

## Impact of COVID- 19 on Female Academia in West African Universities

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### **Abstract**

*Covid-19 have ravaged the world and its impact cut across all works of life more particularly it has affected the educational sector in no small measure. The closure of schools, school attendance, teacher's training, enrollment into schools and academic research has revealed how Covid-19 has affected the universities. The propensity of the impact of the virus between the male and female academia differs in no small measures. The extent to which it has impacted the female academia in West African University forms the focus of this research. The study is conducted in Anglophone West Africa Universities; Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, and Nigeria. The study is basically a theoretical and qualitative research and relies mainly on documentary evidence. This involves content analysis of relevant materials that will be collected. The study revealed that COVID-19 has affected the female academia in the performance of both domestic and official duties. The study therefore concluded that female academia in West Africa have negatively been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study recommended among others that training on modern education skills be done so that the female academia can appreciate and survive the new normal.*

**Keywords:** Academia, Covid-19, West Africa, Education, Female, University

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### **Introduction**

All over the world, countries are striving to further the interest of their nations which is to meet the basic needs and welfare of their citizens. At the course of achieving these aims, various challenges were faced by these countries. One of the greatest challenges is the provision of quality education services especially to women. Education is a cherished venture to every African woman in particular. The route to childhood however, is often characterized by scary and unpleasant experiences that make due to poor or lack of access to education in Africa. It is in the midst of this challenges that in 2019 there was an outbreak of a disease called Corona Virus in China. This disease that was an epidemic soon became a pandemic that ravaged the world.

Today, COVID-19 has become a global epidemic, the world is starting to grapple with the potential impact on human capital (the key factor that drives productivity, wealth creation, and welfare improvements). The continuous spread of the virus across the globe, has resulted in an increase of human loss. Hence, social and economic impact became so significant. The perceived high risk of being infected while working as a health care provider during an infectious disease outbreak to some extent may be a disincentive for young people to enroll into education programs to become doctor, nurse, or other medical workers. Moreover, the disruptions in day-to-day health care services, compounded by loss or shortage of health workers during the outbreak might cause difficulties in regular treatment for other health needs and thus increase the mortality of diseases overall which in turn affects Human Capital indirectly.

The pandemic has affected the educational sector in no small measure and in many ways, for example, an important problem that affect countries rose when students cannot study in their classrooms, because schools are closed so as to limit the spread of the virus. By closure of schools and other Human Development agencies or centers, the education and the training are no longer acquirable and this has undermined its development in Nigeria and other parts of the world at large. This, not counting less visible indirect effects, including increased gender-based violence, yet to be fully documented. The pandemic was superimposed on unresolved tensions between people and technology, between people and the planet, between the haves and the have-nots. These tensions were already shaping a new generation of inequalities pertaining to enhanced capabilities, the new necessities of the 21st century, as defined in the 2019 Human Development Report.

Therefore, the setbacks brought by the Covid-19 pandemic are what promotes Human capital in the society. Human Rights Watch (2020) in a study showed that students, parents, teachers, and education officials across Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Madagascar, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia **shows that school closures caused by the pandemic exacerbated previously existing inequalities, and that children who were already most at risk of being excluded from a quality education have been most affected. This led to increase in the domestic responsibility of Africa women they have to care for the children from morning till night without any break. Meanwhile when schools were in section, children go to school relieving the female academia the responsibility of taking care of children at the home front and also attending to official duties.**

All the tertiary institutions in West Africa were shut down due to the Corona Virus. This made all academics to be at home. Some of these academic especially the male saw this as an opportunity to conduct research from the comforts of their home. However, the female academic due to the fact that they are mothers, wives and lecturers at the same time could not have effectively carried out research like their male counterpart. The propensity of the impact of the virus between the male and female academia differs in no small measures. The extent to which it has the female academia in West African University forms the focus of this research.

