborn (2007) stressed that it facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and learning of skills, as well as helps to shape beliefs and moral values.

2.2. Women Education

Considering that education is the process of acquisition of skills and values for better social functioning, women education can be implied to mean the entire process of acquisition of skills and values by women, to facilitate their ability to function effectively in the society. It is the entire process by which women undergo planned programmes of instruction for the purpose of acquiring necessary experiences that would liberate them from ignorance and improve their social worth.

Etuk et al. (2014), drew attention to the fact that the Human Resource Approach to women and development considers women as productive human resources whose contributions are vital for the achievement of development in society. This implies that national unity as a fundamental aspect of development can be greatly facilitated with the contributions and support of women. Unfortunately, as Etuk et al. (2019) observed, women though necessary actors

*Corresponding Author: graycetuk@yahoo.com

in development, yet they are disadvantageously positioned to drive the processes involved. Clearly, one major factor that places women in this disadvantaged position when it comes to participating in any aspect of development including national unity is lack of or limited opportunities for education.

Like most developing countries, Nigeria has at different times placed emphasis on the education of the girl-child in successive educational policies. This became necessary because as noted by the United Nation's Platform for Action and Beijing Declaration of 1996, education is liberating force that will among other things ensure women's upward mobility, as well as facilitate their participation in decision making in society. However, like a number of other African countries, women education in Nigeria is yet to assume a dimension that matches that of other more developed countries around the globe. In the northern part of the country for instance, more than 50% of young women who are between the ages of 15 and 24 have no experience with formal education (Fhi 360, 2012). Also, Etuk *et al.* (2014) citing a United Nations report stated that out of the 10.5 million children who are out of school in Nigeria, % of them are girls in the north.

Several socioeconomic factors usually challenge the chances of women when it comes to getting even the most basic of education in Nigeria, especially in the northern parts. Poverty, early marriage, as well as illiteracy among parents often stand as a barrier to female education. In the Northern part of Nigeria in particular, Islamic extremism typified by activities of the Boko Haram an Islamic militant group seeks to relegate women exclusively to household and as such targets women and girls who attempt to get an education. A typical case is the kidnap of the Chibok girls by Boko Haram militants in 2014.

Mamman (1996), asserts that women education has a powerful social impact because it makes it possible for women to realize their rights, responsibilities and capabilities, as well as how to exercise them. Likewise, Mba (2006) stressed that it will enable women contribute to life, as well as adapt to society. This perhaps explains why there has been a strong global emphasis on women education, as a reliable way of getting women challenge and eliminate their subordination, as well as take their rightful place in society, so as to bridge the gap between them and their male counterparts.

3. National Unity: The Case of Nigeria

National Unity means the existence of harmony, oneness and peaceful coexistence among the components of a nation. In the Nigerian context, it means the peaceful and harmonious coexistence of the various groups that make up the Nigerian nation.

Nigeria is a highly plural society, in that it is made up of a multiplicity of language, religious and political groups. In terms of languages for instance, besides the three major languages, namely; Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo, there are also a host of others like Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, Ejagham, Tiv, Kanuri, Idoma, Bekwara, Urhobo, Itshekiri, Erei, Yakuur, etc. The list is almost endless. Elugbe and Udoh (2006) puts the number of Nigerian languages at about 500. In terms of ethnic groups, Piel (1976) study, identified about 260 of them are scattered all over Nigeria. The actual figure might be more than this because every language group more or less represents an ethnic group. Thus, if research shows that there are as much as 500 language groups, then one can consider the number of ethnic groups in Nigeria to also be that much.

In the area of religion, we have Christianity, Islam and the African Traditional Religion as the major ones, with yet a host of others found across the country. As for political groups, Nigeria has about the largest number of political parties in Africa, with as much as 91 of them duly registered in the last election held in 2019. There are also social groups representing various interests within the country.

