

Perceived Influence of Empowerment Strategy on Inequalities Affecting Women's Participation in Paid Work in University of Maiduguri, Northeast Nigeria

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Abstract

This study assessed perceived influence of empowerment strategy on inequalities affecting women's participation in paid work in University of Maiduguri Northeast, Nigeria. The study was concerned with inequalities affecting women's participation, the causes and effects on women working in UNIMAID. This paper particularly assessed the empowerment strategy to eliminate those inequalities prevailing in the university and affecting the women. The study adopted qualitative method (design) of data collection and analysis. Twenty (20) participants were randomly selected and engaged in two sessions of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Primary data collected using semi structured question guide were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that high ranked inequalities affecting women's participation in paid work, include stereotypes questioning women's authority, lack of female representation in topmost leadership positions, and exclusion from key decision-making processes in the University of Maiduguri. Main factors influencing prevailing inequalities were found to include cultural bias and religious factors, early marriage tolerance, and non-recognition of women's rights. The study also revealed that education as an empowerment strategy have strong potential to influence women's participation in paid work. The study recommends government, public and parent's support for equal educational opportunities for male and female gender. It also recommends mass education in social institutions, government organizations, and communities, on dangers of gender issues as well as their link to survival, protection, development, and participation rights of all Nigerians.

Keywords: Empowerment, gender, inequality, women participation

Introduction

Inequality is an endemic social problem that cuts across nations, communities, class, location, and gender. It is a state of unfair difference, uneven distribution of resources, infrastructure, or opportunities. It can affect the status, power, or wealth of an individual, class, or nation (Afolabi, 2022). Prior to 1970s governments of nations were more

concerned about inequality conditions between the developed and the developing nations (Aimua, 2021). For instance, early modernization theorists recommended developing countries should model their development plans after that of the developed nations (Ritzer 2020, Obianefo, 2022 & Maduka, 2024). In the case of Nigerian, the subsequent governments have for decades been worried about how to become a developed nation like America or United Kingdom (Maduka & Maduka 2024, Maduka,2024). Therefore, the government had since 1942 been adopting periodic development plans and programmes to achieve development needs of the populace. On the contrary, inequality issues between males and females in countries like Nigeria received less development attention. Although there was women's revolt against unfair public policy known as Aba women's riot of 1929 in Nigeria; but adopting policy to deal with bias and inequalities between male and females attracted little attention.

However, it was in 1970s that a western Feminist writer Esther Boserup brought to the global space, inequality concerning non-recognition and non-participation of Women in development (Bradshaw et al 2022). According to Boserup (1970), development processes prior to 1970s focused attention on males and excluded females in the 3rd world countries Nigeria inclusive. Consequently, since the 1970s there has been increasing attention being drawn to problem exclusion of women from development processes. In 1979 there was world Convention on discriminatory practices posing barriers to women's participation and benefit in different social institutions including education and economy. In 1980s world conference on women identified the importance of promoting women education as part way to "bringing women" into development processes of nations. Women's access and participation in formal education was viewed as tool of empowerment. Women have been dis-empowered by the society through discriminatory traditional practices, to challenge their situation and negotiate for change (Kudo, 2022)

In 1990s there was a dramatic shift in approach regarding the agitation to promote women's participation in development processes (Fapohunda, 2022). Much later, attention was shifted from focusing only on women to solve problem affecting them to focusing on gender. The concept of gender in this paper is perceived beyond the grammatical meaning of gender to imply male and female. Gender in this regard consider roles, issues of

differential access to resources, participation and benefits in programmes and projects between males and females. The problem of gender inequality draws particular attention.

Statement of the Problem

Gender inequality is an unequal treatment or experience, the disparity between males and females in access to resources like education or participation in opportunity like paid employment (Anyalebechi, 2016).

Since the 20th century, global attention on gender issues affecting women and girls continued to grow. This is due to the increasing recognition that women make up half of country's population and they occupy centre place in families and nations. In addition, development experts observed that women are vital human resource that need to be developed educationally as input to achieve increased productivity of nations. Unfortunately, World bank 2015 reported that every day, girls face barriers to education, caused by poverty, cultural norms and practices, poor infrastructure, violence, and fragility.

