

Linguistic Images, Socialisation and Gender in Education

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Introduction

A person's perception of herself and her relationship with others is in general conditioned by society, its norms, religion, upbringing and the means by which these relationships are expressed. In other words, socialisation affects an individual's value systems, including aspiration. It also affects the way in which she defines her relationship with others. This definition is articulated through language which is a social phenomenon, a medium for conveying thought and conventions and for passing such conventions from generation to generation. Language is therefore a medium of culture. The relationship between language and culture is dynamic and symbiotic. Languages reflect communities just as communities impact on languages. Thus, if one operates in a linguistic system in which a husband is referred to as 'master' (*oga* in Nigeria pidgin English) and one accepts the terms and its connotations unquestioningly, then consciously or unconsciously one accepts the power relations subsumed in its usage.

In like manner, if children are exposed to textbooks and advertisements in which doctors and engineers are always male, and nurses and school teachers always female, girls naturally aspire to be nurses and school teachers while boys aspire to become engineers and medical doctors. Research from other parts of the world confirm the negative impact of the sexual stereotyping in textbooks. A European Economic Community (EEC) report found that girls were under-achieving in EEC countries because of sex-role stereotyping and discrimination. A hidden curriculum exists to condition girls, by the

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time they have finished with primary education, to think in terms of feminine stereotypes (Byrne, quoted in Tagney 1979; Gallager 1981).

Language as used in textbooks reinforces gender stereotypes already initiated at the family level where boys are brought up to be strong and adventurous and girls to be obedient, malleable, traditional preservers of nature (Etta 1994). Thus the family plays a very important role in the formation of 'a broad range of traits and values that relate to academic achievement' (Hughes 1989).

The mass media and the entertainment industry do not help matters much. Women are very often presented as objects of amusement simply to be played with, from soap operas to musical videos and to films. Women are not presented as active participants in decision making. Those who are represented are usually chosen because of their looks and hardly because of any intelligence. This projection of women is not restricted to developing countries only. 'The same limited set of dominant Characterizations of women, the same impoverished pattern of female participation in the media can be found – in established media structures and 'emergent' in younger systems' (Gallager 1981).

The portrayal of women in the mass media is of particular importance because of the pervasiveness of media influence. Even in the most remote rural areas, media influence still penetrates via portable transistor radios, calendars and almanacs. The media are thus powerful agents of socialisation.

They do not simply reflect, but subtly and indirectly help to shape social reality. The hypothesis arises from sociological and social psychological theories of socialisation. These essentially propose that social attitudes and behaviours are learnt through a complex process of imitation and comparison with the attitudes and behaviours presented by significant individuals and groups and by cultural forces, including the mass media (Gallager 1981).

Imam (1992:40) corroborates this in her own work. She claims that:

more recent studies have focused attention instead on the long term effects of the mass media. This type of enquiry argues that to the extent that the mass media present a consistently framework ideological discourse, they largely determine the ideological horizons of their audience, not in terms of immediate choices, but rather by limiting and structuring the ways in which issues are taken up and discussed.

In addition to the influences enumerated above, there is the powerful one of all the major religions which preach a hierarchization in which

maleness predominates over femaleness. Consequently, all the agents of socialisation, including the family, school, community, religion and the mass media reinforce differential expectations from female and male children. The gender stereotypes which emerge from the various institutions affect a child's expectation from life and society, the way in which she sees herself and what she perceives as her roles, how far she expects to rise within the family set-up; in education ; in her career and in society as a whole.

Effects of Socialisation on Career Orientation

Gender differentiation begins at birth where in many African cultures the birth of a girl-child is received with some disappointment rather than with joy, especially in families which do not already have a male offspring. A man whose wife delivers a male child feels proud of the fact and sees it as an extension of his masculinity. It is not unusual for example to hear men ask each other, 'what did your wife have? Is it full current or half current?' If it is 'full current' (a boy), they thump each other and shake hands vigorously on it. If it is 'half current' (a girl) then they commiserate, 'Never mind, next time will be better'. With the best intentions, these attitudes impact on the children.

This preference for male children is reflected in how much of their resources families are willing to invest in boys and how little they are willing to invest in girls, especially where resources are limited. Where a choice has to be made, it is usually made in favour of the male child who is seen as the bearer of the family name. In any case, whatever is invested in him remains in the family. Moreover, the labour provided by the girl-child is more valuable to the family than her education. Hughes (1989:56) studying the family in Kenya noted that:

of more significance than ethnic differentiation is the way the traditional Kenyan families have dealt with their sons and daughters and first-born children. For many families, formal education was considered of low priority for daughters ... First-born females often play a critical role in the care of younger siblings, and as a result, are indispensable.

