

Role of Libraries in Promoting Gender Equality in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of libraries in promoting gender equality in Nigeria. Gender inequality refers to discrimination based on sex or gender, where one sex or gender is placed in a more advantageous position than the other. Although gender inequality has been a prominent issue, efforts to address it have not yielded the desired results. In this context, involving libraries in the matter appears to be a promising solution. The paper identifies the factors contributing to gender inequality in Nigeria: socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-religious, socio-political, educational, and legal factors. It further examines the digital gender gap and proposes appropriate strategies to address it. Given the factors perpetuating gender inequality in Nigeria, the paper recommends that libraries leverage the digital age to combat this trend. Additional recommendations include forming strong partnerships with NGOs, organizing intensive campaigns, and implementing awareness and sensitization outreach programs aimed at addressing gender inequality, among others.

Keywords: *Gender inequality, digital gender interval, gender divide, libraries, Nigeria*

Introduction

Gender inequality has become a significant issue in Nigeria and other developing countries, where women are often regarded as second-class citizens. Many still believe that a woman's place is in the kitchen and "the other room." Women are frequently viewed as fragile and are perceived as objects of pleasure and fantasy. However, it is important to recognize that Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) asserts, "All human beings are born free and equal in

dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

In the same vein, Article 2 of the same Universal Declaration of Human Rights posits that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status." From the above viewpoints, it is clear that women should have equal rights as men. Furthermore, they should not be discriminated based on sex, religion, political inclination, or any other factor. They should also be allowed to own property just as their male counterparts do.

It is noteworthy to point out that Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set forth by the United Nations is "Gender Equality." Therefore, there is need to bridge the gender gap, as this would go a long way forward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Against the assumption that women are the weaker sex, they play a variety of roles in national development. Usman (2020) argues that women serve as mothers in family affairs, farmers, educators, entrepreneurs, and teachers, among others. She further adds that women play significant roles in societal development and ensure the stability, progress, and long-term development of nations. On the home front, women are decision-makers. Apart from being mothers, they are the engines of the family. They are great teachers and contribute significantly to the upbringing of children.

Moreover, the enterprising nature of women cannot be overemphasized. In most families today, women are great entrepreneurs. They engage in various petty trades to support the family. In the same vein, most African women are small-scale farmers. Corroborating women's contributions to agricultural development,

Usman (2020) contends that they make up 43 percent of the world's agricultural labor force.

Conceptual framework

Gender inequality has been variously termed "gender disparity," "gender discrimination," "gender imbalance," etc. According to the Save the Children Foundation (n.d.), gender inequality is discrimination based on sex or gender, causing one sex or gender to be routinely privileged or prioritized over another. For IGI Global (n.d.), gender equality is a legal, cultural, or social situation where gender determines unequal opportunities and rights for women and men, characterized by disparities in access to or enjoyment of rights and reinforced by stereotypical culturally and socially defined roles. The organization also highlights that gender inequality involves the contention between males and females regarding equal access to education, healthcare, equal employment, decision-making, and freedom from the threat of violence and oppression. Similarly, the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) (2019) described gender inequality as the disparities between women and men in terms of their access and opportunities in the social, economic, and political spheres, as well as their share in decision-making power at all social levels.

Factors Responsible for Gender Inequality

A number of factors contribute to gender inequality in Nigeria and other African countries. Some researchers have categorized these factors into socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-religious and socio-political factors. Ewang (2022) argues that the Nigerian constitution provides for gender equality and non-discrimination but women continue to suffer injustices and marginalization. She identifies the following factors: discriminatory laws, religious and cultural norms, gender stereotypes low levels of education and disproportionate effect of poverty on women. According to Human Rights Careers (n. d.), ten factors responsible are for gender inequality, including uneven access

to education, employment, job segregation, lack of legal protection, limited bodily autonomy, poor medical care, lack of religious freedom, inadequate political representation, racism and societal mind sets. In the same vein, Funds for NGOs (n. d.) observes that the risk factors contributing to gender inequality include poverty, unsafe migration, gender-based violence, discrimination and a lack of access to education. From the foregoing, the factors responsible for gender inequality in Nigeria can be subsumed under the following sub-headings: socio-cultural factors, socio-economic factors, socio-religious factors, socio-political factors, educational factors, legal factors.

Socio-cultural Factors

Socio-cultural practices that clearly depict gender inequality still exist in Nigeria and other African countries. A few examples will suffice. In many places in Nigeria, it is undeniable that when women lose their husbands, they are accused of being responsible for the death. As a result, they are subjected to various forms of inhuman and degrading treatment. In some cases, they would be forced to stay with the corpses. In such cases, what follows is the seizure of every property belonging to the deceased by the siblings. Sibani (2017) argues that oppression of women as a result of male preference is also a socio-cultural factor that is prevalent. He notes that there are several cases where mothers are neglected or thrown out of matrimonial homes for their inability to give birth to male children. In these situations, the women are maltreated by their husbands who, at times, take other wives in hopes of male children. In most Nigerian and African societies, there is the belief that women are mere property that can be acquired and discarded at any time.

