

## The Struggle for Gender Equality in Education: Insights from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

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### Abstract

*Despite the growing momentum for gender equality in the world, we still observe that this plight is yet to receive proper attention in certain places and areas of life. In societies that are still predominantly patriarchal, the education of women is undermined. This attitude hinders women from attaining their self-development, fulfillment, and ability to harness their innate potentials to meaningfully and maximally impact their environment. However, there is no justification to support this stereotype that has hindered the educational development of women because under the same conditions, women have demonstrated similar intellectual capacities as men. This becomes evident when one considers the contribution of women to education in the course of history. Considering these facts, Paulo Freire insightfully designates education as a political tool that cannot be neutral—it can either be used to oppress or liberate. According to Freire, the education of women is one of the important ingredients of initiating liberation in a society that has been oppressed. To achieve equal access to education, Freire suggests strategic processes that involve dialogue, revolution, political action, and social organization. Thinking along the liberationist philosophy of Paulo Freire, this paper looks into the undermining of women education, their contribution and potentials if given equal opportunities for education, and the effect that equal educational opportunities for women will bear on the well-being of families and national development.*

*Keywords:* education, development, women, Paulo Freire, gender equality

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## **Introduction**

High levels of illiteracy and lack of proper education has been one of the major setbacks of underdeveloped and developing countries. For some, the only crime they committed that hindered their education and rendered them illiterates was because they were born as a female. While education remains a fundamental human right, gender inequality in education has hindered millions of women and girls over the world from maximally harnessing their innate potentials. As a result, many women are unable to enjoy personal fulfillment and contribute meaningfully to national development. This paper will investigate into the nature and extent of the suppression of female education, the reasons for this gender marginalization, the contributions and potentials of women towards the development of the human society if given equal chances be educated and to educate; and insights from Paulo Freire on how to engender equal access to education.

## **The Suppression of Women Education**

It was recorded by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) that women embody about two-thirds of the world's illiterates (2010). Another release by UNESCO (2014) revealed the following shocking statistics:

- Girls are more likely to never have the opportunity of accessing primary education than boys; fewer than 40% of the nations in the world allow for some relative gender equality in education.
- About 54 million of 76 million uneducated young women are domiciled in 9 countries.
- Despite International and national efforts, about half of the children who are out of school are girls.
- In over 20 years, the percentage of illiterate women has not changed; with women constituting about two-thirds of the world's 800 million illiterate adults; and women.

- Among the world's over 120 million uneducated youths, about 75 million are women.
- In over 12 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, female literacy rate is below 50%, and in several severe cases, below 20%.

In Nigeria for example, it has been observed that the literacy level of boys is higher than that of girls. According to UNESCO reports, the statistics of male literacy in Nigeria reads 71.26% while that of the females reads 52.66%; revealing a big difference between both genders (Country Economy, 2018). Another report shows that in urban areas of Nigeria, the percentage of literate men is 86.4% while that of women is 74%. While in the rural areas, the percentage of literate men is 59.5% while that of women is 35.4% (Varrella, 2020). Looking at these figures, the gap is rather unfair and reveals the depth of gender inequality in the area of education that has eaten into the fabrics of the nation.

### Reasons for Undermining Women Education

There are several interrelated reasons responsible for the inequality in the education of women today. According to Ojobo (2008), some of these reasons include:

- **Economic barriers:** In an instance where the family is facing some economic challenges, most families prefer training the boys rather than the girls since they believe the girls will sooner or later get married into another family, leaving only the men to take care of their parents.
- **Male machismo:** This expresses a rather malicious consideration of the females by certain males as inferior beings. As such, they feel it is a waste to educate their wives or daughters since they are only suitable for the kitchen and for making babies. Some men even consider marrying an educated woman as a threat to their assertive ego and so would rather marry an illiterate.
- **Religious challenges:** In the world today, the three major

Abrahamic religions- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe that God has put men in a place of leadership and authority over women. However, while the true definition of this leadership is for service and partnership with an equal, many have twisted the idea to mean one of domination and suppression.

- Traditional and cultural constraints: in some cultures and traditions, the major role of women is to grow up to get married, become devoted housewives, and bear children. As such, the education of women is an extravagance that many families consider unnecessary.
- Stereotypes regarding women and unequal job opportunities: in some countries, women are considered as second-class citizens. As such, men are always better placed than women in terms of employment opportunities. As a result of this, many families now believe it is better to pay more attention to the educational development of boys than girls since the women are less likely to get jobs eventually.
- Early marriages: in some societies, girls are given to marriages at the early ages of even twelve and thirteen. In most instances, this results in serious health complications and other social deprivations such as their education.

