



COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA AND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HOME-SCHOOLING ON THE GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION

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Abstract

The world woke to the news of a deadly disease called the Coronavirus (or COVID-19) in the last month of 2019. The outbreak was first noticed in Wuhan, a province of the Republic of China. The virus spread from China to other parts of the world before the end of 2019. In a bid to flatten the curve of the virus, world leaders, inclusive of the Nigerian government, issued the order of the complete lockdown of economic, political, religious and social lives in their respective countries. This led to the immediate closure of schools in Nigeria in March 2020. Home-schooling or distance learning was adopted here and in many parts of the globe. This paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of the home-school approach enforced by the government to bridge the gap occasioned by the closure of schools. This is with a view to assess the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on the education of girl-children. The study adopts a descriptive phenomenology approach to interrogate the introduction of home-schooling in Nigeria during the COVID-19 lockdown. Findings reveal that a high percentage of Nigerian girls and women were unable to access education through distance-learning during the lockdown. Family socio-economic status and a poor ICT (i.e. Information Communication Technology) driven curriculum among others, were challenges identified. Complete overhauling of the school curriculum to incorporate ICT in teaching-learning processes and procurement of e-learning resources for Nigerian students form part of the recommendations towards sustainable girl-child education and women's empowerment in Nigeria.

Introduction

The history of infectious pandemics shows that the lockdown of social movement is an effective strategy for curbing viral infections. Like some other infections that have plagued the world in the past (such as SARS or Ebola), COVID-19 has led to restriction and lockdown through to an extent far exceeding that of any other response to previous pandemics.

Other measures adopted for the curbing of this disease include frequent washing of hands with soap under a running tap, sneezing into one's curved elbow, covering the mouth with a disposable napkin when coughing, social distancing, eschewing crowded places or public transport, using a nose and mouth covering mask, use of hand sanitizer and observing hygienic practices (such as regular cleaning of surfaces) in the home. The pandemic which is the fifth after the 1918 flu pandemic has affected (at the time of writing) five million, seven hundred and nineteen thousand and eighteen (5,719,018) people (Liu, Y., Kuo, R., & Shih, S. 2020). The number of recoveries is put at two million four hundred and fifty-six thousand, four hundred and forty-seven (2,456,447) with fatality as high as three hundred and fifty-three thousand and sixty (353,060) (Worldometers 2020).

In Nigeria, the first case was recorded and confirmed on 27 February 2020 in Lagos State where an Italian citizen tested positive. Since the index case, there has been a daily increase of infected persons in Nigeria. As of the last week of May 2020, Nigeria has recorded eight thousand three hundred and forty-four reported cases (8,344). A total of two thousand (2000) infected patients have fully recovered and been discharged from isolation centres while a total two hundred and forty-nine (249) deaths have been recorded. No cure has yet been discovered for the virus, and quarantine and social distancing are encouraged by medical experts to prevent or to minimize further spread of the disease (Worldometers, 2020).

Whereas “endemic” refers to a disease or condition that is found regularly among a particular people or in a certain region, “pandemic” refers to something occurring regularly in a very wide area, crossing international, even continental boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people (Peterman et. al. 2020:528). The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) describes COVID-19 as a disease caused by a new strain of Coronaviruses that have not been previously identified in humans. The virus is contracted where there is close contact of less than two metres with an infected person. The mode of spread of the virus includes inhalation of droplets from the nose or mouth of infected persons, or contact with door handles, tables or work surfaces which an infected person has touched. Quarantine and self-isolation are necessary for public health responses to this pandemic (Peterman 2020:24).

Going by the above information, COVID-19 is highly contagious and allowing schools to remain in session would conceivably have been disastrous despite of suggestions that children are less likely to contact the virus or show symptoms. Consequently, the Nigerian government ordered the closure of all schools across the country. The closure of schools and other public gathering places has actually assisted in flattening the curve of the spread of COVID-19 but not without setbacks in the national life of Nigeria. One major aspect that has been badly affected is education. In recognition of this, the government introduced home-school programmes to cushion the effect of the closure of schools. The paper aims at critically assessing the operation of the home-school programme viz-à-viz the agenda for girl-child education and women's empowerment.