## Literature Review

Since the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019, there is increasing research across various fields of human society on its impacts on human society. **Ogunode**, Abigeal and Lydia (2020) in their study examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic school close down on higher institutions in Nigeria. They discovered that the impact of COVID -19 on higher institutions; reduction of international education, disruption of academic calendar of higher institutions, cancellation of local

and international conferences, creating teaching and learning gap, loss of man power in the educational institutions, and cut in budget of higher education. Meanwhile, they suggested among other things that the government should take the following measure; increase the funding of higher institutions to enable the institutions manage the damages caused by the COVID-19 pandemic school close down. However, Ogunode et al (2020) study do not assess the impacts of covid-19 on female academics in West African Universities.

Similarly, Russell et al., (2020), in their review study assert that, in response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, 107 countries had implemented national school closures by March 18, 2020. It is unknown whether school measures are effective in coronavirus outbreaks (eg, due to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East respiratory syndrome, or COVID-19). However, Russell et al (2020) study do not assess the impacts of covid-19 on female academics in West African Universities.

Ogbogu (2011) in her study identified the causes of gender inequality in academia and the implications on the academic development of females in the university system. The study revealed that the recruitment and selection practices in the universities neither stressed male ideology nor discriminated against women; rather merit was the yardstick for acceptance into the profession. Ogbogu study also revealed that lack of mentoring, poor remuneration, women's lack of interest in academia, family responsibilities, the lengthy period of training, and the ideology that women should have low career aspirations due to traditional roles ascribed to them, accounted for the observed disparity in academia. The implication of this disparity according to Ogbogu on the academic development of women is the general reduction in their research output and the perpetuation of their low status in academia. However, Ogbogu concluded that appropriate institutional adjustments and affirmation action programmes are necessary to meet women's demands of equality and improve retention.

Russell et al., (2020), in their review study said, in response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, 107 countries had implemented national school closures by March 18, 2020. It is unknown whether school measures are effective in coronavirus outbreaks (eg, due to severe acute respiratory syndrome [SARS], Middle East respiratory syndrome, or COVID-19). From the above review of the literature, we realized that there is a gap in terms of an assessment of the impacts of Covid-19 on female academics in West Africa. It is against this backdrop; this study seeks to make contributions to this research area.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the Human capital theory. The Human Capital Theory was propounded by Theodore William Schultz in 1960. He was an American economist and chairman of the University of Chicago Department of Economics. Schultz rose to national prominence after winning the 1979 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. The main assumption and strength of the theory shows how education leads to increase in productivity and efficiency of workers by increasing the level of their cognitive skills. Human capital theory views schooling and training as investment in skills and competences (Schultz, 1960 and 1961). It is assumed that based on national expectation of return on investment, individuals make decisions on the education and training they receive as a way of augmenting their productivity. Theodore Schultz, Gory Bucker and Jacob Mincer introduced the notion that people invest in education or as to increase their stock of human capabilities which can be formed by combining innate abilities with investment in human beings (Babalola, 2000).

Human Capital Theory (HCT) concludes that investment in education and training will lead to greater human capital and economic outputs however the validity of the theory is sometimes hard to prove and contradictory. In the past, human capital and economic strength was largely dependent on tangible physical assets such as land, factories and equipment. Labor was a necessary component, but increases in the value of the business came from investment in capital equipment. Modern economists seem to concur that education and health care are the key to improving human capital and ultimately increasing the economic outputs of the nation (Becker 1993). These however, became a limitation because human capital can be viewed from many point of view which may not be necessarily the same with other scholars and at all places, individuals and places differs. In view of the assumption of the theory where education and health care are the yardstick to measure human capital according to Becker (1993), it can be said that human capital in West African Countries has been sabotaged. Owing to the fact that education and health care has suffered a devastating disadvantage in the covid-19 era. Schools has been closed for a long time and health care lack adequate facilities to cope with the ravaging virus. More particular, the academics especially women are mostly affected.

