

ISSUES IN WOMEN'S EDUCATION, HEALTH,
AND NUTRITION: A NIGERIAN
OBSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

A central issue in nutrition and health of children is maternal education. In Nigeria, as in many other African countries, the state of education of women is very deplorable. In the rural areas, where traditional values and norms are very strict, women feel relatively disenfranchised and powerless in pursuing their educational and other personal needs and goals. In addition to traditional restrictions, they suffer from religious moratorium of some sort, in their efforts to meet their social needs. Under these conditions most rural women remain predominantly ignorant, in a social revolutionary sense, thus lacking in both positive aggression and self-esteem. The authors emphasized the deleterious effects which poor maternal education and illiteracy would have on childbearing. In particular, since a child's physical and mental well-being depend greatly on the maternal skill of nurturance and knowledge about healthful living, children of uneducated and illiterate mothers are more likely to experience greater vulnerability to diseases. Suggestions for the prevention and alleviation of maternal educational impoverishment are included for policy implementation.

Introduction

The deplorable state of women's education in developing countries is a common knowledge. Although a major effect of this situation relates to the poor physical health among the illiterate and semi-illiterate mothers and their children in both urban and rural areas, increasing difficulties in many areas of psychological adjustment and functioning seem to further complicate the issue. The problem is getting worse in many countries, with adverse implications for the general population. In Nigeria, the government has long regarded the improvement of educational opportunities and services a crucial aspect of the development effort. In 1976, the country adopted a policy that extended free primary education to all children. Significantly, Primary school enrollment in the country as a whole increased from about 3.7 million in 1970 to 12.7 million 1980, and 14.8 million in 1982 (Nigeria - NISER-UNICEF, 1985).

There are, however, variations in school enrollment for different parts of Nigeria. While the country has been experiencing a remarkable improvement in school enrollment since 1983, the northern states have characteristically had lower rates of primary school attendance and high drop-out rate, especially for females (Nigeria - NNISER/UNICEF, 1985).

The problem of educating females has been attributed to religion and other cultural factors. Women have traditionally been assigned subordinate roles by almost all religions. Male children receive preferential treatment in terms of their grooming for instrumental leadership roles for which education is deemed necessary and appropriate. The long-standing idea of women's role has remained relatively impervious to the forces of social change and modernization in many parts of northern Nigeria.

According to the 1979 Nigerian urban survey (Nigeria - FOS, 1982), the overall literacy level in Nigeria for persons aged 15 years and over was 54.1 percent. The rate was much lower in the North than in the South, and was higher for males (65.6 percent) than females (38.5 percent). For example, the literacy rate among Northern males in Sokoto was 33.4 percent compared to more than 50 percent at Lagos in the South. In contrast, the rates for females were 8.6 percent in Borno and over 50 percent in each of Anambra, Imo, Bendel, and Cross River.

Since child care is generally more the responsibility of women, the rather high illiteracy rate among women (60 percent) has important repercussions for the welfare of a very large segment of the population, in particular, mothers and their young children. The dissemination and use of new ideas on maternal and infant care depend on the ability of the women to comprehend the medium of communication and especially to accept the value system associated with the new approaches.

In some Islamic communities, the early age at marriage of girls and cultural practices like the "purdah", have contributed to resistance to Western education of girls (Oppong, 1983). In the "purdah", older women who have been restrained by the dictates of religion from direct communication with outsiders rely on children (young girls) for the performance of their nonsexual household activities as wives. Therefore, the purdah system, even though it represents an acceptable religious culture and motif, indirectly eventuates to child labour, an experience that conflicts with the child's need for education experience.

Data from the 1981/82 Nigerian fertility survey (Nigeria - NPB, 1984) showed that almost a quarter of all women who ever married did so before the age of 14 years; over half of them married before age 16. The mean age at first marriage in the North was 14-15 years and 18-19 years in the South. Variations by religion and education prevailed. Catholics and Protestants married later (at approximately 19 years) than Moslems (at approximately 14.8 years). Women who received Koranic education married at an average age of 13.9 years, compared to 15.9 years for women with no formal education, and 19 years for those who completed primary school education.

