

OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION: A Needful Empowerment Strategy for Nigerian Women

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ABSTRACT

Open and Distance Education (ODE) has offered access to many people who would have previously been denied access to educational opportunities based on where they live or work, poor-economic circumstances, social status etc. In the past, the African female child had always been denied formal education due to various cultural and social prejudices.

Distance education (DE) has also been employed by numerous women, who had earlier been deprived, to bridge the educational gap between males and females in the country. Thus, the need for Women emancipation through empowerment all over the world is at its peak and Nigerians generally are not left out. Therefore, an attempt to make sure that women's voices are heard, given their right places in the scheme of things, and also the educational attainment of women considering the low level of girls' education in Nigeria which is at a negative variance to attaining women position since certain educational attainments are required for optimal functionality in the various available organs; work place, group or committees of local or international standing.

This paper therefore stresses the use of open and distance learning as an avenue to attain knowledge and education that would put Nigerian women in a better footpath toward achieving their desired aspirations in Life.

Keywords: Distance Education (DE), Distance Learning (DL, Open and Distance Learning (ODL).

INTRODUCTION

During the past few decades, there have been considerable developments in open and distance learning in many developing countries. The African continent has the oldest institutional provision for distance higher and further education in the globe.

The spurge in the open schooling system is a phenomenon of the last part of the twentieth century (Daniel, 2010), and considerable progress has been made in respect of open schooling and open basic education in the African continent at school level and higher education.

Nigeria like other African countries is also striving towards expanding educational opportunities through distance education. In recent years, there has been remarkable progress in Nigeria towards these promises; yet, growing evidence indicates that the conventional education remains ill-positioned to respond to this challenge.

This is even worrisome when we consider the intricate link between accessible education, poverty and empowerment of the marginalized groups, since women have since independence in Nigeria, remained marginal beneficiaries of educational programmes. Not surprisingly, their high poverty status has deepened, especially, with

the introduction of structural adjustments in the 1980s. Despite its free education policy (FGN, 2013) at all levels of basic schooling, access to education for all remained unattainable, more so for girls and women (UNICEF, 2002).

In some Nigerian administrative states like Sokoto and Zamfara, the female literacy rate is as low as 12 percent when compared to 59% for boys (UNESCO, 2003). The statistics indicated a wider gender disparity with 65.5% of males being literate as against 39.5% literate females. The same period revealed that of the nearly 7.3 million children of primary school age not in school about 62% were girls. This stark reality is confirmed by Ofoegbu (2009:47), who argues that in fact only about 33% and 28% of female children respectively attend primary and secondary schools in sub Saharan Africa. This could be generally as a result of negative challenges which include ineffective and inefficient implementation of the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013) and reforms in the Nigerian education system, poor economy, poor management of scarce resources, poverty, early marriage and teenage pregnancy, culture and religious issues, gender bias in content, teaching and learning process.

There has however, never been any period in human history, more now than ever, that the provision of education to women is being championed. Various efforts include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights where the international covenants in arts. 7-9, 11 & 13 mentioned that through the right to education, human beings are oriented to 'the full development of human personality and a sense of dignity'; UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO, 1999), the 1981 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 1990 Jomtien Declaration on Education for All (EFA), and the 2000 World Forum on Education For All, especially the EFA 2015 goal commitment of: "eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girl's full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality (World Education Forum, 2002). Though much progress has been made, it is however ironic and sad, that this is 2015, the target date, and yet this goal is far from being realized. The inability of many women to attend regular institutes of higher learning and acquire degree certificates due to lack of time had given to the establishment of distance learning in Nigeria.

Now, the open distance learning has come a long way to include learners from along the length and breadth of the world into its ambit. It has also given a rare privilege to working women, *house wives*, even prisoners, individuals doing "*Mickey Mouse*" jobs and immigrants to Nigeria other than students and professionals that were the targets of distance learning.

