



CHAPTER 15

GENDER FAIRNESS IN SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION

Chinyere Nwagbara Prof.
FNIM, FCON, FIMC, MNAE, MNAL
Nasarawa State University, Keffi

Introduction

Gender is central to the growth and development of nations. The last two decades of the 20th century witnessed an unprecedented attention being focused on women and women related issues and their advancement in every facet of life (Nwagbara, 2003). This is evidenced by the many landmark global Conferences on Women and Human Rights which took place from 1980 to 2000, affirming that Women's Rights are Human Rights and women should have equal rights with men, devoid of any discrimination and marginalization, in accordance with the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948. This discourse starts with the clarification of the key concepts of gender - equality, equity and fairness as well as persons with special needs and special needs education as part of the introduction. This will enable the reader follow through, the key issues that will arise to guide this discourse .

Gender is a socio - cultural construct associated with being male or female. It is defined differently by different people as impacted by their socio - cultural backgrounds. Gender refers to socially constructed roles and socially learned behaviours and expectations associated with being male or being female (Oakley, 1996). Women and men are biologically different, but all cultures interpret and elaborate these inherent differences into a set of social expectations about what behaviours and activities are appropriate for them and what rights , privileges, resources and even power they possess (Nwagbara, 2003). Gender attributes roles and expectations to male and female, regardless of sex, which is a biological characteristic. It interacts with, but is different from sex. Sex refers to the different biological and physiological characteristic of males and females, such as hormones, chromosomes and reproductive organs. Gender identity refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with others. It also refers to the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female. In most societies, being male or female is not just a matter of different biological and physical characteristics. Men and women face different expectations about how they should dress, behave or work, or even sit. Iwuamadi and Oruwari (2018), cited in Ozoji (2021), further affirms that gender is a social, cultural construction and a social identity ascribed to male and female roles and shaped by the various cultural perspectives of the people. Though there are many definitions of the concept of



gender, but they all culminate in the widely shared norms and expectations about the roles, responsibilities, characteristics and accepted behaviours for men and women in any given society. Since gender is a socio- cultural construct, it is also expected to be amenable to change in ways that can bring about a fair and just society. Gender however affects progress towards equality and freedom from discrimination.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), stated that discrimination against women goes against the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity (UN,1979). Every citizen has a fundamental human right to freedom and dignity irrespective of sex, race, disability or ethnicity, with equal opportunities, rights and resources. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, among other international protocols, as an agenda for women empowerment, seeks to, establish the principle of shared power and responsibility between women and men at home and in the workplace, both in national and international spheres (UN, 1995). This is the underlying principle of gender equality and fairness..

Gender equality refers to people of all genders having equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities. It speaks to the equal participation of women and men in diverse aspects of life, like politics, education, economy. Gender equality means that women and men, girls and boys enjoy the same resources, opportunities and protections (unicef.org). Put simply. gender equality is a state in which access to rights and opportunities is not affected by gender. Clarifying it further, Martinez (2022), states that it does not mean that women and men will have or need the exact same resources, but that women's, men's and gender diverse peoples' rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on their assigned gender at birth. USAID (2015) affirms that gender equality means more than parity in numbers or laws on the books. It means expanding freedoms and improving overall quality of life so that equality is achieved without sacrificing gains for males or females. Gender equality was made part of the international human rights law by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. Thus, the United Nations declares that gender equality is not just a basic human right, it is also a foundation for a peaceful, thriving and sustainable world. Gender equality thus speaks to equality of the sexes in rights, resources, opportunities, status, power and protection, devoid of discrimination. Gender equality requires that both women and men participate fully as equal partners in productive and reproductive life.

Gender equity refers to the process of being fair to women and men. It ensures opportunities are not limited on the basis of gender. It is about fairness and impartiality. Gender equity is the provision of fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women, men and all genders (Martinez, 2022). It speaks to respecting people without discrimination, irrespective of gender. Gender equity also means addressing those inequalities that limit a person's ability to have access to opportunities for better life. Equity recognizes that



women and men have different needs but should be identified and addressed in a way that rectifies the imbalances between the sexes and considered equal in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities. Ozoji (2021), notes that equity is not a blind sharing of opportunities, rather it is a sharing of resources to address needs and equalize opportunities. So, it's about impartiality and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women and men according to their needs. It further speaks to fair and just treatment of both sexes which take into account the different needs of women and men, cultural barriers and (past) discriminations of a given group. It however recognizes that though women and gender - diverse persons are not in the same "starting position" as men, as a result of historical and social disadvantages, they are nevertheless, equal in their human rights. Gender equity lays the basis to aspire towards a gender fair society where there is no discrimination in all aspects of life. It is also a process to achieve gender equality.

