

A Step toward Equality and Inclusion: Viewing Education through a Gender Lens

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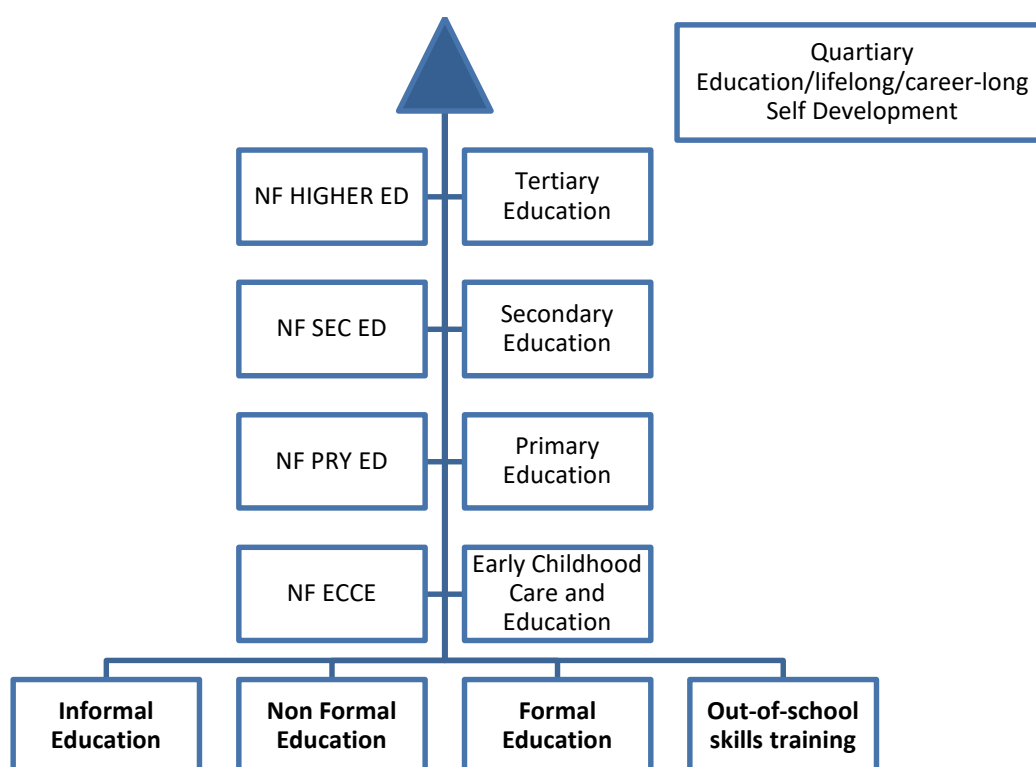
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This discussion begins with a clarification of the concepts in the title and goes on to look at the Gender Challenge in access to Education with specific reference to Nigeria and from the 'meaningful access' angle. Its main import is an attempt to analyse the Gender Challenge in a holistic sense, while its ultimate intention is to seek ways of reinforcing the role of Counselling in addressing the Gender Challenge as a step towards equality and inclusion in Education, and in society.

Concept of Education

Let's attempt to view Education with a clearer lens by considering the concept in its holistic and comprehensive sense, a standpoint I have often described as 'Education with a capital E'. As illustrated in Figure 1, this is a departure from that reductionist view of Education, which simply equates it with schooling. A holistic/comprehensive view acknowledges the fact that, at every stage of life, and in virtually all types of societies, a larger proportion of the population is learning *out-of-school* than *in-school*.

Figure 1: The Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Life-Long and Life-Wide Education



The four routes to learning (incidental, informal, non-formal, and formal) are in real-life circumstances not mutually exclusive. They operate in a mutually supporting form at different phases of life—early childhood, childhood, adolescence, youth and adulthood. Their operation is both lifelong (changing with maturational conditions) and life-wide (acquiring skills required for new responsibilities of different phases of life). Thus, whether in school or out of school, our Education is continuing at primary, secondary, tertiary and most importantly, at quaternary (beyond tertiary) levels.

Concept of Gender

According to the former UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW, 2004):

Gender refers to the array of socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis. Whereas biological sex is determined by genetic and anatomical characteristics, gender is an acquired identity that is learned, changes over time, and varies widely within and across cultures. Gender is relational and refers not simply to women or men but to the relationship between them.

Concept of Gender Equality in Education

With specific reference to Gender in Education, Gender Equality is the goal. However, *Gender Equality* should be distinguished from *gender parity* (equal enrolment of boys and girls) and *gender equity* (comparable education experience for boys and girls). Gender Equality is a concept that goes beyond mere enrolment or physical access to attendance, progression and successful completion, and transition to the next level of Education. It also includes equality of after-school experience and covers all opportunities for self-fulfilment, through opportunities for lifelong learning and the pursuit of careers and other forms of socioeconomic life. See Box 1.