A crucial factor associated with maternal illiteracy is nutritional ignorance. Various studies have shown that malnutrition is one of the most common causes of death among Nigerian children (Onadeko, 1980; Nnayelugo, 1983; et al, 1983). The researchers in those studies implicated malnutrition as significant factor in the high morbidity rate among Nigerian children. Their claims were strengthened by an official estimate that placed the statistics of deaths among children from malnutrition and allied disorders at 120,000 annually (Nigeria - FOS, 1983). The observation is that the problem is more serious among children from uneducated, lower socio-economic status families than those from educated families. Yet, there is no systematic study on the relationship between maternal education, nutritional

practices and psychological adjustment among mothers and children.

In the domain of child-rearing, educational status of the mother is one of the variables which could affect the health of children, as well as their social behaviour. According to Mallum (1988), it has been observed in Nigeria and elsewhere that mothers with college education or with similar backgrounds tend to be less authoritarian in certain aspects of child-rearing, such as sex education. Variations in methods of child-rearing among racial and ethnic groups have also been observed by the same researcher.

There are indications that, in general, western mothers, notwithstanding their level of education, are more permissive than African mothers. However, the educated African mothers usually are less conservative and more permissive, more open, and freer with their children in issues about sex, in comparison with the illiterate mothers (Mallum, 1988). She had observed that in dealing with matters concerning sex, the more highly educated mothers were found to be less shy and less conservative than the less educated and illiterate mothers in providing guidance for their children. The exact nature of these differences would be an interesting subject-matter of future study. This paper is a critical review of the hindrances to women's education and its impact on the health and nutrition of children.

Women's Role In A Traditionally Male-Oriented Culture

Women's roles are defined by the culture in which they live. Since the majority of uneducated African women live in the rural areas, the discussions in this paper would focus more on this group, and specifically on the rural life-style of women in specific sections of Northern Nigeria. The women constitute the mainstay of the agricultural economy in that part of the country. Their main occupation is farming and processing of agricultural products. In addition to these responsibilities are their primary roles of motherhood and house-keeping, which include child-bearing and child-rearing. They educate and socialize the children and ensure that they develop in a physically and mentally appropriate manner, according to the levels of expectations of their culture. So, Nigerian women in the context of this discussion represent the prototype or phenotypical manifestation of a repressive culture. Whether the women are seen in the same light by other observers or by themselves is yet another issue.

There is no gain saying the fact that Nigeria is an example of a traditionally conservative culture. Women, educated and uneducated, experience greater cultural prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination in connection with public attitudes and expectations. As would be expected, maternal functions and responsibilities, by virtue of their complexity, are greatly affected by the above circumstances. However, undoubtedly the burden of a particular traditionally inherent experience and obligation falls more heavily on the shoulders of those mothers who are less educated or illiterate. This is because they lack alternative values. Also, they have unequivocal beliefs in traditional way of life, as well as lack of the knowledge-base and orientation for making alternative choices involving dynamic modern values and life-styles.

Restricted Gender Roles

In the context of the above observations, women in many areas of Northern Nigeria, in particular rural areas, are traditionally forced to lead a life of drudgery

and servitude. Based on the nature of their traditionally imposed gender-role responsibilities as well as the restrictions on their rights in society, these women tend to adopt a conforming life-style. Given that in a traditional culture, respect for the value system is sacrosanct and represents the way of life for those who live in that context, most rural women tend to embrace this attitude with tenacity for the purpose of making the expected adjustment to the culture. In this respect, non-conformity with the traditionally defined roles would produce some psychological and moral conflicts of a serious dimension. In a study on a nomadic group in two northern states in Nigeria, it was found that women who sacrificed their rights for fear of the consequences of alienation by the culture, did so at the expense of their own psychological adjustment. Because they failed to assert themselves, they experienced lack of self-confidence and loss of self-esteem (Onwuzurike, Sikoki, Ikwueke, Asagba, and Ityavyar, 1988).