To say that the groups in Nigeria can form a book is not an understatement. For a country with such number of groups, all of which represent divergent interests, national unity means the ability of all the groups to exist harmoniously with one another, under the same umbrella called 'Nigeria'. However, this can only be possible if each of the groups accepts decisions with which they disagree, tolerate views different from theirs and is prepared to compromise and ultimately agree on common procedures and action.

4. National Unity: The Need in Nigeria

Conflict is a characteristic feature of any setting characterized by multiplicity of groups especially if practical steps are not taken to ensure unity. Whereas diversities among ethnic groups can highly enrich a society, so that such societies, particularly nation states, will often enjoy the advantage of diversity of contributions coming from the diverse ethnic groups; however, such societies are equally often fragile and susceptible to inter-ethnic clashes and hostilities. Differences in religion, norms, values, beliefs, languages and political ideology can become what Giddens (2006) describes as fault-lines that create antagonism between groups, often leading to outright confrontations and inter-group conflicts. In line with this view, Mboto (2001) stressed that where two culturally and physically distinct groups exist, the problem of who gets what, who is what and who should be who exists. Moreover, as Etuk (2018) citing Schneider (1986) highlighted, the mere existence of two or more groups creates room for belief dissimilarity, ethnocentrism, out group rejection, and consequently prejudice, stereotype and discrimination. Furthermore, groups observed Worchel and Goethals (1991) breed competition and aggressive reaction to perceived threats by other groups; and also as (McGee, 1980) cited in Etuk (2018) noted, groups are characterized by incompatibility of values and struggle for scarce resources and positions. All these often culminate into conflict, if decisive steps are not taken to control the situation.

Considering this threat of conflict that groups pose when they exist side by side, it becomes evident that for a nation like Nigeria, which is characterized by countless disparate language, ethnic, political, social and cultural

groups, to mention but a few, conflict between these groups will be the likely order of everyday life if no practical effort is made to check such. It is not surprising therefore that throughout Nigeria's history, the country has been characterized by countless clashes between Ethnic, religious and political groups. Notable examples that shook the very fabrics of this country include: the Zango-Kataf conflict in Kaduna State (1999-2000); Tiv – Jukun Wukari conflict of 1999-2000, in Taraba State; the Itsekiri - Urhobo Warri crisis of 1999-2000; Yelwa – Shendam conflict of 2003-2005; the Mangu - Bokoss crisis (1988-1999) as well as the Ife-Modakeke conflict of 1999-2000 as well as the Ezillo and Ezza – Ezillo conflict in Ebonyi State which lasted from 1982 to 2012 (Orji *et al.*, 2014). Also major conflicts between Christians and Muslims have been witnessed in places like Kafanchan Kaduna State in 1987, Tafawa Balewa, Bauchi State in 1991, as well as Numan town, Adamawa State in 2004 (Suleiman, 2016). Most notably and still ongoing is the insurgency by the Boko Haram Islamic jihadist sect, whose jihadist activities have lasted since 2008 till date. These clashes have no doubt claimed thousands of lives and property worth billions of Dollars.

Because of conflict or the threat of same, which the existence of divergent groups in Nigeria could cause, the need for national unity becomes a particularly urgent one. If there is no national unity, and instead, crises and conflict continue to abound, development into a 21st society will be a mirage for Nigeria. Even what the country has managed to build for over half a century since its independence might simply collapse. Above all, Nigeria's young and delicate democracy could crash, and the possible result could be a complete disintegration of the country. Therefore, no stone must be left unturned in pursuit of national unity Nigeria.

5. Facilitating National Unity through Women Education

In the case of Nigeria, the ugly experience of the civil war still lingers in the minds of many Nigerians and majority of the populace would not subscribe to a reoccurrence of such an unfortunate incident. Avoiding another incident of that nature can only be possible if in the midst of the country's plurality and diversity, unity is not only preached, but also achieved and sustained. Women education is a major resource for the achievement and sustenance of this much needed national unity in Nigeria. How so?