Gender fairness refers to impartiality and justice to both women and men. It speaks to women and men being equal in human rights, devoid of discrimination, segregation and bias against either of them on the basis of gender, religion, ethnicity, social status or disability. Gender equality and gender equity harmonize to promote gender fairness and achievement of goals.

Special needs are related to but broader in context than disabilities. Special need persons are unique individuals who suffer from genetic or environmental factors resulting in their inability to learn like normal healthy persons. They are actually individuals who have a mental, physical and emotional disability. The WHO grouped learners with special needs into more than fourteen. This includes persons with autism, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, blindness, deafness, ADHD, missing limb. Some of the most common special needs that young children are diagnosed with include speech and / or language delays, Autism Spectrum Disorder, cognitive delays, social and emotional disorder and learning differences/ disabilities (FRN, 2015). Persons with special needs require exceptional and extra support to live like others in the society. They are classified into three broad categories.

- 1). Persons with disabilities - These are persons with (a) Physical - muscular dystrophy; (b)Developmental - autism, down syndrome; (c) Behavioural / Emotional - bi - polar, ADD; (d))Sensory - blind, visually impaired, deaf, limited hearing or auditory impairment; and (e)Intellectual - learning impairments; those who because of their condition cannot cope with regular school / class methods and processes.
- 2). At risk children / youth - these are children of nomadic, pastoral, migrant fisher folks, migrant farmers, and almajirai , who, due to their lifestyles and means of livelihood, are unable to have access to the conventional educational provisions / services.
- 3). Gifted and talented children/ youth - these persons have high intelligence quotient (IQ) and quite precocious. They are often not sufficiently challenged by



regular schooling in relation to curriculum and pace and hence need special attention for their unique circumstance.

Special needs education, Ozoji (2021) stated, is the sub - system of regular education that uses both regular and unique curriculum to provide quality education to women and girls with disability. This is for their functional educational transformation like their peers. He further notes that special needs education is a field of study sui generis as well as an authentic means to equalize educational opportunities for women and girls with disabilities.. Special needs education refers to education designed to facilitate the learning of individuals who, for various reasons, need additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods in order to participate and meet learning objectives (unesco.org). Reasons may include (but are not limited to) disadvantages - in physical, behavioural, intellectual, emotional and social capacities. Special needs education thus can be described as the unique education given to learners with unique circumstances, like learners with disabilities; at risk learners and the gifted and talented learners. In the context of this paper, special needs education refers to the education of women and girls with special needs and "special needs" can also be used interchangeably with "disability".

The thrust of this paper is gender fairness in Special Needs Education. The National Policy on Education (NPE) in consonance with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, states that education is a basic human right devoid of discrimination (FRN, 2013). Thus, education is based on equality and fairness. In the light of international and national commitments to Education for All (EFA), and the protocols on gender equality, one dares to ask, "how are women and girls with special needs faring in Nigeria?". One is actually not sure they are faring as well as they should. The widespread cultural biases against women folk limit their educational opportunities among others. Women and girls with special needs face discriminations arising from being female, being in minority of minorities and being disabled - triple jeopardy.

According to Rousso (2003), those committed to gender equity, by not considering disability, and those committed to disability, by not considering gender equity, have all unknowingly rendered girls invisible. However, their circumstances get worse as they are also in the minority of the minorities. Indeed, women and girls with special needs suffer from this invisibility as a result of the triple discrimination which defines them. These cut across cultures and levels of development.

Available data indicate that women and girls with disabilities fare less well in the educational sphere than their disabled male and non - disabled female counterparts. UNESCO, the World Blind Union and others estimate the literacy rate for disabled women as one percent compared to the estimate of about three percent for people without disabilities (Groce, 1997). Such findings in education make part of a larger picture of the triple discrimination of women and girls with special needs in virtually all areas. According to Nagata (2003), statistics from individual



countries and regions, while often higher, nonetheless confirm the gender inequities. In terms of school enrolment, UNESCO states that only two percent of disabled children are in school, with disabled girls even more underserved (unesco.org/wef/countryreports..). These findings are only a part of a larger picture of the triple discrimination based on gender, minority and special need status that plague the lives of women and girls with special needs. Thus, women and girls with special needs get limited options and opportunities. In the same vein, the World Bank (2003), noted that disparity in access to educational opportunity is an urgent gender equity issue in Nigeria. The United Nations (1979) indicates that discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and aspects of human dignity. Arising from this discourse are three key issues which will guide the paper:

- 1). overview of the challenges of gender issues of women and girls with special needs.
- 2). connecting gender and Special Needs Education
- 3). strategies to promote gender fairness in Special Needs Education and gender equality in the society.

