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CHALLENGES ON THE PROVISION OF QUALITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR LIFELONG LEARNING OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN ONITSHA SOUTH COMMUNITY, SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

Professor (Dr.) Adaeze JUNI Menakaya
CICA International University and Seminary
New York, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to determine challenges facing the provision of quality and inclusive education for lifelong learning of women with disabilities in Onitsha South Community, Southeast Nigeria. One research question guided the study. The study adopted a descriptive survey. The population consists of 300 women with disabilities in Onitsha south communities who were selected via random sampling. A questionnaire was developed and used to elicit responses from the respondents, while Frequencies and percentages were used to analyse the collected data. The findings showed that early marriage affect their access and participation to quality and inclusive education; especially those young women with learning disabilities. Some parents try to give their hand away to early marriage and focus on training those without any form of disability in the family. The study also revealed that cultural beliefs and practices hinder women with disabilities access to quality and inclusive education. A number of factors which can contribute to the formation and perpetuation of negative beliefs against women with disability were also found and they include: Lack of understanding and awareness of disability; misconceptions or social constructions concerning the causes of disabilities; ill-informed and insensitive media coverage that perpetuates negative views; Reinforcement of prejudice and fears through law and policy that may affirm harmful beliefs about disability. Based on the findings, recommendations were made. To help make the issues of women with disabilities better and sustainable in Nigeria, the stakeholders can do the following: Recognize fully and fund the talents of people with disabilities, especially young girls and women; Create a plan for employment and retention of women with disabilities and use vendors that do the same; Support those who engage in trade and commerce; and provide them with credit facilities; and Make a commitment to enable women with disabilities to develop peer relationships, build social skills, and respect and accept each other, including the men-folk.

Keywords: Quality and Inclusive Education; Lifelong Learning; Women with Disabilities.

Introduction

Globally, the issues of quality and inclusive education have been constantly advocated by stakeholders in every society because the right to education is a human right and indispensable for the exercise of other human rights (UNESCO, 2020). Quality and inclusive education refers to an educational system that ensures all learners, regardless of their background, abilities, or circumstances, have equal access to high-quality education that meets their individual needs. It aims to provide a supportive and inclusive learning environment that promotes the holistic development of every learner, fosters their full potential, and prepares them for active participation in society. The processes of living and learning in the society have given impetus to individuals to strive hard in developing great interest to seek knowledge on supportive things to solve problems within and outside their environment. According to UNESCO, Education is a fundamental human right that underpins the Education 2030 Agenda, by which countries pledged to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

Furthermore, the UNICEF (2018) explained that every child has the fundamental right to quality education – one that helps them acquire basic literacy and numeracy, enjoy learning without fear, and feel valued and included, irrespective of where they come from. This human right to learning is not easy to access by many in the society irrespective of its advocacy across the world. There are vulnerable and less privileged citizens in different nations that have not been able to get education.

Access to education of poor quality is tantamount to no education at all. There is little point in providing the opportunity for a child to enroll in school if the quality of the education is so poor that the child will not become literate or numerate, or will fail to acquire critical life skills (UNICEF, 2018). According to UNESCO (2020) 8.2% of primary school age children does not go to primary school. Only six in ten young people will be finishing secondary school in 2030. The youth literacy rate (15-24) is of 91.73%, meaning 102 million youth lack basic literacy skills. It was observed that the society are a long way from ensuring that all people, irrespective of their sex, age, race or ethnicity, ability, location, or other social characteristics, have equal rights to access and benefit from quality education.

Therefore, if we want to meet the targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the effective implementation of inclusive educational policies and programmes should be considered as a high priority. Thus, as this study stress the need for provision of quality and inclusive education amongst the populace, it is pertinent to note that womenfolk are equally affected especially women with disabilities in our communities. These women with disabilities

have several challenges when it comes to acquisition of knowledge and skills in the society. They require inclusive quality education which means that all women, regardless of physical, intellectual, social, emotional or linguistic abilities, learn and participate equally and effectively, in safety and free from gender bias.