One of the ways of laying a foundation for national unity is by ensuring the inculcation of morals and values of unity into individuals from childhood. Opoku (1985), stated that morals and values provide human society with a set of ideas about what is good or bad, right or wrong, what is deemed to be good behaviour and what is reprehensible. Similarly, Hughes and Kroehler (2005) pointed out that values in particular provide us with criteria and conceptions by which we evaluate people, objects and events as to their relative worth, merit, beauty or morality. In view of this, if values that deem national unity as desirable are inculcated into children or if children are socialized to evaluate national unity in a positive or acceptable light, then chances are that as adults they will identify with efforts aimed at promoting it. By nature, women bear children. This natural endowment also places them at a vantage point when it comes to nurturing children. This role of nurturing children in turn places them in the position of laying a foundation for national unity in children from childhood through the inculcation of morals and values of national unity. This is particularly so because women's privileged position in child rearing gives them the opportunity of being the ones to inculcate into the children morals and values of patriotism and harmonious coexistence with other people, just the same way such simple issues as toilet habits, respect for elders etc. are inculcated into them.

Because of this unique role of women, compromising with their education would also mean compromising with the very foundation for national unity. Education frees man from ignorance (Haralambos and Heald, 1980). This means that, education will liberate Nigerian women from ignorance and help break the walls of prejudices and stereotypes against out-groups in them. This is particularly important because the Nigerian society is made up of several groups: Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Christians, Muslims, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), All Progressive Alliance (APC) etc. Typically, members of each of these groups hold prejudices and stereotypes, as well as discriminate against members of other groups; a situation which breeds conflicts and constantly threatens the peace and very existence of the nation. Haralambos and Holborn (2007) agreed with this in stating that most modern societies contain within them diverse religious, ethnic and racial groups whose cultures are not only discordant but may be in actual conflict with one another. They added that in such multi-cultural societies, education comes in handy as a means of integrating the members of these different subcultural groups into a common culture of shared values, noting further that through the formal teaching of a common official language, and such other subjects like history, geography, government, literature, and social studies subjects which encourage the development of feelings of patriotism, national unity, loyalty, identity, the schools are able to both build a common sense of nationalism, as well as create a consensus of opinion, beliefs and attitudes among the diverse groupings in these societies especially among the younger generation of school goers. Thus, apart from the fact that an entire population of a society can benefit from this role of education, when women in particular, through education unlearn their own prejudices and stereotypes against out groups, and instead embrace patriotism and harmonious coexistence with out-groups, it becomes easier to transmit same into their children. Moreover, adequate education will not only enhance women's ability to transmit morals and values of unity, also the children themselves will learn faster when their mothers are educated (Mba, 2006). In turn, when these children acquire and grow up with such values, national unity will not be farfetched. Women education can therefore serve to cement together diverse groups within the Nigerian society.

Sensitization and awareness can foster national unity. People cannot embrace harmonious coexistence if they are not even aware of the need for it. However, through sensitization and the creation of awareness, people can become conscious of national unity and the need for it, as well as work towards same. Creation of awareness itself can be facilitated through mobilization (Ogbuigwe, 1996). It is for this reason that the Nigerian government came up with

the idea of the National Orientation Agency, to mobilize and create awareness among Nigerians on issues of national concern.

Over the years, Nigerian women have proven to be good mobilizers. Women like Queen Amina of Zaria and Queen Kambassa of Bonny were able to mobilize their communities against British invasion. The popular Aba women riot of 1949 was as a result of the mobilization ability and effort of women like Mrs. Margaret Ekpo. Also, it is on record that late Dora Akunyili was able to excellently raise awareness across Nigeria on the problem of fake drugs. Even in our rural communities and markets today, we find that women easily mobilize other women, youths and children against social ills. Because women are good mobilizers, there is therefore need to expose them to proper and formal education, to enhance their abilities in this regard. When this is done, they can be recruited to form part of the nation's mobilization framework, for the purpose of the creating awareness and sensitizing Nigerians on the need to embrace national unity.