Overview of the Challenges of Gender Issues of Women and Girls with Special Needs

Persons with special needs are in the minority of any population and it is worse if they are women and girls. Obviously, among women and girls generally, those with special needs are also in the minority. Thus, their chances of being noticed and recognized are slimmer than those of regular women and girls. They are poles away from the public view. They suffer from triple jeopardy : they are in the minority of minorities; they are of the female gender and they have special needs. However, attention is being paid to them by relevant international organizations through declarations and frameworks of action. Nigeria, along with other countries, endorse these frameworks in principle, but often lacks the political will for total implementation. Such declarations include Education for All (EFA) goals; Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Education 2030 : Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action..

Accurate data of women and girls with special needs in Nigeria is not readily available and where available, Ozoji (2021), stated that they are virtually inconclusive even in advanced countries. He observes that the WHO's estimates of ten percent benchmark of every given country population of people with special needs can be an understatement. UN Women estimates that one in five women live with one disability or the other. However, both statistics remain at best estimates for now since there is no conclusive or confirmatory evidence.

The diversity of women and girls with special needs are summarized to include those with

- 1). multiple and intersecting identities, like being from different and ethnic religious and racial backgrounds with distinct life experiences.



-
- 2). systemic and historical marginalization as well as attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their participation and inclusion in the society of regular women and girls.
 - 3). various types of disabilities including intellectual, physical and psycho - social impairments. and;
 - 4). those often excluded from different aspects of the humanitarian development continuum, international and national laws and policies.

Discrimination of women and girls with special needs in the society is quite pervasive. It is virtually in all aspects, including employment, income level, health care, education and marriage. This negative attitude towards women and girls with special needs cut across cultures and development levels. Women and girls with special needs are often stereotyped as helpless, sick, dependent, incompetent and hapless, seriously limiting their options and opportunities. They face more difficulties in public spaces. They often encounter neglect, sexual abuse, maltreatment, exploitation and gender based violence. Those who do not get the opportunity of formal education are often worse off. They may end up begging for sustenance. Thus, poverty is linked to women and girls with special needs.

Women and girls with special needs suffer from invisibility because unenlightened families keep them hidden from the public eye, often times out of shame. A daughter with disability is a little family secret. This naturally results in self resentment for the women and girls with special needs as they are made to believe they are inadequate. Invisibility is arguably. one of the biggest barriers to educational equity for women and girls with special needs. It could also be responsible for the limited inter - personal relationships among women and girls with special needs as they feel snubbed and rejected by all. Unfortunately, they feel powerless to fight these negative attitudes towards them. The feeling of powerlessness gets exacerbated by their lack of education, rehabilitation and empowerment.

The heterogeneity of women and girls with special needs is noteworthy. Their access to education is not only impacted by gender, minority status and special needs only, but it is also affected by the type of special need, whether it is blindness, deafness, autism disorder or mobility. It is further affected by a number of other things : the socio - economic status of the family, ethnicity and location (urban or rural) and numerous other factors. Girls with special needs often find it difficult to get married to normal persons even when they fall in love with them (which is usually rare). So, they often end up marrying their ilk.

There is this general stereotype belief that women are the weaker sex, with smaller brains and intellectually inferior and thus cannot thrive in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)), and only perhaps in the Arts and Humanities. This remains in the realm of bias against the women folk as there is no known study confirming it.

Poverty plays a huge part in the lives of people with special needs. There is a circular relationship between poverty and special needs, Groce (1997), which



states that poverty causes disability, particularly in women and girls. They, in the face of limited resources are more likely than their male counterparts to be deprived of basic necessities such as food and medicines. Thus, women and girls with special needs are more likely to grow up in poor families, a reality that in itself, places them at an educational disadvantage. It is known that disabled girls in rural areas are less likely to have access to education.

Cultural bias against women and girls leads to male privilege in allocation of resources and opportunities both in the family and the larger society. It gets worse with women and girls with special needs as they have to contend with many gender issues in society. These range from invisibility, emotional and physical abuse, stigmatization, little or no education, self - devaluation and sometimes, to a life of poverty. Meanwhile, the men and the boys get the exact opposite of what the women and girls get. They get all the privileges - education, protection, better food, respect, jobs outside the home and visibility. Even men and boys with special needs get better deals than their female counterparts. These cultural barriers cut across countries, cultures and levels of progress.