The number of illiterate adults keeps growing despite efforts from governmental and non-government agencies to curb it. According to Chieke, Madu and Ewelum (2017), each year, an estimated 2.3 million persons join the pool of those 23 million adults considered to be functionally illiterate. The literacy situation in Africa as analysed by UNESCO as reported in Nwafor and Agi (2013), shows that Nigeria's literacy level is 49%, more so, World Bank's report (2010), has it that Nigeria's male adult literacy rate is 71.9%, i.e., those who aged 15 and above, and who can read and write simple statement in their daily life activities. To address this situation, an appropriate step would be to re-emphasize adult education programmes viz a viz lifelong learning process to enhance quality and inclusive education in our communities.

Lifelong learning has been described as a process that includes people learning in different contexts (O'Grady, 2013). These environments do not only include schools but also homes, workplaces, and even locations where people pursue leisure activities. However, O'Grady explained that while the learning process can be applied to learners of all ages, there is a focus on adults who are returning to organized learning. There are programmes based on its framework that address the different needs of learners, such as United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, which caters to the needs of the disadvantaged and marginalized learners (Jarvis, 2009).

Lifelong learning focuses on holistic education and it has two dimensions, namely, lifelong and broad options for learning. These indicate learning that integrates traditional education proposals and modern learning opportunities (Qinhua; Dongming, Zhiying and Hao, (2016). The authors stressed that it also entails an emphasis on encouraging people to learn how to learn and to select content, process, and methodologies that pursues self-design and self-perfection. Some authors highlight that lifelong learning is founded on a different conceptualization of knowledge and its acquisition. It is explained not only as the possession of discrete pieces of information or factual knowledge but also as a generalized scheme of making sense of new events, including the use of tactics in order to effectively deal with them (Sharma, 2004). Therefore, the objective of this study is to determine the need for quality and inclusive education for lifelong learning of women with disabilities in Onitsha South Community, Southeast Nigeria.

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Research Question: What are the challenges facing the provision of quality and inclusive education for lifelong learning of women with disabilities in Onitsha South Community, Southeast Nigeria.

Method

The study adopted a descriptive survey to determine the need for quality and inclusive education for lifelong learning of women with disabilities in Onitsha South Community, Southeast Nigeria. One research question guided the study. The population consists of 300 women with disabilities in Onitsha south communities who were selected via random sampling. A questionnaire was developed to elicit responses from the respondents, while Frequencies and percentages were used to analyse the collected data.

Presentation of Results

Table 1: *mean rating of the perceived challenges on the provision of quality and inclusive education for lifelong learning of women with disabilities in Onitsha south community, southeast Nigeria.*

S/N	Item Descriptions	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	T	$\bar{X}$	Decision
1	Early marriage affects women with disabilities to access quality and inclusive education	108 (432)	92 (276)	88 (176)	12 (12)	300 (896)	2.9	Agreed
2	Cultural beliefs and practices hinder women with disabilities access to quality and inclusive education	82 (328)	87 (261)	73 (146)	58 (58)	300 (793)	2.6	Agreed
3	Lack of funds is an obstacle to women with disabilities to access quality and inclusive education	135 (540)	116 (348)	46 (92)	3 (3)	300	3.3	Agreed
4	Family preference in quality and inclusive education favor mostly males than females	41 (164)	69 (207)	96 (192)	94 (94)	300	2.1	Disagreed
	GRAND MEAN						3.0	Agreed

Table 1 mean ratings:

Item 1 showed that the respondents agreed with that early marriage affects women with disabilities' to access quality and inclusive education. The result revealed that most of item agreed with the mean score of 2.9 which is the decision rule.

Item 2 also agreed with mean score 2.6 that cultural beliefs and practices hinder women

with disabilities access to quality and inclusive education.
Item 3 agreed with mean score 3.3 that lack of funds is an obstacle to women with disabilities to access quality and inclusive education; While Item 4 disagreed with mean score of 2.1 that family preference in quality and inclusive education favour mostly males than females.

Discussion of Findings
Generally speaking, the challenges facing the provision of quality and inclusive education for lifelong learning of women with disabilities cannot be overemphasized in Southeast, Nigeria. These challenges include advocacy efforts to improve the quality of life of women with disabilities which have shown that many of the women continue to encounter discrimination in different domains of life in our society.

The findings on Item 1 showed that early marriage affect their access and participation to quality and inclusive education; especially those young women with learning disabilities. Some parents try to give their hand away to early marriage and focus on training those without any form of disability in the family.