Girl-child Education and Women's Empowerment

The 21st century is an age of remarkable upsurge in advocacy and policy affirmation for girl-child rights and women's empowerment. International organizations like the United Nations (UN), United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF), Every Woman Foundation (EWf), among others, are working relentlessly to ensure continued access to education and quality of life for girl-children and women. The narratives of girl-child education are gradually changing for the better. Cultural and religious biases against female education and participation in government are steadily giving way. A UNICEF report on 2030 Education Agenda acknowledges the fact that more than ever before, children (girl-child inclusive) are now enrolled in school (UNICEF, 2019:1). While some battles have been won, the war is not over. It is one thing to get children enrolled in school; it is another thing entirely to protect the rights of those children to receive a quality education.

Osokoya (2006:71) notes that increased access to qualitative and functional educational opportunities for all boys and girls is the most effective means to combat poverty, reduce misunderstanding, political and religious intolerance and enforce respect for others. He holds that girl-child education is essential for transformation in economic, social, political and technological spheres. Similarly, in my appraisal of the development of girl-child education in Nigeria, I reasoned that qualitative education acquired by some privileged Nigerian women has enabled them to become

ministers in the federal executive cabinet and assume other elected positions nationwide. A poorly educated woman or a school drop-out will never be able to compete with male folks in the labour market, let alone the political scene (Balogun 2014:385).

A cursory look at academic activities in public schools before COVID-19 school lockdown reveals a system characterised by incessant industrial disputes between the Teachers' Union and various state government departments. Teaching and non-teaching staff of the nation's tertiary institutions are not left out. Academic Staff Union of Universities in Nigeria has repeatedly embarked on strikes because of deterioration or non-existence of infrastructures in Nigerian universities. The story is not different in colleges of education and polytechnics in Nigeria. Industrial action has become an "annual ritual" in Nigerian universities. Predictably, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed yet more the existing inequalities and decadence in the Nigerian educational system. The question arising from all of this is: can Nigerian girl-children and women develop their potentials and adequately prepare for a technology-driven economy in an education system laden with inequities and corruption?

Situational Analysis of COVID-19 Home-School in Nigeria

Home-school offers an alternative instruction delivery to a regular classroom setting. It simply means education that is presented at home, usually under the guidance of parents and not teachers or school administrators. In the present, home-schooling is most often conducted because either a child has special needs (this could be sensory, behavioural, educational or emotional kind), or because a child's parents set standards – either educational/aspirational or moral/religious in most cases – that they feel are not being met by the school system. However, the home-school system predates formal school settings, as parents are traditionally known to be children's first teachers. In the pre-industrial revolution era in Europe, formal schooling was not popular. Tuomi & Miller (2011) hint that in pre-industrial revolution European society, provision of education was the responsibility of households, communities, workplaces, and the church. They argue that formal schooling in institutionalized settings became more mainstream when the need arose to address the increasing demand for efficiency and specialization occasioned by systems of pro-

duction. In this scenario, traditional education and moral education provided by the home and the church respectively, lost popularity as these became inefficient to meet the needs of industrialized Europe.

Yin, Zakaria & Baharun (2016:65) maintain that home-schooling is neither a new concept nor practice. While affirming its long years of existence before formal school settings became normalized, they note that it re-emerged as a result of agitations by scholars from different philosophical traditions who expressed displeasure at formal schooling for several reasons. They stress further that the renaissance of home-school emanated from the activities of social movements and religious fundamentalists. By the 1960s and 1970s, home-schooling had become popular. In other words, home-schooling has been an established part of the western world from the twentieth century and even well before that. It offers an alternative to the formal school system within an existing legal framework.