It is an important part of the national development project undertaken by the Nigerian government. The cost of distance learning courses does not weigh heavily on the budget of learners especially the women. It is against this backdrop that Open and Distance Learning (ODE) has been identified as the panacea to the perennial educational challenges of equitable access to learning, equality of basic educational opportunities as well as providing a second chance for women and girls who had never been or had once been in the system but had to dropout for one reason or another.

Even though this mode of education may not be the *magic wind* in solving all our educational ills, Pityana (2009:9) argues that, if properly conceived, could be the long-term strategy for national renaissance, since higher education, notwithstanding the social circumstances, remains an engine of development, knowledge and its development and dissemination can transcend the confines of social deprivation. In Nigeria though, distance learning is still on the way to multiply its potentiality as an alternative education option

Historical antecedence of Distance Learning in Nigeria

Distance education is a field of education that focuses on teaching methods and technology with the aim of delivering teaching, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom. In Nigeria, the emergence of Distance learning in dates back to the colonial time. Owoeye (2004) opines that since the colonial period, correspondence colleges from United Kingdom have provided intermediate and advanced level training to a number of qualified Nigerians via correspondence courses. Distance studies in Nigeria started around the 60s. The first official recognition of distance education by the Nigerian government came in 1959 during a prelude towards independence; the Federal Ministry of Education inaugurated the Ashby Commission.

The Ashby Report submitted in 1960, recommended the establishment of University of Lagos with a department for correspondence courses. The launching of the Universal Primary Education in 1976 led to further recognition of the distance learning mode as a veritable means of promoting teacher education. Towards this end, National Teachers Institute (NTI) was established by the Federal Government in 1976 as the first institution providing distance education courses designed to upgrade under-qualified and unqualified teachers. Later on, some universities such as University of Ibadan and Ahmadu Bello University were providing extension services to their catchment areas. The Ahmadu Bello University Institute of Education also introduced the Teacher In Service Education Programme to raise the quantity and quality of teachers in Northern Nigeria. According to Adegbite and Oyekanmi (2010), the University of Ibadan also inaugurated distance education in 1988 in an attempt to meet the needs of the ever increasing applicants for university education through distance learning programme.

When the National Council of Education ruled that the National Certificate of Education (NCE) should be the minimum qualification for teaching at primary school level, the Ahmadu Bello University Institute of Education, started the NCE through correspondence programme. This important point of training and recruitment of more teachers point was encapsulated in a 2009 report by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), *Projecting the Global Demand for Teachers: Meeting the Goal of Universal Primary Education by 2015*.

According to the report, 10.3 million teachers will be needed worldwide by 2015 if universal primary education is to be attained. Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria Inclusive) faces the most severe teacher shortfalls. The UIS report (2009, p. 15) observed that: "Of the 10.3 million teachers needed, 8.1 million will be deployed to maintain the current capacity of education systems (i.e compensate for attrition).

About 2.2 million recruits will be needed to expand education systems in order to achieve UPE (Universal Primary Education) In other words, one in five teachers that need to be hired by 2015 will be part of global efforts toward EFA.

This reflects the massive investment which is required by governments. This perspective highlights the dramatic burden for sub-saharan Africa (Nigeria Inclusive). The region needs to recruit and train about 1.1 million teachers to maintain the current situation in the classroom, which already falls short in terms of education quality. But to attain UPE, these countries must recruit an additional 1.3 million teachers, bringing the total to 2.4 million. In short they will need to recruit almost as many teachers in just eight years as are currently teaching in classrooms across the region." This huge need for teachers in Africa and other developing countries is alarming as viewed in the context of the limited capacity of teacher education institutions to address it while simultaneously upgrading the large proportion of untrained or unqualified teachers

already in the system and providing adequate opportunities for teachers' continuing professional development.

