



Repositioning Women Education for Economic Growth and Global Competitiveness in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the strategic importance of repositioning women's education as a catalyst for economic growth and global competitiveness in Nigeria. Educating women is a critical driver of economic growth and global competitiveness, acting as a "master key" to reducing poverty, enhancing labour productivity, fostering innovation and meeting Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5). Despite notable progress in educational access, persistent gender disparities in enrollment, retention, and skills acquisition continue to constrain women's full participation in the economy. Drawing on secondary data and policy-oriented analysis, the paper interrogates how targeted investments in girls' and women's education particularly in science, technology, vocational training, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning can enhance productivity, innovation, and inclusive growth. It further explores structural barriers such as poverty, socio-cultural norms, early marriage, inadequate infrastructure, and policy implementation gaps that limit educational outcomes for women. The study argues that aligning women's education with labor market needs, digital transformation, and global value chains will strengthen human capital formation and international competitiveness. It highlights the multiplier effects of women's education on household welfare, demographic dividends, governance, and sustainable development. The paper concludes by proposing policy measures that will enhance women's education in the country.

Keywords: Economic Growth, Global Competitiveness, Women Education

Introduction

Nigeria, with a huge population size of over 150 million people, is considered the largest country in Africa (Udo & Okon, 2021) and women constitute an integral part of this population. Women play specific and a pivotal role either visible or invisible in the Nigerian society and history. They are mainly able to play this role as a result of the education they have received, especially at the tertiary level. A woman creates life, nurtures it, guards and strengthens it. In this task, as a role model, they have a vital role to the development of the nation.

Unfortunately, women are oppressed and discriminated in all spheres of social life (Lockheed, 2023). We cannot think of the welfare of the nation while ignoring the importance of women. In a patriarchal society like Nigeria, women are facing multi-faceted problems socially, economically and politically. Although many significant works are performed by them, still they have been the victim of untold miseries, hardship, atrocities, neglect, and exploitation caused by the male dominated society in all over the world. There is no denial to the fact that the status of women vis-a-vis men in Nigeria is low in comparison to that of the western and developed nations of the world. The gender inequality in Nigeria is so wide that women have suffered discrimination virtually in all segments of the Nigerian society. While acknowledging that efforts are being made, greater efforts need to be made for gender sensitization and the rights and dignity of women should be respected not only for their education and empowerment but for the development of the society.

The surest way to women liberation and discrimination is through education. Education is generally concerned with the imparting of knowledge in people. According to Efesike and Ojugun (2005); in Akubilo and Omefe (2022), education describes the total process of human learning by which knowledge is imparted, valuable skills developed and faculties trained. They maintained that through education one generation passes onto the next, its knowledge and wisdom and that education frees one's mind thereby allowing one to think beyond what one is used.

In the opinions of traditional African societies, women education was regarded as a waste since they are not expected to participate in formal work activities outside the home. They were seen as silent workers, keeping the home, bearing and rearing children and helping their husbands in the farm. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1998) report on the state of education in Nigeria, classified the role of women in traditional society as follows:

- Rearing of children
- Taking care of domestic chores
- Providing water and firewood.

According to Akubilo and Omefe (2012), there are also some societal prohibitions on women which can be seen in the following areas:

- Ownership of familial lands especially when the women do not have a male child.
- Women are not also allowed participating in village councils or in chieftaincy matters.
- There is obvious gender bias against women in variety of nations sporting activities.

According to World Bank (2023), educating women is a primary driver of economic growth, enhanced productivity, and global competitiveness and acts as one of the most cost-effective strategies for sustainable development. The World Bank states that for every dollar invested in girl's education, a return of \$2.80 to \$3 is generated for the global economy. Furthermore, it opines that increasing a country's share of women in secondary education by one percentage point can raise the annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate by 0.3 percent. The Bank maintains that some of the advantages of women education include impact growth, inter-generational gains, higher earnings, productivity, global competitiveness and innovation, workforce expansions, health outcomes, reduced child marriage and resilience.

Women in Nigeria are less endowed than men with education, health, employment, politics, administration, medical skill and productive assets. Thus, gender discrimination is highly visible against adolescent girls, adult women and our child in intra household food allocation. They have faced social, economic, political and administrative discrimination and there is a deep ignorance in the society about the value of women. Now, it has been realized that the progress of the nation was integrally linked with the status of women and for that the advancement of women was placed at the centre stage of Nigerian planning and policy.