Parents who choose to home-school their children do it for a variety of reasons. These range from religious reasons, to the lack of trust in schools, to the fear of bad peer influence, to general dissatisfaction in the public-school-system. Other reasons for home-schooling a child may be due to illness, multiple disability, disciplinary cases or the outbreak of a communicable disease. It is not surprising that home-school became a ready alternative to formal school in the face of the school lockdown occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is no data for home-schooling of students in Nigeria, though there are a few elite families who choose to home-school their wards on account of religious and or socio-economic concerns. The truth is that, the practice is somehow strange to the generality of Nigerians. In any case, Nigerian schools too explored home-school as an alternative or temporary measure during the COVID-19 school closures. Radio and television stations broadcast educational programmes for students of between thirty to sixty minutes in length, daily or on alternate days, depending on the station. WhatsApp was equally employed by some state government for disseminating information. Tertiary institutions, however, were left out of digital classes. The Hon. Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu mandated all tertiary institutions in Nigeria to commence online lectures in April 2020. Unfortunately, this order was blatantly rejected by lecturers. Their excuse was that the various institutions lacked an environment that enabled effective e-learning. Invariably, students in public institutions in Nigeria

were left without educational support services during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, private universities did engage their students via online learning and by correspondence.

Emerging Challenges

The home-school initiative as a form of distance learning adopted during the COVID-19 lockdown suffered set-backs in Nigeria for several reasons. These include:

1) **Poor Digital/Information Communication Technology (ICT) and Literacy**

There is no doubt that Nigerian students in public elementary and secondary schools are exposed to computer studies but the truth is that they are not exposed to practical aspects that will actually help them to operate the computer for effective educational purposes. Public schools in Nigeria, right up to tertiary level, suffer from insufficient digital infrastructure and sometimes, even from the absence of such. Alumni associations of some secondary schools in the metropolitan areas donated computer units to their alma mater but students had not been exposed to or prepared for e-learning. Teachers were not adequately trained in computer competence (let alone online pedagogy) and could not, in most cases, use digital or ICT as a substitute for classroom delivery. Invariably, adopting sophisticated e-learning platforms like Zoom or Google Classroom during the COVID-19 school closure was more than a mirage or fantasy. This is why the Ministry of Education across the states opted for teaching-learning through radio and television.

The story is the same at the tertiary education level. Lectures have mostly been delivered without any recourse to ICT resources; examinations remain paper-based. Large percentages of students seeking admission into tertiary institutions fail to secure placements in the institutions of their choice. This is not unconnected to the computer-based testing introduced by the Joint Admissions Matriculation Board (JAMB). About sixty percent (60%) of candidates learned to use the computer for academic purposes a few days before writing JAMB qualifying examinations.

2) High Cost of Digital/ICT Access

The socio-economic status of parents is a major determinant of the form and quality of education provided for children and youths. Providing digital or ICT access is capital-intensive. Low-income earners are very often excluded from internet access due to lack of financial resources to procure ICT products and applications. The cost of android phones and computer systems is beyond the reach of most average Nigerians. This has further increased the vulnerability and social exclusion of children of low-income earners, most pronouncedly during the COVID-19 school lockdown. ICT products are designed with little or no consideration for the economic and environmental circumstances of their users (Ahmed 2007:333). The cost of a regular subscription to the internet in Nigeria is quite high. Not many students using devices that can launch the internet can afford the exorbitant charges of internet service providers. One might expect a relief in the charges of telecommunication companies during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for Nigerian students across all levels of the educational system but the reality in Nigeria is that no such gesture was extended to subscribers.

Home-schooling requires maximum utilization of internet access. The environment with the best record of success in this mode of study has easy and affordable access to the internet. Connectivity to the internet is another big challenge for ICT utilization in Nigeria. Few parents can afford the high cost of digital or Zoom classes like Microsoft Teams, U-leson and the likes, and even if they can, they might still be frustrated by poor internet connectivity. Students, in the end, complain of boredom and frustration as a result of a constant disruption in their classes due to poor internet connectivity.

3) Disparity in Gender ICT Participation

The twenty-first century world is characterised by inventions and utilization of Information Communication Technology (ICT). Nigeria is rated high among African nations that have embraced the use of the internet. ICT has been employed in banking operations, education, and social interactions to name but a few sectors. However, scholars have expressed concerns over gender disparity in both the awareness and utilization of ICT. George & Barnabas (2015) put the gender distribution of internet users in Nigeria at 69% male and 31% female, indicating that access to ICT is still unequal. Reporting on a study conducted by Intel, Antonio &

Tuffley (2014:677) note that 45% of women in sub-Saharan Africa lack any internet access due to either non-availability or prohibitive cost. The implication of this is that, even where digital infrastructure is available, relatively few women are likely to benefit from it meaningfully. During the COVID-19 school closure, children are not able to benefit effectively from home-schooling in households where mothers have low or no ICT competence. Although young women in tertiary institutions know about ICT, lack of adequate digital infrastructure has widely excluded them from continuing learning during the COVID-19 lockdown.