In Nigeria, women make up a good proportion of the overall population. Yet, as Mba (2006) reports, Nigeria is still a male dominated society, with women being marginalized in many issues. The marginalization of women is a big threat to national unity in Nigeria. This is because in any setting where there is marginalization, conflict will continue until such inequity and injustice, which marginalization depicts is dealt with.

Mboto (2001), notes that lack of justice and equity are among the causes of conflict in Nigeria. However, to ensure harmonious coexistence, members of some groups should not be marginalized when it comes to the distribution of social benefits which are made available for members of other groups.

Massive education of women is one major way out of the inequity and marginalization they have faced in Nigeria, which is a patriarchal society. The United Nations Beijing declaration of 1996 pointed out clearly that education is an essential tool for the goals of equity and peace. Education will pave way for women to be empowered, by equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills they will require to man the positions due them in the society. When women are empowered, the question of inequity, inequality, and marginalization will be eliminated. And unity itself can only exist in the true sense of it when no group is marginalized or deprived of its due.

Accepting to marry men from other groups outside theirs is another way women can function to bring harmony among the disparate groups in Nigeria, and thereby promote the nation's unity. But how can women come to accept marrying men outside their own social, religious, ethnic and language groups if they are prejudiced against or ignorant about other groups? Exposing women to adequate education is the way out here. Education sensitizes and conscientizes people, as well as contributes towards disentangling them from the shackles of myopism (Agbor, 1999). This assertion by Agbor (1999) implies that education will broaden women's view of people outside their own groups, thereby making it easy to accept men from out-groups who ask for their hands in marriage. Moreover, exposure to education will increase their opportunity of close contact with people of other groups. The compulsory National Youth Service Scheme which follows after tertiary education in Nigeria will further broaden such opportunities and contacts. Contact in turn helps to dispel stereotypes, misconceptions and prejudices against other groups (Schneider, 1986). When women have their misconceptions, wrong judgments and stereotypes against people outside their own religious, ethnic, language and social groups dispelled via contact provided by education, it will be easy for them to accept marrying men from such out-groups. Considering that marriage in Africa and indeed Nigeria is a group affair, such marriages involving women and men of different groups will strengthen ties between the groups involved. This will in turn break group boundaries and rather create room for harmonious coexistence between such groups, which is what national unity is all about. In fact, it is not uncommon in Nigeria to find people of a particular ethnic group referring to people of another ethnic group as their in-laws, even they are total strangers to each other. But such a relationship is acknowledged simply because there is a marriage between two individuals from the two ethnic groups.

Lastly, educated Nigerian women today are increasingly forming associations whose membership cuts across the entire country (Mba, 2006). Thus, there are such women groups as National Association of Women Journalist (NAWOJ), Women In Nigeria (WIN), Police Officer's Wives Association (POWA), Naval Officers Wives Association (NOWA), Women Entrepreneurs Association of Nigeria (WEAN), as well as Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) and many others. These associations have afforded women across the nation to work together for common goals. Obviously, these associations became possible because those involved are educated. Hardly are such associations having members from across the country found among the illiterate and mostly rural women. Education will therefore polish up women, making it possible for them to come together in unity under such association. When unity is achieved at this level, definitely, their roles as wives and mothers will position them to carry their husbands and children along these same lines of unity.

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the achievement of national unity is a function of number of practicable strategies. This paper has however opened up a new dimension regarding how national unity can be achieved, which is by adequately engaging women in the area of education. Education will equip women with relevant knowledge and skills, as well as harness their natural endowments. Therefore, among other resources that are being utilized for the purpose of achieving national unity, women education must be included as a veritable resource in that regard. As such, government must step up its efforts at ensuring massive education for women. Specifically, government should modify the content of the National Policy on Education to create an enabling environment for Nigerian women to be massively and adequately educated. When this is done, then the stage would have been set to take Nigeria to the next positive level in the direction of making national unity an absolute reality in Nigeria.