This same attitude is duplicated all over sub-Saharan Africa. Abdalla Adamu, talking about girls, tradition and science education in northern Nigeria makes the point that,

Modern education (i.e. education with roots in Nigeria's colonial past) has never been fully accepted in Kano, *especially for girls*, because of the historical

antecedents which linked development of education with Christian missionary activities as threats to their Islamic way of life (1990:17 emphasis mine).

What happens however, is that the girls are not allowed to continue even with their Koranic education. They are often withdrawn to go and hawk for their mothers.

Reinforcing the fact that female education is not given much priority, Adamu Abdul-Razak makes the following contribution on formal education in Sokoto State, Nigeria.

The greatest problems in women education in Sokoto State are mostly based on home background, misunderstanding of religion, as well as social community sanctions ... To many people, educated women are *semi-prostitutes*. They are regarded as *good time girls* who will not make good wives. They are regarded as a reference group by parents who object to sending their daughters for higher education, which is regarded as superfluous and even detrimental to a woman's domestic role (1987:5 emphasis mine).

The views documented above are not special, but rather representative of views scattered across the continent. It is common knowledge that some men are afraid of marrying 'acada' (academic, educated) girls because they tend to be too independent, and they are less likely to submit unquestioningly to their husbands. They also 'claim their rights'. Women who break out of the restrictive traditional modes to discover and assert themselves are labelled 'feminists' and 'prostitutes'. It is therefore not surprising that statistics after statistics show a higher percentage of male enrolment in schools than female enrolment. An interesting development in Nigeria, however, is the falling number of boys in schools in the Eastern parts of the country where commerce (buying and selling) is given greater priority and recognition than education. Society sees material acquisition as a major yardstick of measuring status and as more money can be made more quickly trading than from educational activities, boys are withdrawn to start a trade while girls are left to continue in the less lucrative business of education. This tendency is causing a lot of concern in enlightened circles and it has generated considerable public and media debates.

The perception of women as essentially reproductive and not productive entities cuts across age groups. R. B. Gaidzanwa found that

a higher percentage of male students viewed women's primary roles as those of mothers, wives and more than 50 per cent of the male students thought that a man's career should have precedence over his wife's. Over 50 per cent of the female

students were of the same opinion as the men with regard to women's primary roles, although it is significant to note that 42 per cent of the female students were of the opinion that careers were the most important roles for women (1991).

This shows the extent to which gendered values are unquestioned and internalised even by females themselves who are discriminated against.

So far, we have looked at female children as a monolithic uniform class. In reality, there are several sub-classes according to economic class, location, religion and race. What we have documented so far are the commonalities which prevail within the entire group. When it comes to the all important question of access to education, girls from poor families are doubly disadvantaged.

Appleton *et al.* (1990), among others, found that gender bias is greatest in households with low parental education, suggesting that poverty is self-perpetuating. In a study they carried out in Côte d'Ivoire, they found out that the problem of girls' underperformance is accounted for mainly by the very wide gap between girls and boys from the poorest households. In addition to scarcity of financial resources, there is the twin problem of lack of exposure and positive role models for girls from low income households to emulate. A lot of studies tie mother's education to the education of daughters. It would appear as if where mothers are well educated and fairly well off, daughters tend to be educated also.

In very poor families, children, especially girls, tend to have too many domestic responsibilities. These responsibilities include chores like fetching water, looking for firewood, hawking and taking care of younger siblings. In some communities such girls also get married off very early. Early marriage translates into early responsibilities and consequently less time for education and self-development. Adamu, quoting a female secondary school principal in northern Nigeria has this to say on the poor performance of girls in school:

It is because of the society. A girl knows that whether she makes an effort or not she will end up marrying. Some of them even get married off when they are in their year 3 or 4. So probably that does not make them interested in further studies. They don't have the incentive; and therefore no motivation to make (any) extra effort (1990:25).

The net result of poor education is the inability to enter the labour market except at the very lowest rungs. Typically then, low status jobs are 'zoned' to women :

The workplace is segregated by sex. Women fill well over half the clerical and service jobs in the developed regions and Latin America and the Caribbeans, and more than a third in Africa and Asia ... within an occupational group, women are almost always in the less prestigious jobs. For example, there are many more women than men in lower-paid professional and technical occupations such as teaching, the largest occupation in this category. As the level, prestige and pay go up, so do the numbers of men – who take an overwhelming majority of the jobs, for example, higher education (United Nations 1991).