Hence Distance education brought about the training of more teachers through the National Teachers institute (NTI). This also brought an attempt to establish an Open University in Abuja which was earlier truncated and was replaced with a dual-mode institution established as the University of Abuja. At the University of Abuja, the Centre for Distance Learning and Continuing Education (CDLCE) was set up and mandated to provide distance education component of every programme that the University would provide. The sandwich programmes were established in the mid 80s and run by some Nigerian Universities and Colleges of Education. The sandwich programmes were originally designed and run during the school long vacations to create opportunities for participation by workers, especially teachers.

These programmes are open to all categories of learners with varied entry qualifications ranging from Primary School Certificate, attempted School Certificate, School Certificate holders, TCII teachers, NCE and first degree holders. More women enrolled in this programme. This was to create access for those who are not able to make it to the conventional schools because of time and other factors.

Although Open and Distance learning was introduced to the university education system in Nigeria in 1983, Through The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) which was first launched in 1983 but suspended in 1985 by the military government. President Olusegun Obasanjo re-launched it in 2001 and NOUN now provides instruction for over 60,000 students as at 2002 (UNESCO, 2002).

The reestablishment of National Open University of Nigeria in 2001 was to prove that open and distance learning is not only cost- effective, but is also a most appropriate avenue for widening access to education, which has helped to produce a better skilled workforce, which in turn has led to the growth and development of both local and national economies. Typically, graduates of distance education programmes find it easier to participate in the economic mainstream. NOUN is the first full-fledged university that operates in an exclusively open and distance learning (ODL) mode of education.

The university focuses mainly on a distance teaching and learning system, and delivers its course materials via print in conjunction with information and communication technology (ICT). The practice of ODL in Nigeria takes various forms, which include correspondence study education, distance learning (Sandwich programmes), Part-Time Teacher Training Programme (PTTP), Open University, weekend programmes, adult literacy education programmes, National Teachers Institute (NTI) and e-learning.

From the beginning of correspondence courses during the first half of the 19th century to the modern conception of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), students have been provided with useful knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities. The programme provides access to young, elderly and disadvantaged groups who are interested in the acquisition of university education, anytime and anywhere. Open and distance education is flexible, and learner friendly.

Multi-perspective approaches to learning are adopted in order to ascertain the quality of instruction. The emergence of the system of ODL is an inevitable and unparalleled advancement in the history of educational development in Nigeria and internationally. Unlike the formal system of education which has its inherent limitations with regards to expansion, provision of access, equity and cost- effectiveness, the growth of open and distance mode of education has now made education flexible by providing

increased educational opportunities to a larger population in different situations and needs.

Thus, we are moving gradually from the exclusive, closed system mode of "privileged" access to education, towards a more inclusive educational model, which supports and is reflective of UNESCO's goal of Education for All for the 21st century. Through various initiatives, such as those undertaken by UNESCO, COL, the British Council, the Literacy Enhancement Assistance Program, and others, the gap between education and world of work that many developing countries have experienced in the past is being narrowed.

Distance learning has great potential in the developing countries (Nigerian Inclusive), by offering a powerful channel for bringing education to groups that have previously been excluded. This brought about the uniqueness of ODL on the following premise;

- There is separation of learner and teacher in time and space.
- There is flexibility in the use of multimedia devices and entry requirements for increased access and equity.
- There is availability of programmes to learners at their chosen locations.
- It is learner-cantered.
- There is openness with regards to access, duration, age, sex, goals and knowledge delivery technique.
- It allows students to combine education with work.
- It allows for a two-way communication between the teacher and the learners.

Generally, open and distance learning has been used to give students a second chance at education, and this seems to have been particularly the case in teacher development programmes in Africa (Holmberg, 1995; De Wolf, 1994; Rumble, 1992).

THE CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Open Distance Education (ODE) and Open Distance Learning (ODL)

There are several approaches to defining the term Distance Education (DE), Kaufman, Watkins and Guerra (2000), defines distance education as the delivery of useful learning opportunities at convenient place and time for learners, irrespective of institution providing the learning opportunity. Distance education aims at increasing access to education for those who have difficulty in accessing it within the mainstream such as the poor, illiterate, women, marginalized and those living in remote areas.