Women and girls with disabilities hardly participate in politics and they hardly get political appointments. All these go to show their invisibility and poor perception of their capabilities in society. They may not even be sensitized to happenings, so they remain in the dark as their inter - personal relationships also remain poor. Those with visual impairments are the most invisible as their situation is quite peculiar. But others with physical impairments, like mobility issues, especially those who use assistive technologies such as wheel chairs to get around, manage to get visible. Most of the vocal women with disability worldwide, including their Nigerian colleagues use wheel chairs and can access places of power to advocate for better services and opportunities for themselves (Ozoji, 2021) and can also participate in international events, like sporting events. Ozoji cites Helen Keller as a classic example of a woman with special needs, who refused to be bogged down in her challenges, achieved her dreams and rose to international relevance and impacted the world positively. That is what a gender positive society can cause to happen.

Helen Keller's society however, understands special needs within the social parameter of inclusivity. Our institutions that care for persons with special needs are yet to adopt the social model of inclusivity. Rather, they are still operating that of charity and welfare which turn women and girls, indeed all persons with special needs into pitiable objects, only good for charity. This perception of and treatment of women and girls with special needs in like manner, exclude them from the attention of the society and keep most of them vulnerable, miserable and in need of charity.

Connecting Gender and Special Needs Education



Education is a fundamental human right, with innumerable benefits. It is an instrument par excellence for effecting national growth and development (FRN, 2013). Education is a powerful tool for socio - economic change, political and technological development. It also plays a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of values and culture among others. Education is a potent tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. It is the greatest single factor which can incredibly improve the status of women in any society, with positive self esteem and self confidence, necessary courage and inner strength to face the challenges of life (Undiyaundeye, 2013). Education creates an informed society and meaningful advances in healthcare and other areas as a result of access to education (UN, 2010). Education is certainly an instrument of freedom, democracy and good governance. Sustainable national development depends on education. It also aims to obliterate ignorance, poverty and disease. Education provides knowledge necessary for the empowerment and actualization of human potential. Education is indispensable and indeed drives the 21st century global world.

There are differences in schooling between males and females in terms of access, retention, completion as well as employment opportunities and they differ in the different regions of the world. Heyzer (2005), affirmed that women make up 50% of the world's population, they represent 60% of the more than one billion adults who do not have access to education. They also represent 70% of the world's poor, but earn only 10% of the world's income and property. It is thus reasonably expected that the rate of illiteracy is much higher for women than for the men. Illiteracy among women is a great challenge to development. Female children often do not have the opportunity to get enrolled in school at the right time and even when enrolled, the attrition rate is higher than that of male children. This is because they are usually forced into early marriages, or they leave school because of teenage pregnancies or even the cultural beliefs that do not consider women education necessary (Nwagbara, 2016). Reporting on the Sub - Saharan Africa (SSA), the World Bank (2001), stated that women's potential is hampered by widespread inequality in education as well as access to essential services and skills between males and females. The World Bank (2003) affirmed that this disparity in access to education is a pressing gender equity issue in Nigeria. This is worrisome as the situation raises more gender fairness concerns for women and girls with special needs.

Special needs education is important because it serves women and girls with emotional, behavioural or cognitive impairments, hearing, vision, speech or learning disabilities, orthopedic and neurological impairments, gifted and talented as well as the migrant and pastoral. However, multiple barriers face women and girls with special needs from getting access to equitable education. Often they suffer from attitudinal barriers, as disability bias coupled with gender bias stare them in the face at school. Other barriers to education include cultural bias against females in general and women and girls with special needs in particular. This age



- old bias leads to preferential treatment of men and boys in allocation of resources and opportunities even in educational institutions.

Education is not considered necessary for girls because they are expected to get married and leave home. So, the boys are given priority, including those with disabilities, since they are expected to continue the family name, become bread winners and assert themselves in their father's house. and the community. But this expectation of marriage is not meant for girls with special needs. In fact, families of girls with special needs assume that because they have one form of disability or the other, they may not marry. In some cultures, the prospect of a good marriage and becoming a mother appear to be the only relevance for their girls. Thus, girls with special needs do not stand a chance of being sent to school because they bear a triple yoke of gender, disability and minority status. So, their chances are further diminished. Some people even assume that no one would marry them as they are more stigmatized and devalued. It is worse for such girls if their families are really poor. Their chances to have access to school become very slim because only the boys , including those with special needs, who enjoy male privilege, will be sent to school in spite of poverty even if they are not as brilliant as the girls. Such cultural barriers leave girls with special needs emotionally drained.