Box 1: Equation for Gender Equality in Education

Enrolment + Attendance + Equitable Educational
Experience + Successful Completion + Equitable Lifelong
Learning Opportunities + Equitable Life Chances

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GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION

A second important point about Gender-in-Education is that it is mainly a female problem, even though a male dimension of the challenge has also manifested in some instances. There are supply and demand factors that determine access to educational opportunities, but those limiting the access of girls and women are weightier. Constellations of socioeconomic, political and institutional, cultural, and school-level obstacles, as outlined in Table 1, influence access to Education in general and hit girls and women harder.

Table 1: Supply-Side and Demand-Side Obstacles to Girls' and Women's Education

Demand	Supply
A. Socioeconomic obstacles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty • High costs (fees, uniforms, transportation, levies) • High opportunity costs/low rates of returns • Girls needed for household/agricultural/petty trading tasks • Residence in remote, sparsely populated areas • Limited employment opportunities for school leavers • Lower employment opportunities and remuneration for women 	C. Political/Institutional obstacles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget constraints • Insufficient public support for the poor • Political instability • Inconsistency in educational policies • Poor quality of educational programmes • Ill-adaptation of educational systems to local learning needs • Lack of clear strategies for women and girls' education
B. Cultural obstacles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents' low level of education • Low priority for girls' education • 'Western' education perceived as incompatible with traditional/cultural beliefs and practices • Early marriages and pregnancies • Sceptical attitudes towards the benefits and outcomes from educating girls 	D. Obstacles at school <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited school/classroom space • High school fees • Low proportion of female teachers • Teachers not sensitised to gender issues • Gender stereotypes in curricula and textbooks • School curricula and school organisation in conflict with traditional culture • Sexual harassment and insecurity • School calendar incompatible with farming cycle • Lack of school canteens or school feeding facilities

Judging by the table, getting to school and learning at school and beyond school is an obstacle course, one scattered with many more obstacles for girls than boys.

Manifestations of Gender One-Sidedness in Education Systems

To discover the gender one-sidedness of our education system, let's look at it through a gender lens from seven different angles, beginning with the horizontal and vertical angles and moving to more complex approaches.

The horizontal angle shows us the effects of a combination of geographical, socioeconomic and cultural factors. From the geographical point of view, wide differences exist in terms

of access to educational opportunities among rural, urban ghetto and smooth urban locations. The more deprived the location, the wider the gender gap to the disadvantage of women and girls. Rural dwellers are more likely to stick to inhibiting aspects of traditional culture and are therefore more likely to harbour ghettos of women and girls with little or no opportunity for education. Deprived locations in rural and urban ghettos may constitute education-no-go areas for females.

Available evidence shows lower participation rates for the female sector of the population using all indices commonly applied in statistics of education: child and adult literacy, enrolment at different levels of formal education, out-of-school children, etc.

The vertical angle makes a case for 'the higher you go, the wider the gender gap'. This manifests itself in the form of a limited number of girls, especially from deprived classes, attaining meaningful access to Education. Meaningful access occurs when the emphasis rises beyond mere physical access. It is a situation in which:

- Enrolment covers virtually the entire catchment population;
- Virtually every child who enrolls in school participates;
- Virtually all who participate progress;
- Virtually all those who progress successfully complete the cycle; and
- Virtually all those who complete the cycle transit to the next cycle.

If there is meaningful access, there is hardly any cohort depreciation. This is a hallmark of education systems that promote equitable access, along with quality and efficiency within an overarching context of a responsive policy environment. In our situation in Nigeria, cohort depreciation is more pronounced among girls. For this reason, we see situations close to gender parity in the early stages of basic education. The gender gap often begins to widen during transition to junior secondary and gets wider still at the senior secondary level.

The cross-sectional angle highlights the preponderance of gender-blind curricula, teaching-learning materials and classroom interaction practices. There are cases of curriculum apartheid that confine girls to soft option disciplines. Many textbooks and other learning materials promote societal expectations of what it means to be a girl or a woman or a boy or a man, do not include many female role models, and leave little room for learners to actively imagine various scenarios for their lives and futures. In addition, many teachers lack experience in designing learning activities informed by feminist pedagogies.