Therefore, continued discrimination and exclusion of women from development processes is considered a huge waste of human resource and a loss to the nation. This paper is concerned primarily on eliminating inequalities affecting female staff of UNIMAID, through educationally empowered tool as change strategy. The study articulated the participant's shared inequality experiences and causes. In addition, it assessed the influence of empowerment strategy towards curbing inequalities females experience in the university. The component of empowerment strategy focused on this paper is formal educational qualification. Education is the 3rd and centre of the five levels of empowerment framework adopted in this write up. An individual can be empowered socially and/or economically by being empowered to assume any or all the five levels of empowerment. The levels are welfare, access, conscientization, participation and control levels. The higher the educational attainment, the more the empowerment, and the more the socio-economic status of the individual. Although an individual may access education without becoming empowered to participate effectively to change any disadvantage situation.

Although women empowerment is vital towards women's full participation in achieving high socioeconomic status. Nigeria women like women in most 3rd world countries had

remained low (Obajobi, 2016). Their poor status is unconnected to inequality arising from discriminatory practices in their life cycle. Available literature observed that Prior to 1970s development discourses and processes, focused on men while women were marginalized and, in many cases, excluded from participating in development processes, programmes and projects of nations (Archibong et al, 2018; Bradshaw et al, 2015).

Early development strategies focused on provision of infrastructures to meet people's development needs (Parker, 2015). Emphasis was more on economic activities like use of machines to improve productivities to meet people's needs in society. Therefore, activities and operations were focused on men while excluding women from participation and benefiting from development activities. Women's place was perceived to be at "home" (Alonge ,2016).

From inception of formal education in Nigeria from 1848 women experienced discriminatory practices. Their exclusion from full participation at all levels of education made them unqualified to be employed in better paid jobs. As far back as 1866 Walter the proponent of overcrowded theory observed that gender issue is reason why women are overcrowded in menial jobs and invisible in some technical, professional field of work. These inequality practices have had a parallel effect on their involvement in development processes, programmes and institutions. Rather development processes focused attention on men for many decades at the disadvantage of the females (Parker, 2015).

The disadvantages against females ranges from restrictions from accessing education, participation in development programmes, studying certain courses, and participating in sex stereotyped careers. These restrictions are violation of women's rights, caused by cultural discriminatory practices and belief system in the society (Anyagwu, 2016). For instance, early girl child marriage, patriarchal practice of male preference, female disinheritance, female subordination and subjugation, discriminatory gendered division of labour and religious practices like purdah and female seclusion practices in Nigeria. They are often referred to as harmful traditional practices (HTPs). These discriminatory practices are harmful and pose barrier to women's full integration to participate with males in all development processes. For instance, Nigeria patriarchal system have high tolerance for

male domination and women subordination. In turn, a good number of females submit in obedience to high dependency on men for survival (Aimua, 2021). High dependency on males is linked to society's perception of males as "breadwinners". Yet there are female single mothers who are heads of households, and they play the role of "bread winning" for their household.

It is in recognition of the important roles females play in societies that world development discourses have focused increased attention on strategies to "bring women into development" processes of nations since the 1970s. According to western feminist writer like Esther Boserup, women make up about half of the world's population. In addition, Esther observed that women from the 3rd world countries farm about 70% food crops that sustains some of the nation's population. Hence it is considered a waste of human resource to continue to subordinate women to the home and leave them "outside" the mainstream of the development processes. Hence the adoption of the slogan "Bring them in" meaning to bring the women into the mainstream of development processes of all nations. The 1970s marked the era of emphasis to bring women into development planning and programmes. This was popularly tagged Women in Development (WID) era. Another global step taken in the 1970s was adoption of world Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) that will cause barriers to the focus to "bring women in" development process (CEDAW, 1979).

By 1980, during world development conferences organized to agree on strategies to fully bring women in development, the importance of empowering women with knowledge and skills as tools needed to participate with men in development processes were emphasised. Promoting women's access to and participation at all levels of education was emphasized as the main tools to achieve empowerment of women.

Despite this realization, women were excluded from accessing formal education from its inception in Nigeria in 1848. Excluding women from accessing and participating in education violates their human rights. women's rights and disadvantages them and the country from achieving set goals like the SDGs (2016-2030). According to World bank

(2023). Every day, girls face barrier“s to education caused by poverty, cultural norms and practices, poor infrastructure, violence and fragility”.

No doubt there are discriminatory restriction on women by the society. Like the subordination of women to the home, Purdah System, Male preference in education and female exclusion from leadership and policy making position. Such limitation and disadvantage position of women forces them to enrol into any available “feminine” course of study which affects their availability to work in any field of their choice on graduation.

