

Listening to the Voices of An American and A Nigerian Woman in Education

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Abstract

There is an increasing awareness that women are not always given a voice in the halls of Higher Education. This has been a recognized problem in the USA for some time. But this problem goes way beyond just the USA. Today, 130 million girls are being denied an education. Women need to make their voices heard while men need to learn to listen. In the words of Melinda Gates: “A woman with a voice is, by definition, a strong woman.” This article is viewed from both an American and a Nigerian perspective. Women and supportive men need to continue to share their stories and highlight both the successes and challenges faced.

Overview

There is an increasing awareness that women are not always given a voice in the halls of Higher Education. This has been a recognized problem in the USA for some time. “In a professional world that has a tradition of the ‘good old boy’ network, women have long fought for recognition in the field of educational technology” (Donaldson, 2016, p. vii). But this problem goes way beyond just the USA. Today, 130 million girls are being denied an education. One brave advocate for females is the courageous young girl, Malala Yousafzai, who risks her life to advocate for education for all girls (Malala Fund, 2019). As a winner of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize, Malala is definitely a voice that is being heard.

In Nigeria, young girls continue to fight for their education. The most recently available adult literacy rate (2015) is only 59.6% in the most populated country in Africa (UNESCO, 2019). There is a Nigerian tradition of considering boys as the priority gender to receive education. Many women have shared how they have gone against their fathers, husbands, and communities to fight for their education and the goal of an academic place within the country. This paper will share from a diversity of perspectives individual women’s stories of their personal journeys in the face of daunting obstacles.

Women need to make their voices heard while men need to learn to listen. In the words of Melinda Gates: “A woman with a voice is, by definition, a strong woman.” Attendees at a recent Association for Digital Education Communications Technology (ADECT) conference in Abuja, Nigeria in May of 2019 shared many stories when asked to make known their experiences. Personal stories were shared from experiences in the USA, Namibia, and Nigeria. According to the Malala Fund website (2019) the following are some of the reasons and examples of why approximately 130 million girls and women are denied an education:

- Child labour: Zainab received less than one cent per day stitching footballs, but she knew she could achieve more for herself and her family by finishing school.
- Early marriage: When the day came for 14-year-old Najlaa to be married, she felt her dreams of finishing school slipping away. So she ran away from home — still in her wedding dress.
- Conflict: By age 17, Zaynab was a refugee of three wars — in Yemen, Somalia and Egypt — and had been out of school for two years.
- Cost: Like many girls in Nigeria, expensive school tuition fees put Amina’s education and future at risk.

- Gender bias: In Pakistan, many girls like Nayab drop out after grade 5 because their parents believe it is a waste of money to send a daughter to secondary school.
- Health: In Ecuador, Daniela graduated secondary school, becoming one of seven girls in her class with a high school diploma — and a child.
- Natural disasters: When an earthquake struck Sydney’s village and damaged her home in Oaxaca, Mexico, she worried about falling behind in her studies.
- Poor quality: Living in a refugee camp in Jordan, the only class available to 12-year-old Rehma is for five and six-year-olds.
- Poor quality: In Syria, Rehma was a promising student, but today in her one-tent school, she’s repeating lessons she learned years ago - the alphabet, numbers, the names of colors and animals. Rehma says her dream is to graduate, but if no higher grades are available to her, she never will.

Ana’s Perspective: Voices Shared from the USA

The historical situation often was not as extreme as the above examples but did include many gender-based challenges. Women played an early and important role in the history of technology. Ada Lovelace, the daughter of English poet Lord Byron, expanded on Charles Babbage's theoretical device in the mid-1800s, creating the first computer program. During WWII, women took over computer programming while the majority of men served in military roles. The women behind the popular film, *Hidden Figures*, got the Apollo 11 to the moon and back during the 1960s. Admiral Grace Hopper was a computer scientist and trail blazed the transition to the sophisticated computer programming languages that we still use today. She also was the one to coin the term “bug” when a moth got into the computer hardware and caused a malfunction.

Dr. Jean Kilbourne was one of my earliest influences in realizing the inequality that surrounds women in our society through the advertising medium. There are now 4 editions of her award-winning documentary, *Killing US Softly*. She speaks very loudly about how Madison Avenue has perpetuated the myth that women are to be seen and not heard. Another advocate for females is the courageous young girl, Malala Yousafzai who was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for her voice in advocating education for all girls.