By application, the theory reveals the influence that education and training have on worker's cognitive skills, and how such skills transform into improving the general productivity of workers. It further insinuates that individuals make better decisions based on the level of education and training they had and yield more result more than those who acquire less of education and training in the society. In other words, it also posits that many individuals combine their inherent abilities with the already invested knowledge to increase their capabilities, therefore, creating a form of competitive advantage over those without the required skills and knowledge. However, with the current COVID-19 pandemic that is ravaging every part of the world, Human capital development tends to be limited.

Using the strength of the theory, it can be assumed that investment in education and training has direct influence on workers' cognitive skills and how the acquired skills can be transformed into productivity. In relation with the topic under study, this assumption failed to be achieved, with the various containments' strategies put in place which proved to limit the spread of the virus (closure of schools and prohibiting social gathering, promotion of social distancing, etc..) all hindered the achievement of the theory's assumption.

### **Impact of Covid-19 on Female Academia in West African Universities**

Despite the remarkable progress women have made in many areas of public life in the past two decades, they are still a long way from participating on the same footing in academia as men. The global picture is one of men outnumbering women in research and publication (Ogbogu, 2011). Studies have shown that there are few female Deans and Professors in many Universities across the world, while the numbers of female Vice-Chancellors are very limited (Poole, 2005). The situation in Anglophone West African Universities in the Gambia, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

It is pertinent to note that universities all over the world are known for their contributions to the development of expertise and high-level manpower that are required for economic growth and national development. For instance, Universities have over the years being providing skilled and professional personnel for both public and private sector. Therefore, it is pertinent to note that women are key player in economic growth and national development as intellectuals, policy-makers,

planners, decision-makers and contributors to the development process (Morley, 1999, Ogbodu, 2020).

Gender inequality in academia is an important issue not only in Nigeria, but all over the world. The situation in the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Spain, India and Switzerland reflects a high under-representation of academic women in professorial positions and in science and technology disciplines. The percentage of women across commonwealth universities of full-academic staff status ranges from 9.5 percent in Ghana to just over 50 percent in Jamaica. The pattern that emerges suggests that woman get stuck at the lower levels of the academic career structure (Ogbogu, 2009, 2020).

The raising cases of Covid-19 across the continued to increase, though not as the first quarter of the year 2020, governments across the world began to impose various strict lockdown measures that are geared towards reducing the spread of the Corona virus some of these measures including states of emergencies, social distancing, closure of public institutions, and ban on public gathering among others. In Africa an estimated 74% of women in Africa are engaged in the informal economy sector, working as street vendors and domestic workers. Also, Women are mainly found in subsistence farming sector and overrepresented in the service, tourism and hospitality industry, a sector characterized by low-paid and limited job security (African Union, 2020). Nevertheless, one of the vulnerable groups in the society that are most likely to bear the brunt end of the virus is women. Though, the corona virus does not discriminate, the measures many countries in West Africa especially Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, and Nigeria have put in place to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic are often discriminatory, both in the way they are developed, formulated implemented and measured. Besides, most of the governments of West African countries response plans that are currently been rolled out have little to no inclusion of a gender related issues in it (African Union, 2020).

Covid-19 pandemic has had negative impact every strata of human society. One sector, that have been greatly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic is the educational sector. This is because, significant numbers of local and international conferences that were planned for the first and second quarter of the year 2020 were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Available records from UNESCO monitoring indicates that, over 200 countries have implemented nationwide closures, impacting about 98% of the world's student population. Similarly, examination bodies such as the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) made press release at various time on the postponement of their examinations to a later date. This closure of educational institutions as well as the cancellation of examinations across West Africa have had significant negative consequences on Female Academia in many West African Universities.

Besides, another impact of the Covid-19 is on the development of science and technology. Today, there is drastic decline in new discovery and new findings in most Universities in West Africa have been reduced because many higher institutions in within the West African Sub-region have not fully integrate ICT into teaching and learning programme. This to a large extent have slow down the space of research and development in many countries in West Africa such as Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, and Nigeria.