Other concerns affecting the education of girls with special needs are connected with the school. There are safety concerns for girls at school, especially those with special needs because of their vulnerability. Issues of violence and sexual harassment get worse with girls with special needs when compared with their peers who are regular. While these issues are barriers to girls education, they are more serious issues for those with special needs. Rousso (2003) stated that available data suggest that girls with special needs experience violence within the family, institutions and community at higher rates than their peers who are not disabled. Moreover, the violence they face may be more chronic and severe, taking some unpleasant measures such as withholding essential care. Rousso further notes that may be the nature of the disability may make it difficult for the victims to assess violent situations, in order to either run away, defend themselves or better still, report such incidents of violence. Thus, there is the need for protection, which may now come at a cost.

There is limited data on sexual harassment of women and girls with special needs. There is the suggestion that girls with special needs face higher rates of harassment in school. There is also the suggestion that harassment by teachers and other adults may be particularly widespread and serious in boarding schools. Sobsey (1994), said possible reasons include the unrealistic view of boarding houses as safe. That there are administrative procedures that encourage and condone abuse. That there is a dehumanization and detachment that often goes on in institutions, and a subculture that supports abuse, which of course leaves these vulnerable women and girls at incredible risk.

Unfortunately, they are also sometimes exposed to sexual abuse too and this often leads to severe trauma, possible pregnancies and even HIV/Aids. The risks



and realities of sexual abuse limits the opportunities of girls with special needs getting formal education. When this happens, they drop out of school and they are traumatized. Reports from Kenya and Tanzania, says this reality makes parents reluctant to send their girls with special needs to school, particularly distant schools from home (Macha, 2002).

Distance to school also constitutes a barrier to education of girls with special needs. In some places, schools that serve students with special needs are segregated, as special education schools are usually located in cities. Issues include safety and cultural prohibitions of females travelling unaccompanied. Barriers are greater for girls with special needs. Those from the suburbs must travel a long distance to the cities to attend school, else they live in school. However, cultural expectations that girls stay close to home may thus, prohibit school attendance by girls with special needs.

Transportation to school is another concern for girls with special needs. Apart from the apparent high costs because of the possible need for escorts for safety/cultural reasons, there is also the issue of additional assistance/ assistive device (wheelchair). Thus, families with limited resources may not afford the extra costs and this results in girls with special needs staying at home. Even those whose schools are close to their places of residence, walking a mile or two to school may not be possible for a girl with mobility issues or impairment. It may also be a huge problem for a girl who is blind, except she is helped by family or friend (Drieger, 1998).

The architectural inaccessibility of school buildings which includes stairs, lack of lifts and ramps, narrow corridors, inaccessible bathrooms, inaccessible desks and equipment make it virtually impossible for girls with special needs to embrace schooling. But depending on the nature of the disability, there may be a need for help with toileting and privacy especially with respect to menstruation. Some girls with special needs may require help to manage their monthly periods, especially if the bathrooms are unsanitary and inaccessible. The need for such personal help can be quite problematic and can also increase safety concerns.

Lack of access to special needs education services and supports like having access to braille equipment, sign language interpreters, flexibility in teaching methods, assistive devices, as well as physical, occupational, speech therapy and other related services prevent girls with special needs from going to school.

Gender and disability bias in school curriculum and textbooks is a big barrier to the education of girls with special needs. Studies of gender bias in educational materials and resources used by students with disabilities are highly limited; even less is known about disability bias and its intersection with gender bias (Rousso, 2003). School curricula and textbooks can reflect gender bias, so curriculum developers and textbook writers owe it as a duty to be conscious of the importance of gender fairness while developing these instructional materials. Women and girls with special needs should be portrayed positively along with their counterparts in



school textbooks and other instructional materials. Other aspects for book assessment such as book cover, title, language appropriateness, should also depict gender sensitivity and fairness.

Mathematics and science education is obviously linked to employability in this increasingly technological world. Societal bias places women and girls with special needs as incapable of comprehending mathematics and science education. This is because of the triple negative assumptions by teachers in respect of gender, disability and (minority status) of girls with special needs. In addition is also the dearth of role models for persons with special needs. Having role models for women and girls with special needs is necessary, in fact, should be a requirement for these schools. Discriminatory actions from teachers to girls with special needs knowing full well their situation, smirks of lack of sensitivity and gender fairness. Such societal attitudes towards these vulnerable persons discourage them from accessing formal education. Thus, teachers should endeavour to be good role models. Teachers with disabilities should also be employed to teach in order to assure them that all hope is not lost, that they can also like their teachers, be useful members of the society.