Socio-economic Factors.

In Nigeria and most African countries, there is a traditional belief that men are the providers while women should take care of the home in addition to bearing children. Though this practice is gradually fading, it has not disappeared completely. In contemporary Nigeria, most

women still believe that the man's money is for the family while their own income is theirs alone and should not be shared. This has denied them many opportunities, including the ability to contribute to the financial decision-making process in their homes. This mindset has widened the gender gap in economic development. At the Global Gender Summit held in Africa in 2019 which had as its theme *Unpacking constraints to gender equality*, Kenyatta (2019) emphasized that women's lack of access to credit and financial control-particularly regarding education and health decisions are key impediments to gender equality. Newiak (2018) opines that Nigerian women could help transform the economy if given the chance.

Socio-religious factors

Man is ruled by religion. The gaps in the major religions in Nigeria encourage gender inequality. For instance, the African traditional religion promotes several practices where gender inequality is widespread. A particularly troubling scenario occurs when young women are married off at the age of thirteen. This is rampant in Northern Nigeria where there is insurgency. Young girls are abducted by insurgents and are married off against their will. Prominent examples include the Chibok and the Dapchi school girls. The case of Leah Sharibu who was abducted in 2018 but is still in captivity, is noteworthy.

Attempts by the Nigerian Senate to pass the Gender Equality Bill have been unsuccessful. This failure is because the bill is believed to be against the tenets of Islam. According to Iroanusi (2021), the bill seeks to guarantee the rights of women to equal opportunities in employment, equal access to education, and equal rights to property and land ownership. It also aims to protect widows' rights, prohibit violence against women, and ensure non-discrimination in political and public life. However, law-makers rejected the bill, insisting that the term "equality" be removed, arguing that it infringes on Islamic practices. They suggested renaming it the "Gender Opportunities Bill."

In Christianity, gender inequality persists despite the concept of equality of all before God (Attoh, 2017). Biblical account of creation, God created woman from one of man's ribs after putting him into a deep sleep (Genesis 2:21-22). Suggesting that the woman is subordinate to man. Attoh (2017) questions whether there is true equality between man and woman in the church. He further points out that none of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ were women. This discrimination is reinforced by Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35:

"Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also said the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church." (KJV)

Socio-political Factors

Politics is often viewed as exclusive preserve of men and a no-go area for the women in Nigeria. It is perceived as a tough terrain even for the men who see it as a do-or die affair. Though a few women are venturing into the murky waters of Nigerian politics, they still suffer from gross under-representation in the Nigerian government. As previously mentioned, the patriarchal structure of the Nigerian society has contributed largely to this development.

Azuh, Egharevba, and Azuh ((2014) list the following factors as responsible for the low participation of women in Nigerian politics: illiteracy, poverty, money politics intimidation, harmful traditional practices and discriminatory cultural stereotypes, violence against women, barriers in electoral process, and religious restrictions. The financial burden is a major barrier that prevents women from engaging in Nigerian politics. Political meetings in Nigeria are predominantly nocturnal creating further obstacles for women. Makama (2013) notes that society does not approve of women staying out, yet gatherings

often run late into the, especially for those actively seeking political position.

Educational Factors

Women's lack of access to education is one of the factors fuelling gender inequality in Nigeria. According to United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (n. d.), investing in girls' education transforms communities, countries and the entire world. It maintains that girls who are educated are less likely to marry young and are more likely to lead healthy, productive lives. Furthermore, they earn higher incomes, participate in decision-making process and build better futures for themselves and their families. Educated girls strengthen economies and reduces inequality and contributes to more stable, societies where individuals can fulfil their potential.

In Nigeria, girl's education is often taken less seriously than boy's education. The reasons for this include early marriage, poverty, illiteracy, gender stereotypes, cultural and religious barriers and gender-based violence. Essentially, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to education," meaning no should be denied access to education on account of gender. Ngwoke (2020) notes that gender inequality in education is a "glass-ceiling" placed over women, unjustly denying them the educational opportunities enjoyed by their male counterparts. He further highlights the following implications gender inequality in education for Nigeria's socio-economic development:

- Reduces the social development and economic productivity for women
- A gap in human capital development and employment opportunities
- Increase poverty among women
- Greater vulnerability to exploitation and cheap labour

- Hindered economic growth due to the exclusion of women from contributing to the economy.

Makama (2013) submits that limited access to education is a significant barrier to female participation in the formal sector. Social pressures such as early marriage and the perception that female education is secondary to that of boys contribute to high illiteracy rates among women. He further contends that education enables women to be less dependent on men, have greater control over their sexual and reproductive health. This reduces high birth rate and is healthier outcomes for mother and child.