4) Power Failure

The provision of uninterrupted electricity has long since formed part of the social infrastructural priority of successive governments in Nigeria. Despite this, the erratic power supply is the norm in Nigeria. The low-cost technology adopted by the Nigerian government during the COVID-19 pandemic, that is, teaching-learning delivery through radio, television and telephones is hampered by power failures. Many rural communities in Nigeria are not connected to the national grid. Obviously, girl-children in rural communities is, therefore, completely left out. Only families that can afford alternative power generation are consistently able to follow the online education programme. The irregular power supply made many students frustrated and unproductive.

Implications of COVID-19 on Women's Empowerment

The various challenges highlighted have implications for gender education and empowerment. In periods of epidemic and conflicts, females are particularly vulnerable to abuse and unequal access to education. Women are known to carry multiple family responsibilities at such times. The economic down-turn occasioned by COVID-19 has mounted pressure on girls and women to contribute to family income. When they should be pursuing their education, they are instead found on the streets, hawking wares, while the radio and television education programmes are going on. Again, ineffective education programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic have left many youths idle, left out and less productive. It has been said that an idle hand is the devil's workshop, and idle, bored youths engage in many anti-social behaviours. As mentioned earlier, women are often disadvantaged during outbreaks of pandemics. Cases of rape and

other forms of gender-based violence multiply and make headlines on electronic and social media. Girls have been raped daily, including by relatives; women have been gang-raped and brutally murdered. These abuses raise questions for formal social protection for women folk during the COVID-19 pandemic (Iroanusi 2020). Many girl-children have been impregnated during the lockdown, and those in this category are not likely to further their studies in the post-COVID-19 school resumption.

Unequal access to qualitative education during the COVID-19 school closure will have negative consequences on socio-economic and political participation of women in the post-COVID-19 Nigerian society. A poorly educated girl-child or a drop-out will not have access to resources that will make self-sufficiency and good family life more likely. A well-educated mother has a better prospect of contributing positively to family health, to protect her family from incidences of maternal and infant mortality, to conform with health protocols during pandemic situations and to prepare herself and her offspring for national development (Osokoya 2008:72). However, attaining this will be even harder for the womenfolk of Nigeria, if the present gender inequality and injustice, exacerbated by COVID-19, in the Nigerian education system is not addressed. Consequently, to meet the 2030 Education Agenda for women's empowerment in Nigeria, there is a need to consider the following:

- There is the need to design the school curriculum across all levels by education stakeholders to be student-centred and ICT driven. There is a need to reconsider the place of technology in education.
- The government needs to focus on capacity building for teachers on the use of digital resources for teaching-learning.
- Adequate funding is required to reposition the infrastructural decay in the Nigerian education system. Government agencies like the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) should partner with non-profit non-governmental agencies to procure computer systems and other ICT resources for schools and students.
- Efforts should be stepped up to remove gender inequality in access and utilization of ICT resources by females in Nigeria.
- Government and public philanthropists should install solar power electricity in schools, especially schools in rural communities.
- There is a need for legislative affirmation for the design and operation of home-schooling as practised in the developed nations.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, discussions have established the fact that COVID-19 has further revealed the educational inequalities in Nigeria. Students from economically advantaged homes continue to have access to learning in the face of the pandemic, while students from poor homes are left out. COVID-19 has also exacerbated the gender divide in terms of digital access and utilization in Nigeria. These have grave implications on girl-child education and women's empowerment in Nigeria. COVID-19 will definitely end, but its impact on female education in a society that has records of socio-cultural obstacles for female education in the pre-pandemic Nigerian society will linger for a long time. Education policymakers and other stakeholders need to synergize efforts to reposition education in Nigeria to address the gender divide and other inequalities in technology-driven life-long education for all categories of learners, but particularly for women and girls.

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