Strategies to Promote Gender Fairness in Special Needs Education and Gender Equality in Society

The concept of gender is in itself a global social construct which affects everyone irrespective of sex, ethnicity, race, disability and age. As we grow up, we see biases that have been created and partially embedded in the social, economic and political systems around us (unesco.org). Education is a process which helps develop a positive attitude, inculcate socio - cultural values as well as prevent discrimination in society among others. Education is a positive change agent. It is a constructive means of correcting gender discrimination of women and girls with special needs at all levels of education, among others. Strategies discussed in this paper are initiatives meant to ensure gender fairness of women and girls with special needs as well as promote gender equality in society..

Education

This refers to the structured education system that runs from (nursery), primary to tertiary. It includes specialized programmes for vocational, technical and professional training. It is usually based on a set of curriculum. Education moulds the physical, emotional and social characteristics of a learner in a balanced manner. Girls with special needs are better off in a formal school setting. Since a learner comes to a learning situation with some physical, social, intellectual, psychological barrier between him or her and mastery of the learning situation and learning material (Obanya, 2016), cognizance must be taken of it in special needs education. Education has the ability to change the course of a person's life, from poverty, alienation and destitution to a path of social belonging, security and prosperity. It moulds someone into an emotionally stable and socially acceptable personality. Furthermore, education helps children to develop critical thinking and



reasoning power, shaping them into good citizens, and improving their social standing and independence. All children are born unique and have impulses and curiosities of various kinds which often seek outlets. Education provides a sense of direction for them through carefully mapped out channels which help them reach their desired goals. Special needs education as earlier discussed is designed to facilitate the learning of individuals who for many reasons, require additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods in order to participate and meet learning objectives in an educational programme (uis.unesco.org). Education is thus considered an excellent means of ensuring gender fairness in special needs education as well as promote gender equality in society. The strategies discussed in this paper are cross - cutting actions designed to achieve the objectives. Women and girls with special needs must embrace education for survival and recognition in society.

Inclusive Education

In fact, it is for their benefit and that of a few others that the issue of inclusive education arose globally. Inclusive education means that all children can be in the same classrooms, in the same schools. It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded, like learners with special needs and speakers of minority languages (unicef.org). Inclusive education allows students of all backgrounds to learn and grow side by side for the benefit of all. Ozoji (2013) cited in Ozoji (2021), affirms that inclusive education is the most preferred school placement for children with special needs, as well as a world trend in special needs education globally. Inclusive education is about giving equal access and opportunities, devoid of discrimination and intolerance to every learner without prejudice to gender, disability, race or any other difference. Inclusive education speaks to the international protocols on Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), no.3 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) no. 5 which insist on appropriate attention being given to women as well as the education of women and girls with disabilities among others. The envision 2030,(Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action) which is hinged on the basic principles of "leaving no one behind", also speaks to girls with special needs being part of humanity, should not be left behind in anything, including education and development. These international declarations and frameworks affirm the overarching role of education as a game changer transforming the lives of people including those of women and girls with special needs.

Curriculum

Formal/inclusive education is driven by a relevant curriculum. Curriculum means different things to different people. For formal education, curriculum is conceived as 'the totality of all learning experiences, planned and unplanned, acquired by the learner under the guidance of a school. It is a roadmap for the 'what, how, why and where of teaching and learning', these include (cultural values, attitudes, aspirations, respect for human rights) along with the knowledge



of subject matter, that learners acquire in the process of schooling. Curriculum is a combination of instructional practices, learning experiences and students' performance assessments that are designed to bring out and evaluate the target learning outcomes of a particular course (www.1.udel.edu). Curriculum is also a framework that sets expectations for student learning and standards for performance, as well as teacher accountability. Curriculum thus, is a veritable roadmap to gender fairness in special needs education and gender equality in society as they can be learned through any of these windows.

Use of Instructional Materials

Instructional materials are essential tools in learning every subject in the school curriculum. They are the content or information taught in a course. They are indispensable to teaching and learning. Instructional materials are print and non - print items that are designed to impart knowledge to students in the educational process and include such items in print - textbooks, teacher's guide, magazines, newspapers, slides, pictures, workbooks and the electronic media (Nwagbara, 2003; Faize & Dohan, 2011). Instructional materials are essential in teaching because they render the contents of instruction more practical and less vague. Learners understand more, what they see and what they interact with, thus, instructional materials are used to facilitate comprehension of ideas in learners as well as ensure long term retention of ideas and topics taught to pupils. They are indispensable in the teaching and learning of women and girls with special needs at all levels.