The flip-side angle shows what happens when the gender balance tilts in favour of girls and women, as has become apparent in statistics in parts of south-eastern Nigeria. Boys in south-eastern Nigeria have tended to drop out (even opt out) of school in large numbers after the junior secondary level, thus creating girl-majority senior secondary classes. There is a strong temptation to go out there to trade, make money and become big men in Society. However, this phenomenon of adolescent-boy disaffection with schooling seems

to be prevalent among boys from homes of low socioeconomic status (an issue calling for more in-depth research).

The distorted angle reveals situations in which female gender balance tends to hide the real gender challenges. This is the situation characterised as 'apparent gender balance'. The BOLESWA countries of southern Africa (Botswana-Lesotho-Swaziland) are taunted as having a preponderance of girls in schools, as is the case in parts of south-eastern Nigeria, as already mentioned. This is a mere on-the-surface situation, which hides three other factors worthy of consideration. First, school enrolment data do not consider the proportion of girls in the school-age population. Second, no distinction is been made between school enrolment and school population. Third, societies reporting gender parity in Education are yet to create equal life-advancement opportunities for women. Gender parity has therefore not translated into gender equality.

The blocked tunnel angle is a way of discerning the roadblocks and glass ceilings that the wider society has erected and that constitute barriers to the advancement of women. Imagine, instead of a light at the end of the school tunnel for a girl, a glass wall or a gate or a wall of bricks. This is a situation of poor participation levels of women in high-ranking and decision-making positions in government and the private sector. And even when women are in such positions, their influence is often consciously and unconsciously stifled. The blocked tunnel angle also reveals the preponderance of women as clerks and secretaries, with low representation among executive cadres. Also, a good number of women may work as classroom teachers, but few rise to top education sector management positions. Situations in which a rare woman's ascension to top functions in society is celebrated as 'breaking' news are not usually indicative of gender mainstreaming in Education.



The multiple-crash angle provides insight into the stark reality of when all the obstacles to participation converge on one and the same individual or group of persons. The person or group is often in poor socioeconomic conditions in a rural setting, suffering from prejudice and exclusion for not belonging to mainstream society, and subjected to poor schooling conditions (or is not at all touched by existing education provisions). Deprivation (including denial of educational opportunities) takes a variety of forms and combines with factors other than sex, yet the most hard-hit person or group is usually female.

Pathway toward Equitable and Inclusive Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All

Nigeria must avoid missing the Education for All (EFA) post-2015 train and take appropriate Education-Above-All (EAA) steps to ensure that we join the rest of the world

in moving toward “The Africa We Want” as articulated in Agenda 2063 of the African Union and toward 2030, the target date set by UN member countries for the attainment of equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for both boys and girls, as well as men and women.

Attaining the desired outcome of *gender-responsive education for gender equality in all aspects of national life* requires intentional work at several levels—political, strategic, programme, and tactical.

Political Directions

Human development engineering usually begins and ends with politics, and positive politics is the key to the success of every other type of intervention. In the case of the matter under discussion, what Nigeria badly needs is a national gender-in-development policy. This is a more all-embracing undertaking than a policy on Women. It is an undertaking that should follow a policy development process, in contradistinction from the prevailing practice of policy imposition. It should have built-in people-ownership safeguards and ensure the full participation of women needs-bearers, and not just ladies. The women-in-development should, most importantly, be an integral part of overall national development orientation.

Strategic Orientation

The strategic orientation should come in the form of a national gender-in-education policy that takes cues from the overarching national gender-in-development policy. Nigeria used to have a girls’ education policy, but it remained simply a document (and a policy is a lot more than a printed document). The new policy, should:

1. Go beyond the formal education sector to address gender challenges in Education with a capital E;
2. Address the various manifestations of gender one-sidedness in Education;
3. Pay attention to the various obstacles to meaningful access to gender inclusiveness in educational services provision and delivery;
4. Result from a fully participatory and consultative process;
5. Allow for adaptation to state, local government, and community-level realities; and
6. Be integrated into the National Policy on Education.

Programming

Programming should be a down-stepping effort of the policy and the strategy at two levels. First, gender concerns (awareness, knowledge, values, attitudes) should be infused into the work of the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) and the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE), to provide further down-to-earth guidelines for curriculum developers and teacher educators. Second, state-level work should include the following:

1. Community, teacher and education stakeholder sensitisation and empowerment;
2. Practical steps for addressing the supply- and demand- side obstacles to participation in Education by both boys and girls, through situation-responsive methods;
3. Infusion of gender concerns into curricula, materials and methods in both formal and non-formal Education;
4. Building gender responsiveness into all system and institutional management activities; and
5. Systematically working through an inclusive, participatory process.