Conceptual Clarifications

Economic Growth

Economic growth has been conceptualized in several ways by different scholars across the globe. For instance, Michael Todaro, a leading development economist defined economic growth as the study process by which the productive capacity of an economy increases steadily over time to bring about a rising level of national income (Todaro, 2011). Koe (2013) in Akunola and Adelika (2024) defines economic growth as the growth or expansion in commodities and merchandise manufactured in a country. In this respect, it can be described as the steady rate in the per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Afshan and Subeen (2017) see economic growth as the exercise in estimation of specific products that the economy produces during a given period of time and it is calculated as the rate of GDP growth. Colambatto (2006) conceptualized economic growth as the proportional changes in GDP or more frequently as GDP per capita. Traditionally, statisticians have calculated growth as a percentage rate of real gross domestic product or real GDP.

Akunola and Adelika (2024) assert that economic growth is a measure of the Gross Value added by resident producers within an economy that changes in material output and a component of economic growth and they often occur within a year. According to economic theory, economic

growth refers to an increase in the value of material production on an annual basis, as measured by the GDP or national income growth rate (World Bank, 2022). To the International Monetary Fund (IMF), economic growth is the rise or improvement in the market value of the goods and services generated by an economy within a given period of time, usually a fiscal year (IMF, 2013). In the opinions of Solow and Swan (1956) in Akunola and Adelika (2024), economic growth is largely a function of the stock of capital (Capital Formation / accumulation), together with the growth rate of the labour force and technical advancement. Also, Romer (1986) in Akunola and Adelika (2024) addressed the endogenous part of economic growth, and according to him, investment in human capital, motivation, and knowledge is known as economic growth.

Conclusively, economic growth can best be described as the consistent rise in national income or output, which mostly entails an expansion of an economy's flow of goods and services – determines a country's capacity to withstand fierce competition on the international market. Thus, the people who live in a nation benefit from economic growth and its indices including a decrease in poverty, better health standard, long lifespan, higher living standards, creation of more jobs, decreased unemployment and political stability. All these significantly drives the economic growth of any nation in the world.

Global Competitiveness

Global competitiveness with respect to this article hinges on economic competitiveness which is seen as the set of institutions, policies and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country (World Economic Forum, 2015). Adelina (2012) in Udo and Okon (2021) defines competitiveness as the ability to sustain in a global economy, any acceptable growth in the real standard of living of the population with an acceptable fair distribution, while efficiently providing employment for substantially all who can and wish to work and doing so without reducing the growth potential in the standards of living of future generations. So economic competitiveness is a determining factor for any country that wants to develop, and should put policies in place for competitiveness and development in the country. Some factors have given drive to this competitiveness for many years now and these include the acceptance and adoption of democratic ideas and economic liberalization, and policies in countries of the world, leading to increase international integration of markets for goods, services and capital.

One of the major objectives of developing economies is how to stimulate the rate of competitiveness and thus economic development mostly through trade and inflow of foreign direct investment. Theories like the Classical and neoclassical theory have argued that in the nexus between globalization and competitiveness. According to Udo and Okon (2021),

competitiveness can occur in a country where the market is free and free market means openness to trade where goods and services are allowed to move freely across nations. This trend enhances competitiveness. Thus, to achieve this, many approaches have been adopted by several administrations in Nigeria.

Women Education and Women Education in Nigeria

Women education refers to the process of providing girls and women with equal access to quality learning opportunities at all levels—primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational, and adult education. It is recognized globally as a fundamental human right and a key driver of national development. According to UNESCO (2023), education empowers women with knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary for personal development and active participation in society.

Historically, women's education was limited in many societies due to cultural beliefs that prioritized men's roles in leadership and economic activities. Over time, advocacy movements and international agreements such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 5 (Gender Equality), have emphasized equal educational opportunities for women and girls. United Nation Women (2022) notes that gender equality in education is essential for achieving broader social and economic progress.

The importance of women education is evident in its social and economic benefits. Educated women are more likely to secure better employment, earn higher incomes, and contribute meaningfully to national productivity. The World Bank (2023) reports that increasing girls' secondary education significantly boosts economic growth and reduces poverty levels. Furthermore, women who are educated tend to marry later, have healthier children, and make informed decisions about family and community development.

Despite progress, challenges remain in many developing countries. Barriers such as poverty, early marriage, cultural discrimination, insecurity, and inadequate school facilities continue to limit girls' access to education. UNICEF (2022) highlights that millions of girls worldwide remain out of school, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, due to social and economic constraints.

Women's education in Nigeria refers to the formal and informal learning opportunities provided to girls and women at all levels—basic, secondary, tertiary, vocational, and adult education. It plays a vital role in national development, poverty reduction, improved health outcomes, and economic growth. According to the Federal Ministry of Education (2014), education is a

fundamental human right and a key instrument for national development, and it emphasizes equal educational opportunities for both males and females in its National Policy on Education.