Textbooks stand out as the most frequently used instructional material in school, thus there should be relevant gender equitable and inclusive illustrations in them, among others. It is particularly important to ensure that illustrations represent all social sub - groups - whether by sex, religious or ethnic backgrounds, presence or absence of disabilities - with the frequency in which they occur in the population and in positive empowering ways ((USAID, 2014). In addition, the illustrations of each subgroup should be comparable in size, placement, and types of characters that are portrayed. A best practice for teaching and learning materials is to depict all social groups as equals who interact in respectful ways. In addition, characters representing subgroups should be portrayed as participating in a broad range of activities, with a range of interests and personal traits. Thus, the use of relevant and adequate instructional materials that depict women and girls with special needs in positive empowering ways can certainly ensure gender fairness in special needs education and gender equality in society.

Production of Qualified Teachers

Special needs education is a relatively new course of studies offered in segregated learning environments. Following international pressure for equity in educational provision for special needs education, there was a policy and practice shift to provide this education in regular schools and renamed inclusive education (Ozaji, 2021). However, there appears to be a dearth of qualified special needs



teachers. So, we find teachers who do not have much clue about handling these vulnerable persons in class. Special needs education teachers should have empathy, must be gender responsive, kind and gentle and master of the subject matter. In fact, a special needs education teacher should be a role model, especially for the females. Only well trained and qualified special needs education should be engaged to teach. Government should invest in the production of gender sensitive teachers and give them adequate incentives and remuneration.

Conducive Classroom Atmosphere and Attitudinal Change

Women and girls with special needs at any level, should be treated with respect and as equals with their male counterparts. There should be no discrimination or bias against them in any form. They should have parallel responsibilities and opportunities as their male counterparts and made as visible as every other person in class and not tucked away in a corner of the class. They should be encouraged to speak out in class just like their male counterparts. The teacher's attitude towards women and girls with special needs must be positive in class as it affects the classroom atmosphere and determines the attitude of the entire class. Thus, a positive attitude towards women and girls with special needs pervades the school and it spreads to the society with a ripple effect. Thus, positive attitudinal change towards women and girls with special needs both in school and the community is very important in the realization of the goal of gender equality and fairness. A gender responsive teacher is important in ensuring gender fairness in special needs education classroom and which by implication instills gender equality in society.

Rehabilitation of women and girls with special needs.

The special needs education programme in Nigeria has little or no emphasis on rehabilitation and programmes that can make the beneficiaries self reliant. They should have access to role models, successful adult women with disabilities to help counter stereotypes. They should also provide them with opportunities to develop their skills, talents and interests instead of dwelling on their limitations. There should be programmes that will make them self reliant. There is the need in Nigeria to produce graduates with special needs who are self reliant and gifted to mastermind technological breakthroughs.

Conclusion

This discourse explored gender fairness in Special Needs Education. First, it discussed gender in its all ramifications as well as special needs education and their implications for gender equality for the development of the society. It further analyzed the different concerns affecting gender equality in the society and moved towards how gender discrimination can be replaced with gender fairness and equality. This paper, has confirmed that there is no gender fairness in special needs education and women and girls with special needs are victims of gender discrimination. It is important that efforts are made to adhere to the international



declarations and frameworks in the implementation of relevant MDGs, SDGs as well as the Incheon Declaration, It however affirms that, Gender fairness in special needs education, equality and consequent empowerment of women is doable. This paper concludes with what according to (vic.gov.au) considers the gains of gender equality for an inclusive society: (1). Gender equality is a fundamental human right; (2). It promotes productivity and economic growth; (3). It prevents violence against women and girls;. (4) Societies are safer and healthier; and (5). Gender equality promotes peace.

Suggestions

Attaining gender fairness of women and girls with special needs is a positive beginning to achieving gender equality in the society. The following suggestions in addition to the strategies discussed, would help the society move in the right direction.

1. It is known that implementation is the "Achilles heel" of government's programmes and policies. The newly established National Commission for Persons with Disabilities is a step in the right direction. So, the Commission should liaise with other relevant institutions and implement their mandate for a gender fair and equal society.
2. Despite all barriers, women with special needs all over the world are becoming a political and social force (Froschl, et al, 1999). Their valuable connections to other women counterparts have given them the power to build a movement. This is an empowerment move. Women and girls with special needs here should not be left out.