To Dhanarajan, (2008), Distance education is the means by which the teacher is taken literally to the student. It is a teaching and learning process in which students are separated from the teachers by a physical distance which is often bridged by communications technologies.

Wikipedia defines Distance education or distance learning as a mode of delivering education and instruction, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom. Distance learning provides "access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both. Distance education courses that require a physical on-site presence for any reason (excluding taking examinations) have been referred to as hybrid or blended courses of study.

Massive open online courses (MOOCs), aimed at large-scale interactive participation and open access via the web or other network technologies, are a recent development in distance education It is an educational process in which a significant proportion of

the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner. Distance learning according to Frederick B. King, Michael F. et. al. (2007) is improved capabilities in knowledge and/or behaviors as a result of mediated experiences that are constrained by time and/or distance such that the learner does not share the same situation with what is being learned. From this definition of distance learning flows our definition of distance education.

Distance education is formalized instructional learning where the time/geographic situation constrains learning by not affording in-person contact between student and instructor. Open Distance Learning is an organized educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimized in terms either of access, or of time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these. Open and Distance learning is a type of learning whereby opportunity is given to people (young and elderly) who have passed the ages of admission into regular universities to continue their education. It is also directed at youngsters beyond school age, who are qualified and desire to earn a university degree.

Adebayo (2007) defined open and distance learning as the type of education that takes place outside the conventional school system; it is imparted without necessarily having personal interaction with students or learners. Creed (2001) sees distance learning as 'an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone far removed in space and /or time from the learners.

According to UNESCO (2002), ODL is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of Internet-based information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web presenting approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners.

The Federal Ministry of education (2002) defines ODL as any form of learning in which the provider enables individual learners to exercise choices over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning and distance learning as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/ or in time from the learner.

Alaezi (2005) refers to open and distance learning as educational patterns, approaches and strategies that permit people to learn with no barriers in respect of time and space, age and previous educational qualification –no entry qualification, no age limit, no regard to sex, race, tribe, state of origin etc. On the other hand, Dodds (2005) in his argument against the concept defines open learning as an approach which combines the principles of learner centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learner provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems. Open learning therefore is the policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning (Glen, 2005).

Generally, open and distance learning education courses are made up of a number of course components or learning materials which can include any of the following: teaching texts, study guides, course guides, readers or anthologies, assignments (with or without an accompanying tutor guide), television broadcasts or videotapes, radio broadcasts or audiotapes, software or online information and data, CD-ROMS,

textbooks and laboratory materials, the telephone, computer conferencing, teleconferencing a webinar based approach which facilitates learning. Tuition materials are sent with questions to be answered, it could be recorded electronic materials and the students do this at their spare time. In addition, some students support may be provided, either through personal communication at local universities or through online student tutors. Both the media used for open and distance learning and the student support arrangements affect the possible level of interaction in open and distance learning courses. It can be deduced from these definitions that open and distance learning provides educational opportunities needed by anyone, anywhere and at anytime. It provides increased educational opportunities to a larger population in different situations and needs. Both students and employees with distance problems can benefit because it is more flexible in terms of time and can be delivered anywhere. Therefore it's a second chance approach to get educated for those that could not complete a certain level of education at a particular time because of varying level of conditions.

Women Empowerment

The extensive use and popularity of the term women empowerment by many international scholars over the years leaves one to think that there is a commonly shared perspective on what it means, but its many different existing definitions and interpretations prove that the opposite is true. In fact, there is no straightforward definition of women empowerment, simply because the concept of power is such a societal contextually dependent concept that it cannot be streamlined internationally.

Nevertheless, research on women empowerment has shown some definitional and interpretational similarities that are interesting to look into when trying to define women empowerment. Empowerment implies that an individual or a group hitherto lacked power or authority by circumstances, denial or default. The issue of women empowerment has become a part of popular debate (Olakunlehin and Ojo, 2006:272). One of the similarities in the literature defining women empowerment is captured in the concept of women's decision-making power as an indicator of women empowerment.