Historically, female education in Nigeria was limited during the pre-colonial and early colonial periods due to cultural beliefs and gender roles that prioritized domestic responsibilities for women. However, during the colonial era, missionary activities contributed significantly to the expansion of Western education, although boys were still favored over girls. After independence in 1960, successive governments introduced reforms to close gender gaps in education. The introduction of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1976 and later the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme in 1999 helped to improve girls' enrollment rates (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2018).

Despite improvements, gender disparities persist, particularly in northern Nigeria. According to UNICEF (2022), Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children globally, and girls are disproportionately affected due to poverty, early marriage, insecurity, and cultural practices. In some rural areas, parents still prioritize boys' education over girls', believing that girls will eventually marry and leave the family.

The importance of women's education cannot be overstated. Educated women are more likely to participate in the labour force, contribute to national income, and raise healthier families. The World Bank (2023) reports that increasing female education levels significantly boosts economic productivity and national GDP growth. Furthermore, educated women tend to have fewer and healthier children, reducing maternal and child mortality rates and improving overall societal well-being.

Several government and international initiatives aim to promote women's education in Nigeria. Organizations such as UN Women and UNESCO support programs focused on girls' access to quality education, gender equality, and empowerment. Policies promoting girl-child education, scholarship schemes, and community sensitization programs have contributed to gradual progress in closing the gender gap.

However, challenges remain. These include inadequate funding, insecurity in some regions, teenage pregnancy, child labour, and weak policy implementation. Addressing these challenges requires stronger political commitment, increased funding for education, enforcement of laws against early child marriage, and community engagement to change harmful cultural norms.

To improve women's education, governments and stakeholders must implement gender-sensitive policies, provide scholarships for girls, improve school infrastructure, and promote community awareness about the value of educating women. Investment in women's education is not only a moral obligation but also a strategic tool for sustainable development and global competitiveness.

Theoretical Perspective

There are several theories associated with women education, economic growth and global competitiveness but for the purposes of this write-up, three theories (Women in Development theory, empowerment theory and Porter's theory on Competitiveness) are adopted.

Women in Development Theory (WID)

One theory which has remained prominent as regards women education and empowerment is the "Women in Development" (WID) theory. According to Akubilo and Omeke (2012), women in development approach emerged in the 1970s and was adopted by the United Nations Agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Bank. A Women in Development (WID) approach is based on the concept that women are marginalized in development-oriented interventions, with the result that women are often excluded from the benefits of development. Hence, the overall objective is to ensure that resources and interventions for development are used to improve the condition and position of women. The WID approach, however, does not necessarily result in changing male-female unequal gender relations. Rather, it intends to support women-specific practical needs such as women's skills development for income generation. It should be noted that the fact that WID approaches do not analyze and address power differentials in the relationship between women and men is seen as a major shortcoming of the approach, WID-oriented programmes are often contrasted to Gender and Development (GAD)-oriented programmes.

The WID aims to integrate women into global economic processes to improve their status and contributions. According to UN ESCWA, it addresses women's marginalization in development focusing on practical needs and skills rather than challenging underlying structural power relating frequently contrasting with the later, more structural Gender and Development (GAD) approach.

WID is based on the idea that education leads to economic development and therefore advocates for inclusion of women in economic and educational policies as a means of achieving women

empowerment. WID approach holds that there is a relationship between education and employment in the formal sector as education helps women to acquire skills which enable them to secure employment. WID approach has led to policies and strategies which resulted in granting women equal access to education and participation in paid employment.

Porter's Theory of Competitiveness

This theory was founded by Porter in the year 2010 and it has to do with competitive advantage of nations. The theory provides that it is the elements in a cluster that will aid competitiveness. These include suppliers of specialized inputs, providers of specialized infrastructure, customers, companies in industries related by skills, technologies, or common inputs, governmental and other institutions—such as universities, standards-setting agencies, vocational training providers, and trade associations—that provide specialized training, education, information, research and technical support. The theory opined that where these elements are adequately managed, it will lead to competitiveness which will lead to economic development.

The theory also emphasized on interconnectedness through collaboration and competition among countries which will promote growth, innovation, and competitiveness at last.

The theory argued that a country which invests in advanced factors such as sophisticated labour and technology has domestic customers who are sophisticated and demanding, has suppliers or related industries that are internationally competitive and has appropriate Firm Strategy and a vigorously domestic rivalry (a competitive market structure) which will enhance a nation's competitive advantage. (Akinola & Adekile, 2024).