There are many more instances that illustrate the condition of women in less technologically developed cultures, exemplified by Nigeria. Religious prejudices against women exist in many part of the country, where absolute conformity with certain religious norms have been found to take a toll on women. The restrictions placed upon them by these norms can be determined from the existing literature on the topic. For example, many women are prevented on religious basis from having direct social interaction with the community in which they live. A typical illustration is the "purdah" culture which prevails in Northern Nigeria, and predominates among the Nomadic Fulanis. Drawing from empirical evidence on nomadic life-style, Onwuzurike et al (1988) observed that even when there is a clear message of personal safety, women in the "purdah" depend mostly on indirect means of communication and obtaining information to become aware of events in their community. Usually young girls or daughters run their errands. The women are extremely afraid of being in public places, such as the market place, where most local people purchase food and household items on daily basis, thus manifesting a clear clinical feature of agoraphobic pathology. They scamper in the presence of strangers, reflecting behavioral profile characteristic of xenophobic disorder. However, that these women seem adjusted to their culture, is an issue of definition that calls for reconciliation among the various theoretical principles of behavior.

Furthermore, these women are substantially uneducated and illiterate. This circumstance poses a serious problem for them in the sense that they are hindered from any employment that requires written messages. Therefore, the poverty of the rural women and their families affect the way their children would be brought up. The frail physique of children from poor background and the high frequency of death among those whose mothers lack basic education are factors worthy of exploration, at least for the purpose of understanding the relationship between lack of maternal education and malnutrition in children.

Though, discrimination and prejudice are problems shared nearly by all women in Africa and across the world, it may have been more pronounced in certain socio-cultural regions of Nigeria. For example, within the Bauchi-plateau geo-socio-cultural milieu, a great importance is attached to the right of inheritance of parental assets or matrimonial property by a daughter or wife following the death of a father or husband, respectively. It suggests that daughters whose parents are dead cannot assume ownership of their parent's farmland, notwithstanding the fact that farming is the mainstay of the local economy. On the contrary, the attitudes towards inheritance are

relatively more favourable toward males. Such institutionalized discrimination against women indirectly reinforces the exploitative characteristics of men in a traditional male-oriented culture.

Lack of Positive Aggression

It can be argued that lack of positive aggression is another factor that can be linked to the low level of educational achievement among Nigerian women. Positive aggression is a valuable psychological characteristic that energizes an individual to engage in behaviours that are goal-directed. Its primary function is to help the person achieve important goals, such as acquire higher social status. Such aggression would make one conscious of her right to be educated. The origin of it is constitutional and psychological in nature, and strongly represents the parameter for the characterization of one's personality. It is suspected that the traditional and conservative environment that produced the African woman may have tempered her innate tendencies toward positive aggression, and may have created in her a dependency need that involves the motive to be nurtured, aided, comforted, and protected by the more aggressive and dominant male. This position is consistent with McCandless and Evans' (1973) notion of the dependent personality, who is seeking assistance, attention, recognition, approval, and reassurance, or seeking help to accomplish goals with a manifestation of passive reaction to frustration.

The arguments above do not, by any means, completely erode the theoretical reasoning that generally aggressive behaviour is acquired through the process of socialization. While genetic predisposition cannot be readily dismissed, most researchers (Frodi 1977; Perry and Bussey, 1979; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1980) favour the argument that some aggressive attitudes found in women reflect cultural conditioning. *Also females are more likely to feel anxious or guilty about behaving aggressively. These feelings tend to inhibit aggression (Frodi et al, 1977). These feelings tend to inhibit aggression (Frodi et al, 1977).* Many psychological reasoning of this kind can be quite useful in explaining why the uneducated and illiterate women being discussed in this paper are described as lacking in positive aggression. In order to avoid a parsimonious generalization of the above idea, certain exceptions are worthy of consideration. For example, the same women whom we have described as lacking in positive aggression, may behave aggressively when they have the means to do so and believe that their behavior is justified. For example, we observed that uneducated and illiterate women in the purdah culture function under repressed aggression. In spite of this circumstance and the cultural conditioning through which these women acquired their gender schema, they are capable of certain forms of positive aggression, such as the ability to empathize with the victim, or to protect their child from a physical danger.