To provide my own foundation on the subject of women in leadership positions, I will share a bit of my own story. I was raised in the Eisenhower beige world of the 1950s, As the first wave of the Baby Boomers our options as women were limited. The only future choices I was given included housewife, secretary, nurse, or elementary school teacher. I remember my mother insisting that I take a typing course instead of physics. She wanted to make sure that I had the necessary clerical skills while insisting I was not smart enough for advanced science classes.

While in college, I was required to take a course on the History of American Education. I rebelled when I discovered that the only women mentioned in the text book included the wife of the first president of Harvard and Maria Montessori who was Italian. Women did play a very important role in the early American education though they were required to be single, church going, and of high moral standards.

Prior to returning to college to finish my degrees in my mid-40s, I was a computer programmer. I always was uneasy with the very masculine terms that described problems: *programs crashing, killing a program, or dealing with a virus*. The accepted terms for what I did in designing early web pages also were not comfortable, I was neither a *Web Master or Mistress*. My final chosen label was *Cyber Goddess*. It was not always easy being the only woman in an office of men who were surprised when I refused to fetch them their morning coffee.

Because I believe that the voices of women in our field are not always heard, I edited the book, *Women’s Voices in the Field of Educational Technology, Our Journeys* (2016). I asked leaders in our profession, men and women, from a total of 5 countries to share their stories. Through this effort I learned that women have to fight for their voices while men’s voices are simply a birthright.

Today many women have just begun to raise their voices to share hidden experiences of sexual harassment and assault. One of 4 or 5 college women have been sexually assaulted per a recent RAINN report (2019). While 21% of transgender, genderqueer, nonconforming college students have been sexually assaulted, A third of rape victims contemplate suicide and 13% succeed. The fact that women and nonconforming students are coming forward to share what many consider their ugly secrets is bringing a major problem to light.

There exists a gender imbalance in attendance at higher educational institutions in the US. The male dominance started to shift downward during the 1970s and the 1990s saw the number of women (71%) increase substantially to outpace the 20-year static figure for men (61%), Other countries have other representations (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014).

Women in the USA are less likely than men to achieve tenure. “While women held nearly half (48.9%) of all tenure-track positions in 2015, they held just 38.4% of tenured positions (Catalyst, 2017). The Catalyst report goes on to state:

- While women represent over half (51.5%) of Assistant Professors and are near parity (44.9%) among Associate Professors, they accounted for less than a third (32.4%) of Professors in 2015.
- Women held over half (57.0%) of all instructor positions, among the lowest ranking positions in academia
- 22.1% of women faculty are in non-tenure-track positions, compared to 16.8% of men faculty.
- At all categories of institutions, full professors who are women earned on average \$98,524 a year compared to \$104,493 for their male colleagues in 2016–2017: only 94.3% of what men earned. (Catalyst, 2017, p. 1)

Within our own International organization, AECT, there have been some interesting trends. Women in the US did not get the vote until 1920, just 3 years before AECT was birthed. Since that time only 17 women have served as an AECT President. There was even a gap of 32 years with only male presidents. With the current membership ratio of 54% women the hope is that this trend is being reversed. In fact, the 2019 slate of members running for the next president contained only women (Doyle, 2016).

Felicia’s Perspective: A Voice Shared from Nigeria

I have my higher education degree from Auchi Polytechnic, University of Portharcourt, and University of Nigeria, Nsuka, Nigeria. I am currently a lecturer, a researcher, a passionate educationist, with a specialty in educational administrator, educational management, and educational technology.

Illiteracy can be equated to sickness of the body and blindness was what my mother always told me as a child. She informed me that an educated woman is an empowered woman. She also told me to ensure that I worked hard as a woman. These wise words were always ringing in my heart and made me work even harder. I went through school as a shining star even though there was no money to support my education. I was considered to be a brilliant student in my secondary school and every other student ran to me to help them with their academic difficulties. In those days in school, most times I did not have the required text books. My fellow students who had the textbooks were always bringing their books to me for coaching and more explanations. I taught them and afterwards used the books myself. My exam performances were always outstanding and far better than the students with the books I borrowed and taught. I eventually became the talk of the town and was popularly called *SP* as I was the Senior Prefect. As a child I also went by the nickname *Doctor* since that is what I wanted in my future. As a teenager I returned to our rural village from the city of Lagos. The culture questioned education for daughters and I was pulled out of school to work the farm. My teachers influenced my father into continuing my education. Around me individuals kept telling me to marry instead of furthering my education. With the support of my father, I came to realize that I was blessed with an inner drive and courage

When I was ready for higher education. I was first admitted to study Agricultural economy at the University of Ibadan but was denied going because my father was wrongly advised. My father took me to a lecturer from my village who then admitted me to study secretarial studies at Auchi Polytechnic. Surviving school was not easy. I graduated and started working. I knew within me that I wanted to get to the top academically but for financial reasons I had to first find a Job.