### **Contribution of Women to Education and Development**

In order to buttress the need to undo gender inequality in terms of education, it is necessary consider the contribution of women who broke the jinx of societal limitations in the field of education and national development. These evidences are proofs that women can do just as good as their male counterpart, if not better, in any area of life. Hence women should be allowed equal opportunities in the society. Experience and research findings reveal that women have contributed to education and development in the areas of the advancement of viable philosophies of education; in academic scholarship to drive educational sustainability;

as efficient educators both formally and informally; towards quality and standard education; and in good leadership and management.

### **Contributions of Women through Advancing Scholarship and Philosophies of Education**

Every educational system or policy that is operative in a place is driven by a particular ideology or philosophy. Overtime, women have made significant contributions towards the development of viable philosophies of education and the corpus of scholarly materials (articles, books, associations, etc.) that has formed the driving force behind educational polices for some nations. But before discussing the contributions of women to education properly, let us consider a word or two about what a philosophy of education means.

According to Hirst and Peters (1980):

Philosophy of education... is simply the application of philosophical tools to educational problems such as educational imbalance, unequal educational opportunities, depletion of quantitative and qualitative education, inefficient curriculum and failure in achieving set goals, aims and objectives of education (Quoted in Iorvaa & James, 2009, p. 25).

Considering the importance of a good philosophy of education, and a lack of it, particularly in Nigeria, Fadahunsi bemoans that “not until Nigeria has fashioned for herself a stable and sound ideology, which other sectors of National life will be patterned after, the future probability of sustainable educational development in Nigeria might be dwindled” (Akpochafo, 2002).

Maria Montessori is reputed for her courage in defying the gender limitations of her time that only gave room for male ideologies to flourish by coming up with a unique theory of education. Her ideology of education was one that was child-centered, paying particular attention to handicapped children. This unique legacy which represented her novel contribution to the world is captured in the philosophy that:

In order to educate, it is essential to know those who are to be educated. If education is to profoundly touch the heart and mind of a child, he/she must be involved in continuous learning; not because he/she is interested in merely earning the highest grade; but simply because he/she is simply curious and interested in learning (In Uzomah & Isanbor, 2017, p. 276).

Montessori's fundamental concern was the natural development of children. Thus, she recommended that education ought to be completely free for children. She saw freedom as the single most important factor in allowing children to develop as spontaneous and creative individuals. Hence, she saw the role of education as providing environments in which children could be free to follow their natural impulses to become the wonderful and dynamic natural learners they were designed to be (Uzomah & Isanbor, 2017).

Another woman contributor to education in this regard is Malala Yousafzai, a renowned social activist. Malala broke the jinx of Pakistani extremism and violence by daring to go to school. In turn, she came to represent a global symbol signifying the importance of educating girls. Because of her heroic agitation for women education in word and deed, she earned the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2014. She interestingly remarked that, "I don't want to be thought of as the 'girl who was shot by the Taliban' but the 'girl who fought for education... This is the cause to which I want to devote my life'" (GPE Secretariat, 2015). She is the founder of the Malala Fund, which promotes intercontinental, national, local policies, and systems that give girls opportunities to high quality education.

Worthy of mention is the contribution of Michelle Obama, former First Lady of the United States, to the development of girl education. In 2015, she organized a campaign themed, "Let Girls Learn," to encourage and support the education of girls in communities across the globe. This involved about 7000 Peace Corps volunteers who were committed to supporting girls to go to school and remain in school. According to Michelle Obama, "Girls are our change-makers - our future doctors and

teachers and entrepreneurs... They're our dreamers and our visionaries who could change the world as we know it" (GPE Secretariat, 2015).

Similarly, Emma Watson- a Hollywood actress, who doubles as a Goodwill Ambassador for UN Women, became dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. In her *HeForShe* advocacy, she sought to encourage boys and men to join in the fight to remove cultural and social barriers hindering the full participation of girls and women in the life of the society. She is noted to have said at the UN women event in September of 2014 that, "We don't often talk about men being imprisoned by gender stereotypes but I can see that they are and that when they are free, things will change for women as a natural consequence." She hilariously noted, "Hey guys, if you want to give the best Christmas present ever - sponsor a girl so she can get an education" (GPE Secretariat, 2015).

Simone Weil was consistent in her works in drawing attention to the manifold instrumentality of education in engendering women integration into the active life of the society. According to her, education not only prepares women to be able to solve their personal existential challenges with greater ease, but also puts them in a better position to contribute meaningfully in their immediate communities and society at large (Ann & Maughn, 2020).