Stressing the dimension of resources, the dimension of decision-making agency reflects the capabilities women have to shape their live according to their own desires (Kabeer, 1999: 438). All definitions of empowerment pointing towards decision-making power share the characteristic that it is about women having individual control over their lives, either economically, socially or psychologically. Another way in which empowerment is conceptualised is by referring to the importance of social inclusion (Malhotra, et al., 2002: 4). Here, empowerment is to be obtained by the participation of women in society and by, as Malhotra, et al., 2002:4 states it: "the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them." Connected to the concept of social inclusion is the dimension of political and social awareness of women which explains part of the empowerment process.

Saraswathy, et al. (2008:190) moreover pointed out that women empowerment is a result of a process of women "identifying their inner strength, opportunities for growth, and their role in reshaping their own destiny". Finally, women empowerment has frequently been termed a process of women gaining more access to a steady income and economic power or security (Malhotra, et al., 2002). These definitions are not essentially exclusive, but refer to different components of empowerment. For this study, we follow Alcoff (1988:432), who defines empowerment as a process which women come to believe in their ability "to construct, and take on and [their] choices".

Powerlessness, in contrast, we see as the continuing subordination of women by men in public and private spheres, supported by cultural messages of devaluation internalised, in varying degrees, by women. These messages form the basis for women's doubts about their power to shape their lives.

Accessible Education

The purpose of adopting ODL as a policy option is ostensibly to increase access to higher education especially by non-traditional learners. Access implies the facilitation of people, in this case women, to get education, the opportunity for enrolment as well as the facilitation and the encouragement of sustaining enrolment by learners in appropriate education programmes. UNESCO (2002) equally stated that ODL represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from constraints of time and place and offering learning opportunities to individuals and group of learners.

In Nigeria, women are discriminated against in access to education for social and economic reasons.

The Human *Development Report 2002* puts the statistics of illiterate women at 57 percent as against 43 percent for males. As seemingly insignificant this difference may appear, it is completely unacceptable, if the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are to be achieved.

In Nigeria, girls and women comprise about 49.69 percent of the total population. Incidentally, about 61 percent of the total female population reported to be illiterates against 37.7 percent of the male population.

Thus, the objective of ODL in Nigeria is to enhance the opportunities that support education for all and life-long learning and at the same time provide avenues for the acquisition of qualitative education for all categories of learners especially women.

As Calvert (1986) notes, ODL helps extend the market for education to clientele who have not been previously served. In developing countries, particularly in Africa, this clientele has continued to increase in geometric proportion.

Poverty Alleviation

Definitions of poverty are as varied as poverty itself. We do not intend to reconcile them here, as this is done elsewhere. However, based on our respondents, poverty is best captured in the basic needs approach. Aluko (1975) refers to poverty as "a lack of command over basic consumption needs, which mean, in other words, that there is an inadequate level of consumption giving rise to insufficient food, clothing and/or shelter, and moreover the lack of certain capacities, such as being able to participate with dignity in society. Poverty has been defined as the inability to attain a minimum standard of living (World Bank Report, 1990).

In Nigeria, the prevalence of both relative and absolute poverty is duly recognised and even mentioned in various National Developments Plans and Conferences of the Nigerian Economic Society. Poverty has a gendered face, and any attempt at its alleviation must take cognizance of this fact. We have favoured a basic needs framework of poverty.

Ogwumike and Ekpenyong (1995) see poverty as a household's inability to provide sufficient income to satisfy its need for food, shelter, education, clothing and

transportation. Minimum standards for food are based on nutritional requirements in terms of calories and protein consumption habit and customs are also allowed for in the selection of the food items to give the required national stock.

Shelter and education, the number of person per room and the number of children attending school (and the level of schooling) respectively, are adopted as minimum standard.

However, the problem of defining minimum standard for clothing and transportation has persisted. Poverty specifically has traditionally warranted significant attention by all governments and civil society if only because it's most fundamental characteristic is deprivation, which denies the people and communities the options necessary to exercise choices about their lives.