The practical /Tactical Level

This is the level of operation of the school manager and the teacher-counsellor, both of whom must have been part of the participatory programme development process. The tasks here fall into four main categories:

1. Comprehensive, school-based learner psycho-social support initiatives;
2. Infusion of gender concerns into school organisation, classroom management, and more particularly into the process dimension of the curriculum (the concrete/practical activities in which teachers and learners engage);
3. Gender-sensitive codes to guide gender-sensitive behaviour for creating a gender-sensitive school culture; and
4. Infusion of gender concerns into all aspects of a school's implicit curriculum¹.

These processes and activities—from policy and strategy to program and tactical levels—should ultimately lead to an education system that moves from mere gender parity to embrace gender equity and thus open the gates to gender equality in wider society.

Responsibility of Counsellors for Gender in Education

Gender-responsive education (i.e. in the case of Nigeria's Universal Basic Education programme) is the responsibility of All. The Counselling professional, however, has very critical roles to play in the process, and this conference must delve into these roles at length as well as in breadth.

For now, let us explore three complementary categories of Counselling Professionals: the academic/researcher counsellor, the system- and institutional-level manager counsellor, and the classroom-teacher counsellor. The task ahead is to mobilise the talents that abound within professionals in each category.

¹ An explicit curriculum is one that has been carefully designed, pilot tested by teachers and students, and then presented or published. An **implicit curriculum** is one that is crafted within the thinking processes of individual teachers but not written down or published, and therefore not able to be replicated by others. See Burton (1998) at <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED434754>

The Academic-Researcher Counsellor

Counsellors in this group can make an impact on the promotion of gender-responsive, equitable and inclusive education only if they stand on the academic tripod, by pursuing the tripartite goal of functioning as:

- Consummate researchers (devoted to participatory action research that addresses genuinely felt needs);
- Creative teachers (applying responsive pedagogies to meet the genuine needs of specific groups of learners, and ploughing research results into enriched teaching content and methods);
- Committed change agents (working with individuals, groups, communities to affect change through the injection of new knowledge).

This group also includes curriculum developers and teacher educators. They will be charged with lead roles in advocacy (for awareness and value orientation in society), curriculum enrichment through the infusion of gender concerns, and pedagogical leadership through serving as models for teachers, both in pre-service and in-service career-long professional development initiatives.

The Manager-Counsellor

At the system-wide level, persons in this category of counselling professionals should track the effects of policy and serve as school development advisers. They should engage in systematic needs analysis of practising teachers, as inputs into teacher continuing education on gender-responsive education. Above all, they are to serve as advocates at the education ministry level for adequate gender-in-education resourcing, in terms of funds, materials and personnel.

The manager-counsellor should also engage in school learning projects designed to sharpen the gender lenses of teachers through systematic exposure to new ideas, the provision of appropriate materials, and the coordination of gender-responsive teaching programmes and implicit curriculum activities.

The Classroom Teacher-Counsellor

The ideal teacher is expected to have developed 'A Teaching Personality'. Such a person intuitively and consciously plays a counselling role, by always acting as a trusted confidant for learners. Teachers do not simply transmit information or impart knowledge; they transform lives. This they do through a systematic process of:

- Role-model behaviour;
- Empathy with learners and gaining learner-confidence;
- Engaging learners in analysing issues and solving problems;
- Broadening learner horizons and sharpening learner skills through exposure to challenging tasks;
- Self-discovery activities to develop learner interpersonal skills;

- Group activities that sharpen communication and interpersonal skills;
- Coaching (systematic assistance/encouragement for learner efforts in attaining a desired goal);
- Mentoring (developing a mutual trust relationship with students).

A learner who has passed through the hands of a good teacher-mentor-counsellor, as the saying goes, will never be the same again. With specific reference to gender-responsive counselling, learning activities should apply the above principles in developing self-confidence, assertiveness, motivation, and achievement among girls, while developing among both genders the habit of respect and of being critical of social constructs that hinder people's opportunities to fulfil their potential and contribute to society.

Dear reader, I hope you found your place in at least one of the three categories above, or otherwise see your role and where and how you fit in and contribute.

Conclusion

Viewing Education through a gender lens involves looking at learning systems in our society from a variety of angles. Looking from different angles, as described in this paper, reveals challenges that girls and women, in particular, face. The enhanced understandings and insights gained should inform the infusion of gender concerns and perspectives into national development and education policies and practices. When this happens, education will change, society will change, and the mainstream will change to become more accommodating and inclusive.

Gender-response education programmes and pedagogical practices should be the bedrock upon which society is built. This sort of Education-Above-All is the responsibility of all. Counselling professionals (of the three categories identified in this discussion) are key players—actively participating in policy and programme development and monitoring processes and ensuring down-to earth gender-responsive counselling at school, classroom, and community levels.