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment theory was propounded by [blank] and is an on-going process where individuals and communities gain control over their lives, access resources and develop critical understanding of their environment. The theory addresses powerlessness caused by systemic oppression by focusing on both the process of empowerment and the resulting outcomes aiming for personal, organizational and community-level change.

According to [blank] the key components and dimensions of empowerment theory operate across multiple levels emphasizing that no single standard fits all contexts:

- **Dimensions:** That includes intrapersonal (feeling of control), interactional (critical awareness), and behavioural (action-oriented components).
- **Levels:** It addresses empowerment at the individual (Self-efficacy), organizational (shared leadership), and community (collective action levels).

- **Processes:** These are actions that [blank] resources, such as participation in community organization or skill-building.
- **Outcomes:** The result of these processes, such as increased influence in policy decision or improved quality of life.

Ways to Reposition Women Education for Economic Growth and Global

Competitiveness in Nigeria

For women education in Nigeria to stimulate the nation's economic growth and remain global competitive in the era of globalization, there are certain measures or strategies that need to be taken by the government at all levels as recommended by the World Bank, National Policy on Education of the Federal Ministry of Education of Nigeria, and Nigeria Economic Summit Group policy brief which states that aligning education with labour market demands enhances employability and economic productivity.

1. Increase Access to Quality Basic and Secondary Education for Girls

Many girls in Nigeria are still out of school due to poverty, early marriage, insecurity, and cultural norms. Ensuring universal access to primary and secondary education for girls builds foundational skills needed for economic participation. The strategies to apply in this respect include:

- i. Scholarships and bursary programs for girls from low-income households.
- ii. Community engagement programs to reduce early marriage and promote girls' schooling.
- iii. Safe school environments (especially in northern regions where insecurity affects girls' schooling).

2. Expand STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) Education for Girls

STEM fields are crucial for innovation, technology development, and high-growth sectors of the economy. This will involve:

- i. Encouraging girls' participation in STEM prepares Nigeria's workforce for global competition.
- ii. STEM clubs and competitions targeted at girls in secondary schools.
- iii. Partnerships with tech firms to offer mentorship, internships, and coding bootcamps for young women.
- iv. Scholarships for tertiary STEM education for high-performing girls.

3. Strengthen Vocational and Technical Education for Women

Not all learners enter academia; vocational skills empower women to create jobs or enter skilled workforces. The specific strategies will involve:

- i. Establish women-inclusive vocational training centers in urban and rural areas.
- ii. Skills training in areas like construction technology, ICT, agribusiness, digital marketing, and fashion design.

4. Promote Gender-Sensitive Curriculum and Teacher Training

Gender bias in educational materials and teachers' attitudes can limit girls' aspirations. Gender-responsive teaching encourages girls to pursue ambitious careers. This will involve:

- i. Review and revise curricula to remove stereotypes.
- ii. Train teachers in gender-inclusive pedagogy.
- iii. Encourage positive female role models in textbooks.

5. Support Tertiary and Postgraduate Education for Women

Higher education equips women with advanced skills crucial for leadership and high-value economic roles. The strategies shall involve:

- i. Government and private sector scholarships for women in postgraduate programs.
- ii. Research grants targeted at women scholars.
- iii. Leadership development programs for female academics and professionals.

6. Link Education to Labour Market Needs and Entrepreneurship

Education should align with labour market demands so graduates can work in growing industries or start successful businesses. To this end, the following strategies need to be adopted:

- i. Integrate internships, apprenticeships, and industrial training into curricula.
- ii. Provide business incubators and entrepreneurship training at universities.
- iii. Strengthen career-advisory services focused on future jobs and global trends.

7. Reform Policy and Strengthen Implementation

Strong education policies with measurable targets for girls' education ensure lasting impact. This will require the following:

- i. Implementation of existing policies like the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act with gender benchmarks.
- ii. Increased budgetary allocation to education, focusing on girls and women.
- iii. Monitoring and evaluation systems to track female participation and outcomes.

8. Engage Communities and Change Social Norms

Deep-rooted cultural norms can discourage girls from education. Community involvement helps shift mindsets. This includes:

- i. Local campaigns led by traditional and religious leaders to promote girl-child education.
- ii. Parent-teacher associations that prioritize girls' attendance.
- iii. Community sponsorship of girls' schooling.

Conclusion

Women's education in Nigeria is essential for sustainable development and global competitiveness. While significant progress has been made through government policies and international support, gender inequality in education still exists. Strengthening policies, increasing access, and promoting gender-sensitive educational practices will help Nigeria harness the full potential of its female population for national growth and development.

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