Women will continue to be under-represented in economic and social spheres, especially at decision making levels, as long as they continue to be poorly educated. We must hasten to add though that education is only one of several factors, the range of which includes class, religion, race and marital status. It is certain that among this complex of factors, education holds a key position.

For the discussion on the effects of limited education on career orientation to be meaningful, it must go beyond the issue of access. It must of necessity include an analysis of the manner in which those who manage to gain access are confronted with language and linguistic images which confirm negative gender stereotypes already initiated at family and communities levels. It must also included an analysis of the role of the mass media in the whole process.

Gendered Language in Education and the Mass Media

Before we turn to the very important subject of language as used in education and how this together with socialisation affect professional and career orientation of girls, it is important to discuss the impact of the mass media on the whole process of socialisation, and especially as they reinforce negative stereotypes of woman.

We reiterate that for the purposes of our discussion here, language is taken to include all forms of linguistic images – the spoken word, writing (books), models, diagrams, portraits and sketches as well as images in the media. Language, it is known, influences image formation on women and children. First a graphic anecdote. Nancy Nwendamseke recounts an interesting example of cultural beliefs in Tanzania. It is often said that if a boy gets into the kitchen and begins to cook, he will grow breasts like girls. It is anybody's guess that little boys who hear such a myth would spend a lot of energy avoiding the kitchen. Kitchens for such boys would be exclusive preserves of women.

On the specific issue of the images of women in the mass media, Imam (1992:39) succinctly describes the manner in which it is portrayed by the mass media.

Studies of women's images and gender ideologies in the mass media indicate that from country to country, there is a uniformity in the media's depiction of these issues: women are under-represented, trivialised and shown within a narrow range of stereotypes (as primarily domestic, either 'madonna' or 'whore' with negative psychological characteristics as dependent, passive, weak, treacherous and so on)... At the very best, the portrayal can be described as narrow. At worst it is unrealistic, demeaning and damaging.

Specific examples bear out her observations. It is not uncommon, for example, to see advertisements of oil companies featuring men in helmets, drilling oil from rigs. No woman is shown anywhere in the picture. What this implies is that women are not engineers, which is not true, or at the worst, they don't really count.

There is a new wave of locally produced films distributed on video tapes which depict women essentially as objects with villainous machiavellian instincts whose main preoccupation is to use their bodies to attract men and dupe them. These films are watched everywhere – in the market, in shops, in homes with children and everybody watching. The portrayal of women in such films is very damaging and demeaning.

We come to the very important issue of the way and manner in which children who manage to gain access to education are socialised within the formal school system. There is the important issue of sexism in the language of textbooks, lack of positive role models, gendered selection of courses and choice of subjects, deliberate policy of sexual differentiation in career orientation and a general lack of sensitivity to cultural norms as they affect female children.

If one opens a page on hospital scenes in a typical school, to the likelihood is that one would find a male medical doctor being assisted by some smiling female nurses. That, decoded, means that men are doctors while women are nurses. Children internalise these subconscious messages. The titles of the nursing profession itself seem to have zoned it to women only, thus there are midwives (no midhusbands), matrons (no patrons), nursing sisters (no nursing brothers) so that even at the linguistic level, the profession is gender-bearing. Compare this to politics where the art of good governance is referred to as 'statesmanship' even though there are both men and women in

governance. There are a good number of professions which tend to be gender bearing even though in reality they are not necessarily so, as practitioners of these professions are found in both sexes. Examples are as follows:

| Male | Female | Heterosexual |
|-------------|---------------|---------------------|
| farmer | nurse | trader |
| nurse | trader | labourer |
| trader | labourer | midwife |
| labourer | midwife | teacher |
| midwife | teacher | driver |
| teacher | driver | milkmaid |
| driver | milkmaid | man (kind) |
| milkmaid | man (kind) | Washman |
| man (kind) | washman | prostitute |
| washman | prostitute | |
| prostitute | | |
| ruler | | |
| family head | | |
| herdsman | | |
| hunter | | |
| soldier | | |
| fisherman | | |
| mechanic | | |
| engineer | | |
| politician | | |