### **The Contributions of Women as Efficient Educators both Informally and Formally**

Considering the intricate connection between mothers and their children and the fact that the first educators of children are mothers, it is in the best interest of the society to ensure the literacy of women (who are all potential mothers), since these children will grow up to be the leaders of tomorrow (Anka, 2006).

It has also been observed that most male teachers have backed out of primary and secondary schools because of the poor remuneration, while most female teachers have remained. In such instances where most of these women are largely uneducated or poorly educated, their influence

will mirror in the educational capacity of the children. Hence, the need for proper training of women because in most instances where men cannot endure the stress or poor remuneration, they have that enduring capacity to remain in the system so that their children- by extension can have access to quality education. Besides, women excel better than men in elementary education because sustaining the attention of children require a great deal of patience and creativity which most men find laborious and unattractive. Yunita Mazia notes, “Female teachers are more active when it comes to bonding with the students. I think maybe it’s our motherly instincts that make us feel more connected to them.” (Cahya, 2020).

The statistics from Imo state in Nigeria reveal that at both the primary and secondary level of education, female teachers are more than male teachers by more than 80%. Thus, in spite of the dwindling in the number of male teachers over time due to poor salaries, the number of female teachers kept increasing. What this reveal is that without this sacrifice on the part of women, Nigeria’s educational system would have crumbled during that time (Ezeh et al., 2014).

In Nigeria, gender inequality in terms of women education tends to be more predominant in the northern parts. The 19th century jihad however led to the institution of the Sokoto Caliphate and produced great scholars that included women. Before this time, scholars such as Boyd (1989) noted that the situation of women was appalling because they were basically confined to enslavement, marriage and concubinage. Bugaje (2015) noted that Shehu became empathetic to the plight of these women who were intentionally left ignorant and regarded as possessions. And so, the jihad saw the emergence of women scholars that became well versed in Islamic sciences and wrote many works. Worthy of note is Nana Asmau whose efforts laid the solid edifice of women education in Northern Nigeria (Kaura, 1990).

Nana Asmau was a teacher to both men and women during the jihad. She influenced and encouraged other women to get enlightened through education. She founded the *Yan Taru* organization in 1830 in order to engender female education. This organization consisted of women from



several communities, and after they became educated, they were charged to go back to their respective communities to educate their fellow women. They were directed by well-informed women known as *jajis*. The effect of the massive education of women led to the production of sound and literate women known as the *Modibbo* (the learned). Asma'u delineated education as women's political space and employed education as an instrument for state-building (Ezeh et al., 2014).

### **Contribution of Women towards the Quality and Standard of Education**

Experience has shown that women have the capacity to provide alternative solutions to challenges that could lead to higher standards, quality, and innovation in education (Ezeh & Chukwudebe, 2006). In times past, Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) was introduced in order to replace individual examinations into Nigerian universities so as to curb situations of duplicate admissions that hindered others from securing a place. However, it was later observed that some of those who came in through JAMB performed poorly and threatened the educational integrity of several tertiary institutions. It took the initiative of Mrs. Chinwe Nora Obaji, who was Minister of Education at the time to bring the process of Post-Jamb examinations in universities to aid the screening of those who were unprepared for higher education (Ezeh et al., 2014).

After Mrs. Obaji, another female minister of education- Mrs. Obiageli Ezekwesili gave remarkable recommendations that aided in improving the quality and standard of education in Nigeria so that Nigerian graduates can compete internationally. One of her notable recommendations prompted the conversion of some polytechnics to degree-awarding institutions in order to meet the needs of Nigeria's teeming youths (Ezeh et al., 2014).

### **Contribution of Women to Leadership and Management in Education**

Experience reveals marked differences in the management and leadership styles of men and women. Research findings reveal that women are apt to be more democratic and interactive when leading in the corporate world

(Ezeh & Chukwudebe, 2006). It was also observed in another research that women are wont to employ “transformational leadership” which entails motivating others by converting their personal self-interest into the objectives of the group. This collaborative style of leadership frequently observed with women is in contrast with the authoritative style of leadership often employed by men. This interactive style of management and leadership creates opportunity for various insights and perspectives (Rosener, 1990).

This was exemplified by Dr. Omanhe Phillipa Idogho, the first female rector of Federal Polytechnic, Auchi, Edo State. She ensured the swift issuance of certificates to those who had graduated for years without their diploma certificates; she ensured swift processing and release of results for students; and efficiently tackled cultism to the barest minimum through frequent seminars on the dangers of cultism and by sending union leaders abroad for security and leadership training (Ezeh et al., 2014).