Issues in Perspective

To put the whole discussion in a better perspective, a few major factors that have been speculated as impacting the psychosocial circumstance of most rural women, call for further elaboration. These factors include education, religion as barrier to education, social attitudes and psychological conditions, and health and nutrition.

Most problems of the rural women center around illiteracy and lack of education. It seems that the generality of uneducated rural women understand the importance of educa-

tion for themselves and for their children. Unfortunately, due to the stereotypical attitude of the culture or society toward women education, they are inhibited from positively asserting themselves through engaging in behaviours and roles that would enable them actualize themselves. To the extent to which they fail to accept the realities of their weakness or to confront their passivity, these women and their children will remain victims of inferiority complex. In the earlier cited study, Onwuzurike et al (1988) noted that 97 percent of the uneducated and illiterate women who participated in their study on women education did not believe in the sexist, traditional thinking that "education of women is a waste" and that "educated women are difficult to control". Such responses meant that the women recognized the importance of education of women despite the obvious negative attitude towards women education.

Also, as reported by the researchers, almost all subjects responded "Yes" to the statement "Educational freedom for rural women will be difficult to achieve because of the common belief that a woman's place is in the "kitchen." This response underscores the notion that apparently in every local woman there is a hidden wish to be educated. The environment remains the major inhibiting factor militating against the fulfillment of this wish.

What is indeed not clear is the extent to which a given religious belief stimulates or demotivates the desire in women to be educated. In the study cited above subjects were asked: "Does your religious belief prevent you from going to school or sending your daughter to school?" A majority of subjects answered "No". This greater than expected negative response appears to be a veiled attempt of the respondents to enhance their personal image in the eyes of their interviewers. The study also showed difference in educational accomplishments by religious affiliations. There were more Christians at all levels of education, from primary to post-primary.

The natural desire for most African women to self-actualize themselves in the same way as men through educational development appear to be instrumentally hampered by social attitudes and stereotypes. Most African women seem to have accepted the stereotype as a way of life, and therefore are not motivated to do something about it. In measuring social attitude in their study, Onwuzurike et al (1988) presented their subjects with the following statements among others: a) "Women achieve social status through marriage; b) "Certain professions are the prerogatives of men," c) "Women and men should not have equal opportunity." These statements represented common prejudices which the public usually has about women in Africa. The researchers found that even though the statements were sexist and stereotypical, the women identified with them. That was particularly so for rural women, most of whom (56 percent) agreed with the notion that large proportion of Nigerian women still respect the traditional mores, and as such would accept conditions that conflict with their own personal choices, interests, and desires. Thus timidity, lack of assertiveness, and passivity are common behavioural profile found mostly among the uneducated women. These women often show low self-concept and manifest low self-esteem in their dealing with others. It is not unlikely that children of mothers with above indicated personality characteristic will tend to inherit similar profile. Central to this discussion is the condition of children in certain sections of Northern Nigeria, where most mothers are illiterate and uneducated and are victims of religious and traditional conservatism. Hardly can anyone in the right frame of mind or without a magical thinking expect that children born

into this circumstance would develop without serious psychological or behavioural fixations. However, these views remain subjective until empirically verified.

Health and Nutritional Issues

It is no exaggeration to say that a preponderous majority of the rural women lack the understanding about balanced diet, partly because they are uneducated. In addition to this background, they hold many traditional views and prejudices about certain types of foods that are yet to be verified. For instance, in Nigerian society, it is common place for mothers to say with emphasis that "Egg is not good for children." We interpret this to mean that egg is good for adults only! Further interpretation of the statement is that African mothers have their own health and nutritional standards. Incidentally, when their standards conflict with western or the scientific standards for nutrition, their choice is quickly and frequently attributed to ignorance.