Enyioko (2021) argues that the educational philosophy, which is based on providing “equal access to educational opportunity for all citizens at all levels” has been compromised. Citing USAID (2016), he maintains that cultural values, the cost of education and colonial policies hinder women’s access to education. According to him, educational attainment is the most fundamental prerequisite for women’s empowerment in all facets of society. Without access to comparable education, women are unable to secure well-paid jobs, participate in government and gain political influence.

Legal factors

The fact that women are marginalized or discriminated against in any society today is based on the provisions of the law. Some laws restrict women’s rights and freedoms while others tend to put women in subservient positions. The International Development Law Organization (IDLO) (n. d.) emphasizes that “gender inequality is an affront to human dignity, a challenge to the rule of law and an obstacle to development, noting that denying women of their rightful place in society by depriving them of equal access to education, justice or livelihood is tantamount to robbing societies of the talent and potential of half of their population. The organization asserts that women’s roles are vital of in securing every social need from peace to food, adding

that though gender equality is increasingly a feature of national constitutions, the law continues to restrict women's rights and freedoms and dictates their submission to male relatives or limits what they may own or inherit. Though Section 42 of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) emphasizes the right to freedom from discrimination of any kind some discriminatory laws still exist against women. Ekhatior (2015) cites Section 55(1) of the Labour Act which stipulates that a woman cannot be employed on night duty in a public or any agricultural undertaking with the except for women nurses and women in management positions who are not engaged in manual labour, as stated in Section 55(7).

Also, under Section 56(1) of the Labour Act, women are prevented from engaging in mining activities. Similarly, women are discriminated against in the police force and other paramilitary outfits in Nigeria. For instance, Section 127 of the Police Act stipulates that married women are prevented from seeking enlistment in the Nigerian Police Force. Under this section, in the event that an unmarried police woman becomes pregnant, she would be dismissed from the police force and can only be reinstated on the approval of the Inspector General of Police (Ekhatior, 2015). In like manner, Regulation 124 of the Police Act provides that a woman police officer who is interested in getting married must, first of all, apply in writing to the commissioner of police for approval (Imasogie, 2010 as cited in Ekhatior, 2015).

Additionally, under Section 56(1) of the Labour Act, women are prevented from engaging in mining activities.

Similarly, women are discriminated against in the police force and other paramilitary outfits in Nigeria. For instance, Section 127 of the Police Act stipulates that married women are prohibited from enlisting in the Nigerian Police Force. Furthermore, if an unmarried police woman becomes pregnant, she would be dismissed from the police force and can only be reinstated on the approval of the Inspector

General of Police (Ekhatior, 2015). In the same vein, Regulation 124 of the Police Act provides that a female police officer interested in getting married must first apply in writing to the commissioner of police for approval (Imasogie, 2010 as cited in Ekhatior, 2015).

Furthermore, some of the regulations of the Nigerian Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) discriminate against women. According to Ekhatior (2015), Article 5(1) of the NDLEA Order (2002) stipulates that "All unmarried female members of staff that wish to marry shall apply in writing to the Chairman/Chief Executive, asking for permission, stating details of the intended husband.

Promoting the Digital Gender Divide/Gap

Ede (2023) argues that the theme for International Women's Day, 2023, entitled: "Digital Innovation and technology for gender equality" recognizes the powerful potential that digital entrepreneurship presents for women whether in new business opportunities, gains in the agricultural value chain, in the health sector or in creating access to credit, markets, clients, and global value chains. She further asserts that technology is fundamental for the growth and expansion of the opportunities that could provide equal access to economic resources, financial opportunities, and political leadership. Digital technology offers life-changing opportunities and innovations to promote inclusive growth, expand educational opportunities, improve health services, and foster governance (USAID, 2023).

The digital divide is the gap between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not. According to USAID (2023), the digital divide is the distinction between those who have internet and/or mobile phone access and can make use of digital communications services, and those who are excluded from these services. The digital gender divide, on the other hand, reflects the inequalities between men and women in terms of technology access and use (USAID, 2021). Ojo

(2022) distilled the following strategies from interviews with various experts to help bridge digital gender gap in Nigeria:

- The government should focus more on providing girls and children equal access to education. In this regard, patriarchal and harmful traditional norms should be tackled through reorientation, laws and sanctions to enable girls have more opportunities to access digital education and internet use and services.
- The government should increase access to quality basic education for all. Appropriate measures must be put in place to promote free basic education for girls.
- NGOs should help girls to acquire computer literacy skills
- Organize of intensive campaigns, awareness and sensitization programmes on the use of ICT
- The Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy should develop and implement gender equity policies at all levels.