Such deprivation is strongly linked to a host of risk factors, identified by the World Bank to include "low level of nutrition, illness, and the inability to access information or to take advantage of educational opportunities at the primary and secondary level" tend to exclude its victims from the enjoyment of any developmental gains seen in the macro economy.

The World Bank has also pointed to a reasonably strong correlation between poverty and illiteracy in Nigeria, and has confirmed the dearth of human capital among the poor in the country. However, it remains to be added that the foundation of poverty eradication and women empowerment is ensuring that the vast majority of the people are equipped to participate in the knowledge economy of the 21st century, especially through programmes that would encourage their enrolment in large numbers, in a wide swathe of courses for educational and skills development. Training in this case includes social skills, introduction to entrepreneurship, and workplace etiquette. Distance education qualifies to be a feasible vehicle for making such training programmes available and accessible to women

BENEFITS OF ODE TO WOMEN IN NIGERIA

Accessible Education for Women in Nigeria

Olakulehin and Ojo (2006) argue that the only effective way to meaningfully contribute to the emancipation of women in the Nigerian society is to widen the access of women and girls to quality education. Since the conventional structures of education have not been able to adequately meet the demands of female education in Nigeria, on a research study conducted by Terhemba (2011) ODL readily fills in this void, she maintained that respondents agreed that this mode of delivery has afforded them the opportunity to benefit from education, which they would not otherwise had the opportunity. According to her, a respondent in Benue explained;

I got my National Certificate of Education before my colleagues, who in the first place considered the NTI programme I was enrolled in a second class. It was called various derogatory names, especially Torfam (referring to its seasonal nature). By the time I was certified, they had just gotten admission to a conventional College of Education. I have not stopped from there; I am now taken a BA (Ed) in Early Childhood at the NOUN.

Another respondent in Kogi affirmed the way ODE has transformed the educational landscape in Nigeria. She graphically informed that:

If you know the challenge we women have in combining domestic work and studies, you would agree with the double work women perform. I never had a slight idea that it was possible for me to look after my children, go to work at the Local government Council, and at the same time attend a University. NOUN has literally and figuratively carried education to our doorsteps.

UNESCO and other United Nations agencies have identified access as one of the ways of reducing gender inequality in the society. Reviewing the submission from the literature, three reasons have been identified as being germane for equality of opportunity and access in education:

- equal access for individuals regardless of social circumstances
- equal chances to take part or share in the system
- equal educational results: equal gains.

Poverty Alleviation for Women in Nigeria

Olakulehin and Ojo (2006:273) suggested that ODL will increase the income-earning potential and development of women. Kanwar and Taplin (2001) citing Le Vine (1982) also suggest that educated women would afford to buy goods and services for their children and have a greater chance of helping them to find employment through their contacts.

Furthermore, educated women have demonstrated a better ability to keep control of their husband's expenditures and to maintain their own economic independence, to improve household management, and be more able to save money and generally contribute more to the family income pool (Chaudry, 1995).

Then the question is "What impact has ODE had on poverty reduction of women in Nigeria? The answers may be diverse, but one common theme, however, was the fact that, at the initial enrolment into the programme, it appeared that the women were becoming poor and poorer.

However, after the painful challenges of completing the programme, their living standards and those of their families increased. Terhemba (2011) reported One commercial farmer in Nassarawa saying:

...they were times I decided enough was enough. We had three children in the secondary school and the fourth had written matriculation examinations for university admission. I could see that my husband was not supportive of my part-time programme again. Allah be blessed, I have since completed my studies, and with connections and the knowledge from my course, had gotten a small loan. I can say now that my husband collects enough money from me, as I collected from him during my studies.