The point is that nutritional ignorance among African mothers may be a function of little or no education on the part of mothers, and the ineptitude of cultural eating habits. Ironically, the same mother who claims that egg is not good for children would turn around in some other occasion and say: "Children should eat fatty foods, for it helps them to grow fat!" Beliefs such as this, apart from representing common fallacies about children's nutrition, also reflect lack of standards in maternal and cultural orientation about diet. "Fat" is an adjective most westerners would find as repulsive. In contrast, in most African cultures, being fat used to be an acceptable value. It was seen as an evidence of good living! The importance of fatness is demonstrated in a special ceremony marking pubertal maturity in preparation for marriage for young Ibo women in Nigeria, where the girls were placed in an isolated "fattening house", Called "mgbede", and fed with heavy carbohydrate diet for many months. After gaining enormous weight at the end of this rite of passage, they would directly dance themselves into marriage with ready suitors.

Given that every society has preference for certain kinds of food, and idiosyncratic ways of preparing and consuming certain meals, snail meat is a preferred meal for many mothers in parts of West Africa, Nigeria in particular. As a matter of fact, it is a delicacy. Its proteinous and nutritional value is very high as claimed by nutritionists. Nevertheless, "Pregnant women should not eat snail." It was believed that if they did, their babies would continuously experience drooping mouth and running nose. Due to wide spread superstition of this kind, many pregnant mothers would try to avoid the snail meal, even though it was relatively more available to some mothers than any other type of meat. A researcher on the nutritional status of pre-school children in rural community in Nigeria observed that superstitious beliefs about food were especially common among uneducated women (Onadeko, 1980). In a study on a similar issue (Onwuzurike et al, 1988), the subjects (57 percent of the sample), who were all uneducated rural mothers, agreed that "For good health, what matters is the quantity and not the quality of food you take," compared to less than 50 percent of the overall sample, who were literate and better educated, and who felt that the quality of food was more important than the quantity. It seems one may never resolve the controversy about "quantity" versus "quality" in this issue without first of all appreciating the unique circumstances of each group in the study. It is very likely that mothers whose response bothered on quantity were motivated more by the physiological need associated with hunger, whereas mothers who focused on quality were influenced more by psychologi-

cal factors associated with food and health. By this brief analysis, we are trying to make the point that need determines attitudes toward food. That most rural and especially impoverished African mothers generally preferred quantity to quality of food, may suggest the differences in their environmental experiences, and how these experiences influence their nutritional practices, or choices for their children. Recent data credited to Onwuzurike and his colleagues underscored the present hypothetical viewpoint. The former study showed some variations in the consumption of major food items in a manner that represented a rather consistent trend in the patterns of dietary behavior among a section of Nigerian mothers (Table1)

Table 1
Food Consumption by Percent of Women (N =1,200)

	Every day	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely	Uncertain
	%	%	%	%	%
Carbohydrate	65	17	6	12	0
Vegetables	40	28	13	13	6
Fruits	43	35	10	12	0
High Protein	42	34	13	11	0
Low Protein	35	40	12	13	0

Percentage of Subject and Frequency of Consumption
of Major Class of Food (Onwuzurike et al, 1988).

As indicated on Table 1, about 65 percent of the 1,200 women consumed a concentrate of carbohydrate meals everyday, compared to the consumption of vegetable by 40%, fruits 43%, high protein 42%, and low protein by 35% of the women. Since dietary habits are learned through conditioning as other social behaviours, children would tend to replicate their mother's eating and dietary behaviours. This discussion allows us to examine in a more critical approach the maternal dietary behaviours that prevail mostly among majority of uneducated African women. It is our belief that in a culture where childhood and many infectious diseases are still rampant, mothers, who find it hard to break old eating habits which may be traditionally important, but nutritionally bankrupt, do so the detriment of their children's health. According to Tomkins (1981) and Taqiet al, (1982), a high incidence of killer diseases, including childhood tuberculosis and diarrhoea were found among pre-school children in rural Nigeria. The fact that the mothers of the children associated with these diseases were predominantly uneducated and rural, make the findings more interesting as well as disturbing. Issues like these are more than worthy of an elaborate inquiry. While there are strong and sufficient reasons to attribute childhood problems to the ripple effect of maternal educational inadequacy, it would not be scientifically necessary and acceptable to do so without a carefully planned and scientifically designed research. In such a project the issues to be addressed would be whether there are any relationships between maternal education, nutritional habits, and children's physical and mental health.