References

Agbor, U. I. (1999). *Ethnic pluralism and national identity in Nigeria. In ozumba, g. O. Eteng, o. N.,and okom, m. (eds.). .* Citizenship Education. Aba: Vitalis Books: Nigeria. 170-84.

Elugbe, B. and Udoh, I. I. L., 2006. "Documenting endangered Ngerian languages: Challenges and constraints." In *Ihezue, L. and Osuji, O. A. (eds.). Proceedings of the National Workshop on Best Practices to Safeguard Endangered Nigerian Languages. Abuja: UNESCO.* pp. 15-37.

Etuk, G. R. (2018). *Basics of group studies.* Lambert Academic Publishing: Mauritius.

Etuk, G. R., Coker, F. G. and Ogrimah, A. J. (2014). Women's participation in nigeria's industrial development process: Obstacles and options for change. *Journal of Sustainable Development,* 7(6): 168-74.

Etuk, G. R., Bassey, U. S. and Osam, E. (2019). Gendered sociocultural structures and africa's quest for development. *Journal of Sustainable Development,* 12(6): 121–27.

Fhi 360 (2012). Schooling in northern Nigeria: Challenges for girls' education. Available: https://www.epdc.org

Giddens, A. S. (2006). *Sociology cambridge.* Polity Press.

Haralambos, M. and Heald, R. (1980). *Sociology: Themes and perspectives.* University Press: Oxford.

Haralambos, M. and Holborn (2007). *Sociology: Themes and perspectives.* HarperCollins Publishers: London.

Hughes, M. and Kroehler, C. J. (2005). *Sociology: The core.* McGraw Hill College: New York.

Igbo, E. M. (2003). *Basic sociology.* CIDJAP Press: Enugu.

Mamman, M., 1996. "Gender bias: Road block to sustainable development." In *Oruwari, Y. (ed). Women Development and the Nigerian Environment. Ibadan: Vantage Publishers.* pp. 17-23.

Mba, T. (2006). *Issues and trends in Nigerian education.* Pearl Publishers: Port Harcourt.

Mboto, W. A. (2001). *Intergroup relations.* Clear Lines Publications: Calabar.

Mboto, W. A. (2002). *Readings in sociology of education.* Clear Lines Publications: Calabar.

National Policy on Education (2004). *Federal republic of Nigeria.* 4th edn N.E.R.D.C. Press.

Ogbuigwe, A. E. (1996). *Sustainable development in Nigeria: The role of women. In oruwari, y. (ed.). Women development and the Nigerian environment.* Vantage Publishers: Ibadan. 69-74.

Onwuka, U., 1981. "Curriculum: Concept of." In *Onwuka, U. (ed) Curriculum Development in Africa. Onitsha: Africana-FEP.* pp. 10-27.

Opoku, K. A., 1985. "Moral values and development." In *Emeyonu, E. N. et al (eds.) Education. Culture and Development in Africa. New York: The Professors World Peace Academy PWPA.* pp. 65-82.

Orji, R. O., Eme, O. I. and Nwoba, H. A. (2014). Communal conflict in Nigeria: An examination of ezillo and ezza – ezillo conflict of ebonyi state, (1982-2012). *Kuwait Chapter of Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review,* 4(1): 514-26.

Piel, M. (1976). *Nigerian politics: The people view.* Cassell and Company Ltd: London.

Schneider, D. Y. (1986). *Introduction to social psychology.* Harcourt and Brace: New York.

Suleiman, K. O. (2016). Religious violence in contemporary nigeria: Implication and options for peace and stability order. *Journal For Study of Religion,* 29(1): 85-103.

Worchel, S. C. and Goethals, G. R. (1991). *Understanding social psychology.* Brooks and Cole Publishers: California.