By the same token, if one asks a child, 'who is a surgeon?' The child would most likely begin her answer with, 'he is a person who ...' The reality though is that there are male nurses as well as female doctors. Agriculture Science textbooks very often do not show females as active participants in the agricultural sector. There are usually stories about the 'farmer and his wife', 'the herdsman and his cows'. This goes totally against reality in cultures where women routinely work on the farm, in most cases ploughing their own plots. It is commonly known that in agricultural and pastoral production, cross-cultural evidence clearly indicates that women practically participate in all operations, side by side with men. In many cultures, most of the agricultural operations and pastoral activities were predominantly performed by women except comparatively heavier tasks like bush clearance and felling of trees, including also the defence and military operations. United Nations statistics show that women are working in agriculture in much of Africa and Asia and that nearly 80 per cent of economically

active women in sub-Saharan Africa and at least half in Asia, except Western Asia, are in agriculture (United Nations 1991). This non-representation, or negative representation of women, is found all over Africa. In Kenya, Obura (1992) observed that

an analysis of the transmission of gender images by schools in Kenya concluded that in mathematics, science, technical subjects, language and social science textbooks, images of female are considerably fewer in number and negatively portrayed in comparison to images of males (quoted in Waijama and Kimani 1985:48).

This brings us to the issue of gendered selection of subjects. It is well documented that boys generally perform better than girls in science and technological based subjects and this is reflected in the imbalance in student applications to science and technical subject areas at the tertiary levels. There are many reasons for this.

In the first instances, science subjects are generally not well catered for in the public school system, at least in Nigeria. This adversely affects all children, male and female, as the schools usually do not have well-equipped laboratories. Then there is the problem of scarcity of science teachers. The few that are available are often male and unwilling to work in rural areas. There are two major fall-outs of this. One is that all children in rural areas are disadvantaged. Two, girls have no female role models in science for them to emulate, so very often they come to view science subjects as 'male' subjects.

In female single-sex schools, this disadvantage becomes even more glaring as teachers of other subjects tend to be female. If and when male teachers go to these schools, generally it is to teach Agricultural Science and other science subjects. The unfortunate impression is created that these subjects are not really for women. Adamu (1990) and other studies (e.g. Hardin 1983) suggest that girls are virtually 'switched off' studying science subjects because of cultural and social stereotypes that fixed the roles of boys and girls which are reflected in the schooling process. The behavioural stereotype for girls held by both fellow students and teachers was one of the factors 'switching' them off studying science subjects in schools. He reported a well-meaning intervention by the Kano State government aimed at encouraging female participation in Science and Technology. Girls were allowed a lower entry score than boys into special schools for teaching science and technology. In addition to the core subjects of Biology, Physics, Mathematics,

Geography and English which were compulsory for both sexes, girls were required to make an additional choice between Home Management and Food and Nutrition, while boys were required to make an additional choice between Technical Drawing, Agricultural Science and Further Mathematics. The girls were therefore prevented from studying technical subjects. Even though the entire project was a well-meaning one, deep rooted stereotypes of girls reading Home Management and Nutrition and boys reading Technical Drawing, Further Mathematics and Agricultural Science still dominated. In its conclusion, the report actually showed that the ultimate aim of the government seemed to be the production of female medical personnel to attend to female patients, a practice which was more culturally and religiously acceptable. The aim was not to produce female engineers, geologists, architects or agronomists. The conclusions to be drawn from the experiment are best stated in Adamu's own words.

Perhaps not surprisingly, even this move to provide more opportunities for girls to study science education within a legislative framework, especially in a traditional society such as Kano, elements of stereotyped stratification from officials about the students' eventual careers was somehow inevitable. For instance, in most official statements, it was made clear a major objective of the girls education in Kano is to produce women doctors and nurses (Adamu 1990:211).

The pervasiveness of gender stereotyping in educational material seems to be total. We carried out a survey on computers and computer games which have become an integral part of educational material all over the world, especially in developed nations, but also in developing ones. In Nigeria, in recent times, there has been a proliferation of these games in urban centres. Many households, especially middle and upper class ones, have one game or more. The focus of the study was on children aged between 10 and 18 who reside in the two cosmopolitan cities of Lagos and Benin. They were carefully chosen to be children who either owned games themselves or who had unlimited access to them. This survey included 273 children, 149 boys 124 girls. Controlling for all parameters except sex, we found that more boys play computer games most of the time. Almost without exception, the children believe boys play most. Among the reasons given for this, the most important ones are those which involve differentiation on the basis of gender both at home and in society. They include the following, listed in order of frequency:

- Boys are more interested
- Boys have a lot of spare time because they have no work to do
- Girls are always busy in the kitchen or with housework
- Computer games are designed for boys
- Boys like action games
- Boys like violence
- Boys are more adventurous
- The games have mostly male characters. Only boys and men are heroes.
- Boys understand more easily
- Mostly boys are found in computer clubs. Girls are scared of such places.