Some girls marry at the age they are supposed to be in school building skills for work and economic empowerment. Early marriage dis-empowers young girls and make them to depend on males for survival later as adult. This lack of education affects their ability to leaving the individual vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Lack of access to education implies lack of modern technological skill to engage in paid work for advancement. An illiterate remains without competitive skills to work, and earning wages which are necessary to–meet personal and national development needs. Therefore, she remains socially and economically poor and low in status Kudo, 2022).

It is not surprizing that 1980 development experts emphasized importance of empowering women to acquire skills to challenge inequality practices, take control of their life activities and make decisions for themselves and others. Empowerment is a multilevel concept that can impact an individual, group, or society. It is a key idea in individual and nation’s development (Mc Connell, Motley, Liao & McAuliff, 2017). Empowerment entails increased awareness of situations and causes which may or may not be affecting one's situation and life in general. According to Keys et al (2017), empowerment can increase one's control over relevant aspects of one’s life. Through empowerment, one can gain control and foster power. The empowerment strategy was borrowed from the empowerment theory explained in five (5) levels of participation.

Therefore, this present study, investigated the use of gender and development policy to eliminate gender inequalities affecting women’s unhindered participation in development processes. Although the gender perspective approach has been adopted since the 1990s. An assessment study in 2024 measuring or assessing changes since 2021 found out poor

influence to changing discriminatory practices. The study attributed the poor influence on poor implementation.

Based on the findings of this study, it was opined that empowerment is a viable option to eliminate inequalities affecting women's working in Unimaid. This paper therefore recommends empowerment strategy to address women's bias experiences. However, the effectiveness of the educational skills women imbibe through education makes the individual equipped to negotiate better.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to determine the effects of empowerment on women participating in work in the University of Maiduguri, Borno state. It specifically set out to

1. Ascertain inequality practices affecting women's access and participation in paid work in the university of Maiduguri, Borno state.
2. Determine the causes of inequalities affecting women's participation in their work environment in the university of Maiduguri.
3. Assess the effects of educationally empowered women on their level of participation in their workplace.

Literature Review

According to Ayodeji (2020), gender is the socially constructed way of being male or female. Gender expresses universal inequality between women and men (Kimbel, 2000).

Gender inequality in education leads to unequal distribution of wealth between men and women (Aina and Aremu 2021). Arguably, gender inequality in education lowers females' social development and economic productivity. Females have been observed to be excluded from participating in technical and professional courses which in turn affects inequality and visibility of women in certain fields of work termed men's field of specialty (Gebre, 2020). Practices like early marriage, stereotyped sex roles, religious seclusion practice of Islam and patriarch practice of male preference still affect women's education (Aina & Aremu 2022). According to Aina and Aremu (2021), ladies in Nigeria received less education than males,

and Muslims received significantly less education than Christians. According to the empowerment theory education is a major component of empowerment strategy. Education is the third and center of the five levels of empowerment strategy. No wonder Millenium Development Goal 3 focused on Women Empowerment and gender equality to meet development needs of nations. (MDGs, 2000-2015).

Educational empowerment for women equips her with skills, knowledge and qualifications to engage in paid work. Women engaging in paid work earns her economic independence and improved socioeconomic status. An educated, empowered female like the male is better motivated to work hard to increase productivity there by contribute towards achieving nation's development goals and vice versa. (World Bank, 2015). Ideally, the higher the level of education, the better improved the socioeconomic status of the educated (Onyeke et al 2022).

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on equity and empowerment theories. Equity theory is a theory that adopts a Human right approach. The empowerment theory as propounded by Rappaport in 2019 focuses on the concerns of the powerless group. According to Rappaport when talking about empowerment, key considerations are whether the action of an empowered person, community, group or nation meets the needs, choices and rights of the target population. The theory recommends that to fully address the concerns of the powerless group, efforts must be made at different levels. It increases one's self-esteem and efficiency at work. An empowered individual can exercise control over situations affecting him or her. In addition, such individual develops a sense of personal power, and mastery which can increase the capacity to act better than when one feels powerless. Infact when one is empowered, he or she is equipped to challenge unacceptable situation affecting others.

Method

The study area was University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri, Nigeria. The university is located in the Maiduguri metropolitan area in Borno state, northeastern Nigeria. Maiduguri has an estimated population of about 1, 112 449 million (Usman et al, 2021) and the major religion practiced is Islam with Christianity in the minority.