In time I got married after a few years. Faced with married life, I saw my academic dream slipping away. I had my first child and then with a great deal of courage and a supportive husband, I went back to school. Eventually I graduated, and then went back to school for my Masters. Today, I am happy to have earned the title of doctor of philosophy with a specialization in Educational Administration and Planning. Our culture did not encourage me in my desired medical degree but I have achieved my dream with my PhD transitioning from medical to academic doctor

Even though I did not receive my PhD until 2017, I have accomplished many milestones along the way. I established a private primary school in a country where literacy is not always the focus for young girls. My research has been presented at international conferences at Harvard and Indiana University. I was the founder of the Association of Digital Education Communication Technology and organized the initial AECT – ADECT professional conference. Through this affiliation, I have created lasting collegial relations with key AECT scholars. At this point in my journey I’m excitedly waiting to see what the future holds.

Nigerian Past and Present Voices

Nigeria is currently the largest African nation in terms of population and within a few years will be third in the world behind China and India. The latest available figures show 59.4% female literacy and 74.4% male literacy. As of 2018, the illiteracy rate for 15-24-years-old was 9,364,626 with males at 3,509,338 and females at 5,855,288. Among those 15 years and older (41,763,792), 15,904,134 were male and 25,859,658 were female (UNESCO Institute for Statistics: Nigeria, 2019).

The culture continues to encourage males in education while women and young girls are given limited options. In 1920, only 7.7 % of Nigeria's college students were female. By 2009, number was increased to 45 %. In spite of the high percentage pursuing higher education, females constitute just 20.3% of lecturers in Nigerian universities. This is a country where the terrorist Boko Haram continues to thrive while using kidnapping and suppression to discourage education or equality for girls.

When researching the noted women of Nigeria, the list included the following names:

- Prof. Adetoun Ogunseye – 1st female professor
- Grace Alele-Williams – 1st female Vice- Chancellor and 1st female PhD
- Funmilayo Ransom-Kuti – teacher, activist, founder of the Nigerian Women’s Union
- Kuforiji-Olubi – Headmistress at 19 who became the first female graduate from the male-only Chartered Accountant of England and Wales. She was the also the first female graduate of ICAN

There are many identified societal benefits in educating women. These include a direct correlation with improved health and increased quality of life. Educated women are more likely to seek proper medical care both for themselves — especially maternal care — and their children. Higher rates of female education correspond with lower HIV and STD rates. Educated Nigerian women are less likely to get married or give birth as teenagers which improves society as a whole. These women are also more likely to hold stable jobs, less likely to be in poverty, and more likely to contribute to the overall economy (King & Hill, 1993).

Discussion on Future Opportunities

Women’s voices are starting to be heard. More women are assuming prominent leadership roles in higher ed, the corporate world, and politics. Programs and professional organizations are in place at many universities to nurture future women leaders. And the generation entering college appear to not support the mantra: well we’ve always done it that way.

As many of us have been mentored, we have learned how important it is to support emerging scholars and colleagues. We value the act of reaching a hand back to those who follow. Leadership is taught by example, not by words. So how do we take this forward? Women need to make our voices heard while men and administrators need to learn to listen. A proven approach to support and to encourage emerging scholars and leaders is to:

- Be an intentional mentor
- Actively *invest* in a mentee’s success
- Purposefully build mentees’ confidence
- Assure early successes
- Promote mentees’ strengths to others
- Treat mentees as your colleagues
- Invite mentees to work alongside you (co-teaching, co-writing, co-serving)
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The quote that begins the *Women’s Voices* book is by Alan Rickman: “We need to tell stories to each other about who we are, why we are, where we come from, and what might be possible” (Donaldson, 2016. p. vii). Women and supportive men need to continue to share their stories and highlight both the successes and challenges faced. As our voices are heard, let us be the chorus that supports all those whom blaze their own future paths at all international levels.

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