In addition, the impact of covid-19 is on budgetary allocation to the educational sector in West African countries. For instance, Cseaafrica (2020) in his submission asserted that:

*“the Nigerian federal budget for the 2020 fiscal year was prepared with significant revenue expectations but with contestable realizations. The approved budget had projected revenue*

*collections at N 8.24 Trillion, an increase of about 20% from 2019 figure. The revenue assumptions are premised on increased global oil demand and stable market with oil price benchmark and oil output respectively at \$57 per barrel and 2.18 Million Barrels Per Day. The emergence of COVID-19 and its increasing incidence in Nigeria has called for drastic review and changes in the earlier revenue expectations and fiscal projections. Compared to events that led to recession in 2016, the current state of the global economy poses more difficulties ahead as the oil price is currently below US\$30 with projections that it will dip further going by the price war among key players in the industry. Unfortunately, the nation has grossly underachieved in setting aside sufficient buffers for rainy days such as it faces in the coming days. In addressing these daunting economic challenges, the current considerations to revise the budget downward is inevitable” (Cited in Ogunode et al 2020: 132).*

Evidence based research from the African Union have shown that African women are at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic on the continent, including at the front line in health services and support, and engagement with communities. However, women’s representation in policy development and decision making on COVID-19 is limited. Furthermore, women have unequal access to information and communication technologies often due to their lower levels of education and literacy (African Union, 2020). This situation is not different when the condition of female academics in West African Universities are assessed against the background of their contributions to research and development in post-covid-19 era.

On the whole, in many West African countries like Nigeria, substantial number of women are living in quarantine and self-isolating with violent partners. Many of these women do not have access to information on how to seek help or even how they could be quarantined separately. Furthermore, the differentiated violence experienced by women with disabilities is often not captured. Cases of specific violence against nurses and women, many of whom are perceived as potential source of infections is also not being captured. Therefore, evidence-based research has shown that COVID-19 has led to a marked increase in domestic violence, intimate partner violence and violence in the public space. However, this has not been reflected in government reports on response to COVID, many of which focus on efforts to minimise the loss of lives and avoid overwhelming health systems (African Union, 2020). This has become a source of concern to policy makers and the governments of West African Countries today. Thus, there is the need to address this ugly situation before it is too late.

### **Conclusion**

The outbreak of Covid-19 in late 2019 brought the world to its knees for the first time where world leaders at its first instance lack the policy direction to follow. Though, remarkable success has been achieved in the area of prevention but very little successes have been recorded in the area of vaccine. Therefore, this study investigated the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on female academics in West African universities. Though, despite the unavailability of statistical figures to backup some of the arguments in this study, we have been able to use secondary data to make case for the negative impacts of female academics in West African universities. This study argues that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected most especially women academics in the area of research, conferences attendance, and budgetary allocations to the education sector which to a large extent have affected women. Hence, this study makes the following recommendations as a measure in reducing the impacts of Covid-19 on female academics in West African Universities.

### **Recommendations**

Firstly, the governments of West African countries should ensure that all policies and programmes designed to address the problems brought by the Covid-19 pandemic has gender contents in it so as to address the plight of women. Secondly, the governments of West African countries should create a special endowment fund that will help in financing researches to be conducted by female researchers in most West African universities.

Thirdly, the governments of West African countries should ensure that both local and international conferences to be attended by female academics are made free and compulsory. This will among other things encourage female researchers to work harder in the area of research in finding lasting solution to many societal problems facing the West African Sub-Region.

In addition, there is the need for the government of Anglophone West African countries to train female academics on modern education skills so that the female academia can appreciate and survive the new normal.

Lastly, appropriate key institutional reforms and affirmation action programmes for women academics are necessary to meet women's demands of equality and improve retention in University system across West Africa.

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