Design

The study adopted qualitative method of data collection. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) as the study instrument. Random Sampling technique was used to select 20 participants who were made up of 10 males and 10 females from the 17 faculties in the University, the administrative department and personnel department.

Instruments of Data Collection

There were four FGD sessions held among the 20 participants with each session comprising of 5 members of the same gender each. The data collected was transcribed and analysed thematically in line with the study objectives.

Results

Respondent's opinions on inequality practices affecting women's participation strategy on inequalities affecting women's participation in paid work in university of Maiduguri, northeast Nigeria.

FGD participants reported that top ranking inequalities experienced by women in participation in paid work include stereotypes that question their competence or authority in their field, excluded from key decision-making processes within their institutions, pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, affecting their professional identity and opportunities, unequal regard compared to their male counterparts and sexual harassment, lack of representation in leadership positions and important committees, biased employment, lower salaries than their male counterparts for the same qualifications and experience, barriers to promotion, with fewer opportunities to advance to senior positions.

One of the FGD participants responded as follows:

"If there is an appointment in this university now, maybe vacancy as a member of a board, I know that if a woman is there she will want to show off and everyone to know that there is a woman in the group or 'ohoo' that women are strict at work and by so doing I know she will be affecting people's promotion and happiness at work negatively, I will not vote for a female. I will rather vote for a man who I know that if there is a problem the person will understand. Women like to show off when they are at work and by so doing fail to carry everybody along. That still affects their performance since she will not be demonstrating good leadership qualities. The same

woman that is crying for employment, when government grants them the power now they will forget others” (Male University Staff, July 2023).

Another participant corroborated that unfair distribution of responsibilities affected women’s ability to participate and had this to say,

“You know this role sharing starts from birth: the mothers share roles leaving the whole work for the girls while the boys go to play football, and some keep reading while the girls are working in the house. You know when the girls have worked all day how they will be able to meet up. We also need to change our orientation with the way we bring up our children” (Ministry of Women Affairs Director, July 2023).

Another FGD participant identified one of the effects of inequalities thus:

“Men have higher promotion rates as they have more time to give to their jobs while women do not even have the opportunity” (Female University staff, 2024).

Causes of inequality practices affecting women’s participation at work in University of Maiduguri, northeast Nigeria

FGD participants stated that top ranking causes of inequalities affecting women’s participation in higher educational institutions include non-recognition of women’s rights, religious restrictions, early marriage, belief that educated women will not respect their husbands, poverty, cultural practices, male preference, gender roles and workload at home preventing women from working as well as the belief that women who work will be exposed to male sexual advances.

A FGD participant who is a Head of Department had this to say:

“You know in some cases the girls are forced to withdraw because of marriage. In my course last year out of the 11 females, 2 withdrew at the same time. I tried to follow them up and it took some time but one of the girls told me that she was given out in marriage for the purpose of using her money to educate her brother. Here people get married as early as 10-12 years. That is the tradition” (Male University staff, July 2024)

Another participant responded thus:

“Some men think that once a woman is educated, she becomes disobedient to her husband, and she will not be home when the man wants her. Some men do not consider women as human being with rights who can help them. Some women also don’t know anything, they don’t know what they can offer” (Female University staff, July 2024)

The results provide information on barriers affecting females accessing and participating in work. There are prevailing inequalities prevailing in the work place affecting women's participation. Participant's opinion indicates that the causes are deeply rooted in traditional and patriarchal beliefs and practices in society. Practices rooted in culture and religious beliefs and practices take time to become internalized. Once one imbibes such practices there is usually resistance to change and the issues becomes challenging to address. Therefore it is not surprising that Nigeria women's efforts like pushing government to adopt policies and programmes such as the National policy on women (2000), the National Gender Policy 2006 reviewed in 2021, women and girls are still experiencing discriminatory practices.

Examining other measures such as education as component of empowerment strategy becomes imperative to achieve women and national development goals.

Effects of empowerment Strategy on inequalities affecting women's participation in work in university of Maiduguri, northeast Nigeria.

The participants underscored the importance of educational awareness campaigns, particularly targeting rural communities stating that the rural people lacked education. According to a FGD participant,

"Yesoo, education power. Without going to school, you can't do much. You can't get any where. You see our here now we live in this town, but go to our villages, you see all women and their children living there. This is because, these days men including the young boys, have all gone to cities in search of money. The women don't have money, yet because they did not go to school like the men they can't leave village. Yes, what will they be doing there? Therefore, when the men leave the village in search of work and money in the cities, the women remain in the village managing life. Assuming they went to school like the men, they will move. Even though some the husbands may say no because of the children.