We found these responses very illuminating. The content of the games themselves present a barrier to girls as many of the children (male and female) believe the games are designed for boys who supposedly like fighting games, violence and action. And most of the characters are male. Furthermore, parental attitude hinders girls access to these games while boys are free to play, girls are busy helping their mothers. So already from the level of play and experimentation, boys have an advantage over girls. Familiarity with computers is definitely going to have an effect on inclination towards careers in Computerisation. A positive fallout of the survey was the difference in response to the questions, 'who play?' and 'who should play?'. While the children know that boys play most, they also respond that both boys and girls should play because 'God created all equally' (Ufomata 1996).

Implications for Policy Formulation

Education is recognised as a key factor in development and a major index of development. Sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to satisfy their aspiration for a life. Governments around the world and especially in Africa need to re-assess their educational policies to make education available to all, including half of their populations which are female.

According to the World Bank (1988) the differential between male and female school enrolments is no longer particularly pronounced at the primary level – girls account for 44 per cent of primary enrolments in Africa today, compared with 43 per cent in Asia and 48 per cent in Latin America. The difference between male and female enrolments remains high, however, in post primary education. The problem of female enrolment at the all-important secondary and tertiary levels need to be addressed seriously. If female educational attainments remain at the very lowest levels, then females would continue to occupy the lower ends of the occupation strata in economies. To achieve greater enrolments at higher levels, practices such as early marriages should be discouraged and legislated against. Many countries (e.g. Tunisia) have legislated against this, whereas several pay lip-service to the desirability of girls attaining higher education. This issue is one that needs to be taken seriously.

Secondly, research supports the fact of a positive correlation between parental income, education of mother and the education of girls. Obviously, the more educated women there are, the more the likelihood of girls to continue their education to tertiary levels. The implication of this is that governments and families must do their best to break the mould of female illiteracy.

The dropout rate for girls is higher than for boys due to socio-cultural and economic reasons. Girls are not enrolled in schools due to the burden of work at home. They look after younger siblings, attend to cooking, farming and grazing of animals, collect firewood and fetch water. Governments can help by providing basic amenities like water near homestead and commissioning the manufacture of cheap alternative sources of domestic fuel to firewood. These will free girls from some of their chores, the environment would be better for it and everybody becomes an incidental beneficiary at the end. In addition, it is important that schools are provided close to communities as many parents reflect an unwillingness to send their children far away from home. They fear this might be dangerous, especially for girls.

Education is expensive and governments need to intervene positively in the funding of education. Laboratory facilities should be provided in schools and incentives given to science teachers, especially female ones and also those who are willing to go to rural areas. Positive affirmative action is necessary to even out gender inequality in higher

education. It is common that where funds are limited, the girl child tends to be dropped in favour of her brothers. Legislative provisions should be made to accord a differential scholarship scheme in favour of girls. This would lighten the financial burden on families and would make them more willing to send their daughters to school.

We now come to the all important issue of the content of academic programmes and the language used textbooks. There is a need for educationists to look again at the issue of relevance in the content of courses and to reorientate themselves to be more gender-sensitive. In the first instance, mathematics and technological subjects should be made more interesting and more relevant to students' everyday life. This would increase the interest and participation of all children.

Secondly, textbooks should be reviewed to remove all gender stereotypes. Agriculture and science books should include positive images of both men and women equally and actively participating in activities depicted in these texts. Existing books, especially primary and secondary texts, need to be reviewed and checked for negative stereotyping. A simple test would be to ask some basic questions about any text under review. A guideline could include the following adaptation of Judith Stinton (1979):

(1) A check on the illustrations

- Look for stereotypes: Are girls always playing supporting roles?
- Look for tokenisms: Are the genders proportionally represented in the illustration?
- Who is doing what? Are females shown in leadership or action roles?

(2) Check the storyline

- Resolution of problems: are women treated as 'the problem'?
- Are the reasons for gender inequality explained, or accepted as inevitable?
- Role of women: Are female achievements due only to good looks or sexual manipulation? Could the same stories be told if the sex roles were reversed? Do the men in the stories always possess the power, take the leadership and make the important decisions?

(3) *Watch for loaded words and sexist language.*

Conclusion

The pursuit of equity in education is a stated goal of governments all over the world, including Africa. To successfully pursue this goal,

strategies must be multifaceted if they are to be effective in increasing the representation in higher education of women ethnic minorities, students from low income families, and other economically or educationally disadvantaged groups.... Increasing women's demand for higher education, for instance, in part requires actions in the labour market, fair employment and family policies to make employment opportunities more attractive for women graduates. In part, it also requires providing career information, role models of successful women, flexible modes of attendance (part-time studies, short courses and credit systems) and separate facilities appropriate to cultural practices (World Bank 1993:44-45).

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