Conclusion

The deplorable state of women's education in Nigeria and many parts of Africa poses

a very serious social challenge. The impact on illiteracy among women is mostly felt in the rural areas, where conformity to traditional norms are the sine qua for non social adjustment. In discussing this issue, we pointed out that even though these women recognize the importance of formal education for all, they expressed the view that negative traditional attitude toward them has hindered their progress in that area. Religion is one of the hindrances to women's education in the northern part of Nigeria. It however interacts with other social factors, such as traditionally rooted prejudices and stereotypes, to contribute to low education among women.

Unemployment is rife among most African women, majority of whom has family income that is usually below subsistent level. Also, the erroneous assumption that certain professional domains are the prerogatives of men, seems to deter women from engaging in competitive struggles with men in their motivation for employment and professional aspirations.

It seems therefore, that the major option available to women for social mobility is marriage. Thus, most African women tend to perceive and use marriage as an opportunity to rise in social status. The society must adapt to the needs of women and must revamp those traditional norms which discriminate against them. Also, the notion should be instilled that no specific professions are the exclusive domain of men.

The genesis of the female gender prejudices and discrimination may be rooted in male socio-culture dominance and control. Traditionally, women have been dominated by men through conditioned cognitive orientation involving the terrible consequences of breaking institutionalized taboos that clearly define the gender-role responsibilities and expectations for males and females. Specifically, for the uneducated rural women, any negation of the traditional norms and beliefs is a cause for conflict, guilt, and loss of the need for belongingness. In view of this, consciously or unconsciously, African women are motivated to aspire only within the limits prescribed by tradition. Thus, archetypically, their self-actualizing motives are structurally limited by traditions.

It is not surprising therefore, that child-bearing and child-rearing remain the de facto responsibilities exclusive to women. There is much sense in the statement that to educate a woman is to educate the world. Without formal education, mothers are limited in what they can offer to their children in a changing society.

Children need to be reared under a healthy environment. Proper nutritional practices are necessary for children in Africa to develop healthy body and mind, and the intellectual ability that would make them competent in the technological world of the twenty-first century. Therefore, without effective maternal education and training this will be difficult to achieve.

Suggestions for Policy Implementation

In Africa today, and particularly in Nigeria, the educational circumstance of rural women and their children implicates the ineptitude of certain African beliefs and traditions. It also manifests the weaknesses of the educational policies and plannings. So far there have been ineffective educational strategies that would improve the knowledge-base of the rural population, particularly in child-upbringing and modern ways of life. Much effort

should be devoted in improving the life-style of women and children. The governments should include in their plans for national development some formal education program for rural women, because formal education is an instrument par excellence for effecting national development. Education is regarded now, more than ever before, as a means for preparing everyone not only for the purpose of equipping individuals with skills appropriate for the present technological era, but also for meeting one's personal needs. Education is no longer conceived as a male gender-bound, class-bound, or place-bound process. Education for the rural population means the acquisition of occupational, life skills, the development of healthy personality, analytic modes of thinking, the formation of positive attitudes, values and aspirations, and information.

The concept of using education to improve the individual and society also involves the idea of using education for urban and rural females who are the mothers of the world, and capitalizing on their learning strategies. The supreme aim of education for the target population being discussed in this paper should not only be to change undesirable attitudes of uneducated African mothers, but also to enable them to be more responsive to modern ways of life, assisting them to alter some decadent traditions and at same time to retain what is good in their culture.

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