Government is therefore, urged to support this empowerment through compulsory and functional education, apprenticeship, vocational skills acquisition, mentoring and special grants - in -aid for entrepreneurship. With women and girls with special needs empowered and recognized, the society is on its way to achieving gender fairness and equality.

References

- Drieger, (1998). We know who we are. The Disabled Women's Network- Trinidad and Tobago. *Disability International*. Fall.
- Esu, A. E. O (2021). Beyond gender fairness in curriculum development and implementation in Nigerian education system: What is and What ought to be. Key note paper presented at the 4th international conference of Gender Studies Association of Nigeria held at College of Education, Agbor, Delta State.
- Faize & Dohan (2011). Utilization of instructional materials as tools for effective academic. Culled from <https://www.mdpi.com> > pdf
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013). *National Policy on Education*. Abuja : NERDC.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2015). *National Policy on Special Needs Education in Nigeria*. Abuja: Federal Ministry of Education.



-
- Froschl, M., Rubin, E. & Sprung, B. (1999). Connecting gender and disability in *Gender and Disability Digest*. Newton, M.A. : Educational Equity Concepts, Inc.
- Groce, N (1997). Women with disabilities in the developing world. *Journal of Disabilities Policy Studies*. 8, 1 & 2, pp. 178 - 1192.
- Heyzer, C. (ed). (2005). *A woman's development agenda for the 21st century : In a commitment to world's women*. New York : United Nations Development Fund.
- Macha, E. (2002). Visually impaired women and educational opportunities in Tanzania. Paper presented at the AAUW Educational Foundation Conference: International Perspectives - Global Voices for Gender Equity, November. 15 - 17, Washington, DC.
- Martinez, H. (2022). *What is gender equity, definitions and examples*. Washington ; United Way NCA.
- Nagata, K. K. (2003). Gender and disability in the Arab region : The challenges in the new millennium. *Asia Pacific Disability Rehabilitation Journal*, 14, 1, 10 - 17.
- Nwagbara, C. (2003). *Gender issues in Population //family life education, women and gender issues in Nigeria*. Owerri : TAIT Publications.
- Nwagbara, C. (2005)). Utilization of instructional materials in *Education in Nigeria: Early learning and related critical issues*. Owerri : TAIT Publications.
- Nwagbara, C.(2016). Women in development in G. C. Offorma (ed). *Women and development*. Abuja : Nigerian Academy of Education.
- Oakley. A. (1996). *Sex, gender and society*. England : Gower Publishing Company, Ltd.
- Obanya, Pai (2018). Educating for the new world of creativity and innovation. *Obanya Series*.
- Ozaji, E. D. (2021). Promoting gender fairness of women and girls with exceptionalities in Nigeria : Matters arising. Lead paper presented at the 4th International Conference held at the College of Education, Agbor, Delta State.
- Rousso, H. (2003). Education for all : A gender and disability perspective. Paper commissioned for the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4, The Leap to Equality*.
- Sobsey, D. (1994). *Violence and abuse in the lives of people with disabilities: The end of silent acceptance?* Baltimore : Paul H. Brookes.
- Undiyaundeye, F. (2013). The challenge of women empowerment for sustainable development in Nigeria. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. 2, 11. ISSN 2281-3993, October.
- UNESCO (2022) Special needs education. UNESCO Institute of Statistics. <https://uis.unesco.org>
- United Nations (1979). *Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW)*. UN document.
- United Nations (1995). *Beijing declaration and Platform for action*. UN Women.
-



-
- United Nations (2010). *The World's Women 2010 : Trends and statistics*. United Nations Report.
- UN Women. (2022). *The empowerment of women and girls with disabilities : Towards full and effective participation*. Culled from unwomen.org august 18.
- USAID (2010). *Guide to gender integration and analysis : Additional help for ADS*. Chapters 201 & 203. EGAT/Women in development office.
- USAID (2014). *Guidance on gender and inclusiveness in teaching and learning materials*. Prepared for Bureau for Africa, USAID. Washington, D. C.
- USAID (2015). *A guide to strengthening gender equality and inclusiveness in teaching and learning materials*. Washington, D. C. : United States Agency for International Development.
- World Bank (nd). *The World Bank in gender*. (worldbank.org).
- World Bank (2001). *Engendering development through gender equality in rights, resources and voice*. New York : Oxford University Press. Inc.
- World Bank (2003). *School education in Nigeria : Preparing for universal basic education*. Human Development III, Africa Region.