The study also reveals from Item 2 that cultural beliefs and practices hinder women with disabilities access to quality and inclusive education. A number of factors can contribute to the formation and perpetuation of negative beliefs against women with disability. These include: Lack of understanding and awareness of disability; Misconceptions or social constructions concerning the causes of disabilities; Ill-informed and insensitive media coverage that perpetuates negative views; Reinforcement of prejudice and fears through law and policy that may affirm harmful beliefs about disability. All these ignorance about disabilities affect access to quality and inclusive education to women with disabilities.

The study also identified lack of funds on Item 3 as an obstacle to women with disabilities to access quality and inclusive education. Poverty among women with disabilities is concerning, and requires programs focused specifically on alleviating poverty among women with disabilities, rather than just persons with disabilities or women. There are unique financial issues that women with disabilities face which must be addressed. Due to lack of funds for these women with disabilities, access to quality and inclusive education has been a great struggle to them (National Women's Law Center, 2023).

The study findings on Item 4 disclosed that family preference in quality and inclusive education favour mostly males than females. According to UNDP (2015) and World Bank (2012), women remain socially marginalized and underrepresented within the society, as well as, outside of households in low-income countries. Most societies especially in

African communities, males are preferred for quality and inclusive education than females whether gifted or disabled. Women are also shown to be mostly involved in domestic and in-door activities while men have a higher presence in professional roles.

Conclusion

Women education is a right, and women with disabilities have right to access quality and inclusive learning whether it is through functional literacy, lifelong learning programs or general education processes. Investment in women's education is widely believed to benefit the society through numerous economic and non-economic channels (UNESCO, 2006), hence, the need to provide them quality and inclusive education programs.

In this study, it was discovered that a high degree of gender stereotypes in the form of 'exclusion' and 'the quality of representation' in Onitsha South communities. Moreover, market women with disabilities were mostly associated with petty trading and passive support from the government. The extent of stereotypes found in the marketplace, however, varies across communities. Making an intentional effort ensures that people with disabilities are welcomed and treated fairly at events and in employment is critical to diversity, equity, and inclusion overall (Anderson, 2023).

Recommendations

By way of recommendations, the author presented general tips for stakeholders to keep in mind while dealing with persons with disabilities, including women: These include;

- Language matters. Use terminology that is inclusive.
- Treat adults with disabilities as adults. Baby talk is not appropriate.
- Speak directly to people with disabilities, not at their aide or sign language interpreter. Talk at eye level; if necessary, sit in a chair to be on the same level as a person who uses a wheelchair.
- Listen patiently and attentively to a person who has difficulty speaking; do not try to finish their thoughts for them.
- Remember that a person's mobility equipment is part of their personal space. Don't move a wheelchair, cane, or scooter without their permission.
- Not all disabilities are visible or apparent, but this does not make them any less real.
- Be mindful that people with cognitive or psychological disabilities have varying ways of coping with their conditions.
- Please note it is considered offensive to pretend to have a disability, and disability simulation experiences should be done for design/navigational purposes only.
- If you are unsure how to interact with a person with disabilities, ask them!

To help make the issues of women with disabilities better and sustainable in Nigeria, the stakeholders can do the following:

1. Recognize fully and fund the talents of people with disabilities, especially young girls and women.
2. Create a plan for employment and retention of women with disabilities and use vendors that do the same. Support those who engage in trade and commerce; and provide them with credit facilities.
3. Make a commitment to enable women with disabilities to develop peer relationships, build social skills, and respect and accept each other, including the men-folk.
4. Provide training to make inclusion successful for all females and males.
5. Improve social determinants of health, such as promoting physical access, changing social attitudes to foster disability inclusion, and removing social and environmental barriers to health care access (Respectability, 2023).
6. Introduce lifelong skill acquisition programs for girls and women in different areas of human endeavor so that they can be trained to be self-reliant and self-employed within their community.
7. There should be more sensitization and awareness on disabilities and dispelling the cultural myths surrounding disability issues.
8. Males and females should have equal rights at home and society. There should be no preference on who gets education or training.
9. Issues of early marriage should be discouraged. Young girls with disability should rather be encouraged to embrace life skills and vocational training for self-employment, sustenance and actualization.

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