### **Insights from Paulo Freire: An Intervention**

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian educator and philosopher, highly influential in the field of education. He is renowned for his work on critical pedagogy, which aims to transform the educational process into a means of creating a more equitable and just society. Freire’s approach encourages critical thinking and the questioning of societal norms, particularly those related to oppression. His most famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, explores these themes in depth. Throughout his career, Freire focused on literacy programs designed to empower the poor and marginalized, using education as a tool for social change. His methods have been adopted worldwide, making a significant impact on educational theory and practice (Collins, 1997).

Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been instrumental in shedding light on the political dimension of education. Freire (1970) argues that education cannot remain neutral with respect to the socio-political structures and dynamics of society. According to him, education is a two-edged sword, which can either be used to perpetuate oppression or

as a tool for social change and emancipation (Freire, 1985). In the first instance, education can be used by the oppressor to maintain the status quo and prevent the oppressed from seeking liberation. The oppressor can use education to blind the oppressed to the reality of their situation or paralyze them with fear if they ever try to challenge the status quo. On the other hand, education can also be a tool for liberation and social change. When used in this way, education can empower the oppressed to challenge the status quo, promote social justice, and work towards a more equitable society.

Freire's ideas have significant implications for the delivery of education. It underscores the need for educators to be sensitive to sociopolitical issues in their instruction. Education should not be limited to the transfer of knowledge and skills but should also incorporate an understanding of social structures and dynamics. This way, education can be used as a tool for promoting social justice and empowering individuals to be active citizens in society. Paulo Freire was a renowned advocate for the role of education in promoting social justice and combating oppression, power imbalances, and dominant ideologies. According to Freire, silence in the face of oppression is tantamount to being an accomplice to it. Therefore, it is essential to break the silence and speak out against the marginalization of women in education.

Women's educational marginalization has been a longstanding issue that has far-reaching implications for their social integration and quality of life. Many women are unaware of the dangers of illiteracy and how it can perpetuate gender inequality. Therefore, there is a need for concerted efforts to raise awareness of the importance of education for women's empowerment and the eradication of gender disparity in education. Conferences, organizations, and individual initiatives can play a crucial role in this regard by providing a platform for dialogue and collaboration towards seeking redress. They can help to highlight the malice of gender inequality in education and encourage collective action towards promoting social justice and gender equity (Stromquist, 2014).

Freire's insights on the liberating role of education in promoting

social justice remain relevant today, particularly in the context of women's educational marginalization. Breaking the silence and raising awareness can go a long way in promoting gender equity and empowering women to realize their full potential. Through his literary works, Freire has consistently emphasized the importance of equality and its role in enabling individuals to realize their full potential. One of Freire's most famous quotes is, "Nobody is superior to anyone else" (Freire,1998: 108). This assertion, highlights the need for societies to embrace and practice equality in all aspects of life. According to Freire, true equality can only be achieved when individuals recognize and respect each other's inherent worth and dignity.

In the same vein, Freire (1998) also stresses the crucial role that teachers play in promoting equality. He asserts that effective teaching requires active listening skills and a commitment to cultivating a range of virtues, including generosity, love, respect for others, tolerance, humility, joy, a love of life, openness to new experiences, a willingness to accept change, tenacity in the face of adversity, a refusal of determinism, a spirit of hope, and a commitment to justice. Only by embodying these virtues can teachers create an environment that fosters genuine and attentive listening and allows all students to thrive.

Freire (1998) also notes that accepting and respecting differences is a crucial prerequisite to effectively listening to others. This underscores the need for societies to embrace diversity and practice equality in all areas, including education. In particular, it is essential to ensure that marginalized groups, such as women, are provided with equal opportunities to compete fairly for education and employment opportunities, and to contribute to the greater good of society. Paulo Freire's message of equality remains as relevant today as it was when he first articulated it. His insights into the importance of equality and effective teaching continue to inspire educators and students worldwide, providing a roadmap for creating a more just and equitable society.

In addition, Paulo Freire, proposed an approach to teaching that goes beyond the traditional question-and-answer format. Instead, his

approach involved posing problems to students, which requires them to think critically and come up with solutions. This method is particularly relevant in addressing the issue of women's educational marginalization, especially in African societies where patriarchal structures still hold a significant amount of influence. In these societies, women often face significant barriers to accessing education, including limited resources, gender-based discrimination, and cultural norms that prioritize male education over female education. However, by adopting Freire's approach to teaching, educators can help students develop a deeper understanding of the causes and effects of educational marginalization and encourage them to challenge these norms (Stromquist, 2014).