Yet another participant interrupted the one talking and contributed thus:

I agree, it is true, without education, you can't go far in life. This is the main problem women have. Even Nigeria, illiteracy is too much. Especially in this place. It is even better now. You

know since this present education policy, not only that government made it compulsory for boys and girls to go to school, but there is punishment if parents withdraw girls from school to marry her out. Some parents are still doing it but it is not like before.

Again, another participant contributed thus:

It is true, Government is trying to force parents to leave their girls to finish school before marrying, but it is not all parents. Many parents know the importance of education for boys and girls now. You know before, it is the boys that are sent to school now a lot of parents send both boys and girls. Things have changed a lot. You know before these are problems this place face. Now even government is making sure the girls who go to school in Islamic schools, the curriculum includes subjects done in government schools and the law is against not sending girls to school. You can see changes now. Even there is adult education for those who could not go to school when they were young. I think government is trying but they can try more.

Yet another FGD participant said:

“Women still lag men and part of the reason is that our mothers were not educated. Women did not start going to school on time like the men” (Male University staff, 2024).

Discussion of Findings

The study identified different inequality practices that significantly impact women's participation in tertiary educational institutions. Stereotyping, exclusion from decision-making, and underrepresentation in leadership roles are the most prevalent issues. These findings suggest that gender biases are deeply entrenched in institutional cultures, affecting women's professional identities, influence, and opportunities. The participants also opined that high incidence of sexual harassment further contributes to the hostile work environment faced by women. This not only impacts their participation but also their overall well-being. The study also highlights the additional burden women bear in balancing family responsibilities with professional aspirations, which is compounded by biases in recruitment and promotion when compared to their male counterparts. These practices collectively create systemic barriers that limit women's full participation and advancement in higher education.

The causes of inequalities identified in the study are deeply rooted in cultural, social, and economic factors. The belief that working women disrespect their husbands, reported by many FGD participant reflects the strong cultural norms that discourage women from pursuing careers. This is further exacerbated by the non-recognition of women's rights, early marriage practices and male preference. These findings highlight a societal context where traditional gender roles are strictly enforced, limiting women's opportunities for professional growth. Economic factors, such as poverty and financial dependence on male partners, also play a significant role in perpetuating gender inequalities. The study reveals that cultural and religious practices further restrict women's participation, reinforcing traditional roles and limiting their access to leadership and decision-making positions.

The link between educational inequalities and broader social and economic consequences is also highlighted, with majority of participants indicating that without access to higher education, women are less likely to escape poverty. This reflects the interconnectedness of educational access and economic empowerment.

The research further identifies how inequalities limit women's opportunities for personal and professional growth, with of participants noting that these barriers restrict women's ability to develop their skills and intellectual capacities fully.

The economic implications of these inequalities are further emphasized by the finding that women with less access to higher education are often confined to low-paying and informal jobs, limiting their career opportunities and financial independence.

Conclusion

Generally, participation in paid work required specialized skills and knowledge to work and earn increased wages. The more the educational attainment the more the social and economic status of the beneficiary. To work in a university required skilled, semi-skilled and unprofessional skill. To teach especially in higher educational institutions requires greater academic requirement. Unfortunately, Females were excluded from access to education from inception of western education in countries including Nigeria. There have been efforts to promote women access and participation in education. This study investigated the improvement in empowering women educationally in UNIMAID in the northern part of Nigeria. Women were found to experience more challenges in accessing education than their male counterparts due to various socio-cultural, economic and religious reasons.

Disadvantage position educationally affects ability to participate in all careers freely like the male counterpart. In addition, participation in formal employment sector is also affected by factors including education, environment, social-cultural factors etc. According to World Bank report it states thus:

Women's ability to be gainfully employed leaves them in economically and socially disadvantaged status in the society. A key instrument to changing the experience of women in participation in paid work in developing regions like Northern Nigeria is empowerment strategies like girl child education and policies against early child marriage and girl-child withdrawal from schools at all levels.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made

1. Provision of equal education opportunities would lead to greater participation and integration of women into development mainstream processes.
2. Elimination of all discriminatory practices against women especially seclusion practices, early girl child marriage, patriarchal practice of male preference, female subordination, and subjugation.

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