In the same vein, Ede (2023) believes that the problems hindering African women's digital inclusion can be tackled if government and policy formulators make deliberate efforts to bridge the digital divide. She refers to the Policy Brief on Women and the Digital Economy in Africa by the Harvard University Centre for African Studies, which outlines some opportunities for African development institutions and national governments to promote of gender-inclusive participation in the digital economy as follows:

- ❖ Prioritize equitable access to STEM education for all girls including those in low-income communities and rural or remote areas
- ❖ Build equitable infrastructure for internet access in communities and schools

- ❖ Promote regional collaboration across digital technologies. There is a The African Continental Free Trade Area has the potential to open up new opportunities for digital trade between countries
- ❖ Co-invest in public-private partnerships that support inclusion in tech.
- ❖ Work with the private sector to collect better data on women in tech.
- ❖ Provide small and medium business-scale women with basic technological tools and knowledge to enhance their business. This would significantly impact their local economy and consequently the larger economy.
- ❖ Adopt policies that ensure incorporation of solutions and ideas conceptualized by women for digital inclusion.

The Role of Libraries in Promoting the Gender Equality

As mentioned earlier, the library is a repository of knowledge and information resources. It houses both print and digital resources. Libraries can leverage the digital age to promote gender equality by ensuring equitable distribution of information resources irrespective of gender. To buttress this point, IFLA (2003) contends that:

Library and information services are key actors in providing unhindered access to essential resources for economic and cultural advance. In doing so, they contribute effectively to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom, safeguarding democratic values and universal civil rights. They encourage social inclusion, by striving to serve all those in their user communities regardless of age, gender, economic or employment status, literacy or technical skills, cultural or ethnic origin, religious or political beliefs, sexual orientation, and physical or mental ability. The communities they serve may be geographically based or, increasingly, linked only by technology and shared interests (P.2)

It further states that the library is a means of access to information, ideas and works of imagination. As knowledge-based institutions, libraries can adopt different strategies aimed at promoting the gender equality. In this regard, the annual Readership Promotion Campaign organized by the National Library of Nigeria needs to be sustained as it is one of the ways in which libraries bridge the gender gap. The theme for the 2023 Readership Promotion Campaign was entitled “Read Your way to the Top” during which reading competitions were organized among students of junior secondary schools across the country (Chikelu, 2023). According to the National Librarian, it is targeted at the hinterlands where there is a large concentration of school children.

Furthermore, libraries are known for their sensitization, collaborative efforts, and outreach or extension programmes. In this regard, the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) in collaboration with its state chapters and Librarians’ Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) can partner with women organizations and NGOs to promote gender equality. Examples of such organizations include The National Centre for Women Development (NCWD), International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Nigeria, Women in Politics Forum (WIPF), Women’s Technology Empowerment Centre (WTEC), Women in Nigeria, Women in Management Business and Public Service (WIMBIZ), Women Consortium of Nigeria, Vicar Hope Foundation, etc.

General Recommendations

In view of the identified factors responsible for gender inequality in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

- Libraries can leverage the digital age in to promote gender. This can be achieved by equipping the libraries with both print and digital resources for easy access by all library patrons.
- Libraries can partner with NGOs to promote gender equality. Such partnership or collaboration are intended to address the issue of 35%

affirmative action recommended by the National Gender Policy which has not been implemented over the years.

- Libraries should vigorously engage in intensive campaigns, awareness and sensitization or outreach programmes meant to address gender inequality. These campaigns should target rural areas to encourage the education of the girl-child. This would also address the issue of out- of- school children.
- The government should provide adequate funding for Nigerian libraries to enable them to provide adequate information resources (especially ICT resources) for effective service delivery.
- Discriminatory laws against women, especially written laws, should be comprehensively reviewed by the government.
- The patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society should be addressed by the government through reorientation, legislation, and sanctions to ensure women and girls have equal opportunities as their male counterparts.
- The government should provide free and basic education for girls, as this would go a long way towards bridging gender inequality.
- The Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy should develop and implement gender equity policies at all levels.

Conclusion

Gender inequality is discrimination on the basis of sex or gender in which one gender is perceived to have undue advantage over the other. In Nigeria and other African countries, the issue of gender inequality has been a persistent problem that seems insurmountable. The Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature and this fuels gender inequality. However, gender inequality is not without solution. Libraries can play a significant role in bridging gender inequality in Nigeria. They can leverage the digital age to bridge the gap by

providing adequate digital resources and services for easy access by all library patrons irrespective of gender. Nonetheless, this feat cannot be possible without adequate government funding. Furthermore, libraries can form strong alliances with NGOs to reduce gender inequality. Since “gender equality” is goal number five of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is imperative that libraries take the lead to ensure that gender inequality is reduced to the barest minimum. This would trigger rapid developments across all sectors of the economy.

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