Through consciousness-raising and critical thinking, students and educators can work together to identify and implement practical solutions to this problem. This may involve advocating for policy changes, providing additional resources to support female education, or challenging gender-based stereotypes and discrimination. Overall, Freire's approach to teaching provides a powerful tool for addressing the issue of women's educational marginalization in African societies and beyond. By empowering students to think critically and question the status quo, educators can help pave the way for a more just and equitable future.

Freire also talked on the drawbacks resulting from racial, class, or gender disparities. He stressed the importance of recognizing the harmful effects of these differences and the need for concerted efforts to eliminate them. He argued that individuals who support such cruel distinctions are not distinct from those who oppress, and it is therefore incumbent upon all members of society to work together to address this issue (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007). Freire believed that those who suffer from these disparities, including women who are denied equal access to education, must take an active role in advocating for change. He contended that it is essential to alter the laws, beliefs, and customs that are responsible for perpetuating these inequalities. This will require a balanced understanding of male and female identities, regardless of any biological, emotional, or physiological differences, to ensure that women have equal opportunities

for education, employment, leadership, and management in all spheres of private and public life.

In his book on empowerment, Freire emphasized that achieving freedom and liberation from oppression entails more than just acquiring literacy. While literacy can help the oppressed understand how they are being oppressed, it is not enough to guarantee their liberation. In addition to literacy, it is necessary to acquire specific tactics and abilities that will enable individuals to participate in political action. These skills and strategies are crucial in ensuring that the oppressed are able to engage in meaningful political action that will guarantee their liberty. Therefore, the acquisition of these skills and strategies is essential in the journey towards true freedom and liberation. In this light, Stromquist (2014) noted that:

Irrespective of whether or not the programme content and processes raise one's awareness of exploitation, literacy perse does not empower students, although it does provide women with a greater sense of self-efficacy, which can be taken as a precursor to empowerment. Women advocating for social change realize the need for specific targets of action, in which the "oppressor" attains a concrete embodiment while intersecting with such factors as social class, ethnicity and religion (among other social markers) (p. 7).

The importance of taking action in situations of oppression cannot be overstated, as emphasized by Freire. According to him, even though enlightenment may be attained, it is not enough to attain liberation from oppression. Both individual and collective action are necessary for this purpose. Freire explained that a mere perception of reality is not enough to transform objective reality. He noted that, "the oppressed must confront reality critically, simultaneously objectifying and acting upon that reality", adding that "a mere perception of reality not followed by this critical intervention will not lead to a transformation of objective reality – precisely because it is not a true perception" (Freire, 1970, p. 37).

The issue of gender parity in education is a complex and multifaceted

topic, and it is heartening to see women taking an active role in addressing it. Women have identified various approaches to achieving gender parity in education, including debate, revolution, political action, and social organization - all of which are core principles of liberty. These methods empower women to voice their concerns and advocate for their rights, as well as to challenge the status quo and effect meaningful change (Staudt, 2002). In addition to these grassroots efforts, women-led non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as a powerful force in advancing the cause of female education. These organizations have a specific focus on breaking down patriarchal barriers to education and promoting gender equality. They work to improve access to education for girls, provide training and resources to teachers and communities, and advocate for policy changes that support girls' education.

One notable example of such an NGO is the Malala Fund, founded by Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai. The Malala Fund works to ensure that every girl has access to 12 years of free, safe, and quality education. The organization invests in local education leaders and advocates for increased public investment in education. Through these efforts, the Malala Fund has helped thousands of girls around the world to access education and achieve their full potential. Overall, the pursuit of gender parity in education requires a multifaceted approach that includes both grassroots activism and institutional change. Women have identified numerous strategies for achieving this goal, and NGOs like the Malala Fund play a critical role in advancing the cause of female education. By working together and supporting one another, we can create a more equitable and just world for all.

## **Conclusion**

From the foregoing discourse, what is eminent is the fact that women have been unjustly marginalized in their access to education due to several reasons as discussed in the body of the text. But when we look at the salient contributions of women to the growth and development of education in all its facets, it becomes clear that the reasons for an unequal access to

education based on gender bias do not hold water because women also have the potential to do just as much, or even better in certain areas, if given equal opportunities. Unfortunately, their efforts seldom come to the limelight, unlike their male counterparts. The recommendation therefore, according to Paulo Freire is that education, dialogue, revolution, political action, and social organization should be employed as an emancipatory tool in order to fight for gender parity so that women can be given equal opportunities to both be educated and to educate.

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