On this study, Terhemba (2011) concluded that, a large proportion of the respondents were in agreement that with the completion of the programme, they were now able to provide sufficient income to satisfy the basic necessities of life, including the need for food, shelter, education, clothing and transportation. This is obvious when women are not confined to the four wall of the house alone with the primitive believe of just bearing children and cook, getting them empowered and gainfully employed will at least reduce the financial burden of the man if not totally eradicated.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND SELF RELIANCE IN NIGERIA

Since accessible education, leads to poverty reduction, it is believed that there is a continuum between access, poverty reduction and empowerment of women. Chaudry (1995) has aptly demonstrated that women who attended adult education classes became more confident, which in turn equipped them with better mobility, expression, understanding and ability to make decisions and accept responsibility. There were benefits not only for the women themselves, but for their husbands, children, families and communities. For example, it has been found that educated mothers are able to contribute more effectively to the quality of their children's education (Raj, 1982; Chaudry, 1995). According to a research conducted by Terhemba (2011) she came out with a tabulated analysis showing the Empowerment score percentages as demonstrated by women, see below

Table: 1
Empowerment score percentages as demonstrated by women

Activity	Average Empowerment Score per Indicator	
	Empowered	Not Empowered
Mobility	88.3	12.7
Economic security	56.9	43.1
Ability to make large and small purchases	84.4	15.6
Involvement in major decisions	56.6	43.4
Relative freedom from family	86.7	13.3
Political and legal awareness	44.0	56.0
Public participation/protests/campaigning	92.0	8.0
Aggregated Percent	72.7	28.3

Although it is not easy presenting data on women empowerment in quantitative terms based on the subjective component of empowerment. However, the table above attempts this.

The conclusion she drawn from the field study analysis is that ODE overall leads to higher women empowerment if women empowerment is measured by all seven indicators (mobility, economic security, the ability to make small and large purchases, involvement in major decisions, relative freedom from domination by the family, political and legal awareness and participation in public protests and campaigning) together. Looking at the effects of ODL on the empowerment indicators as separate dimensions, it can be said that ODL leads more substantially to public participation, mobility, ability to make purchases, and relative freedom from domination by the family. About 72.7 percent of the female respondents agreed that these programmes have empowered them compared to 28.3 percent that think otherwise (Tehemba, 2011)

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN PARTICIPATING ODE PROGRAMMES

Despite remarkable progress made in empowering women in Nigeria, there are still considerable obstacles to this feat. Poverty, early marriage and teenage pregnancy, culture and religious issues, and gender bias in content, teaching and learning process are still a hindrance. There is still a pervading expectation that education is more important for males than for females (Tremaine and Owen, 1984), especially since after marriage women leave to join their husbands' families and, hence, are not regarded as being useful to their own families in the long term. An outcome of this attitude can be

lack of emotional and financial support or even demonstrated hostility concerning studies (Lunneborg, 1994). Yet for those who have scaled these first hurdles, there are fundamental challenges of timely receipt of instructional materials, access to the internet, inappropriate technology and power failure. These and many more frustrate women's effort to participate in ODL programmes. Other challenges as explained by Morayo (2013) Includes;

Power Supply

The problem of power instability in Nigeria is perennial and has been a major setback for our technological development. Most DE students that reside in cities and towns are faced with the problem of epileptic supply of power. Worse still, majority of them live in rural areas that are not connected to the national grid Lack of skills in Designing Course-wares: Instructional delivery in ODL is greatly affected by some facilitators' lack of knowledge and skills in designing and delivering courses in electronic format. This scenario is a fall out of the Non ICT-compliant status of the facilitators.

Poverty and Poor ICT Penetration

Statistics reveal that many Nigerians live in poverty. The result of this is that the cost of computers and other ICT resources are far beyond their reach. Therefore, like most African countries basic ICT infrastructures are inadequate. There is still low level of computer literacy among the Nigerians. Internet connectivity: Statistics has shown that there is low level of internet connectivity in Nigeria. The cost of accessing internet is still very high in West Africa. Most ODL students make use of Cyber Café where they are made to pay so much on hourly basis despite the poor services and slow rate of the servers. To make both students and teachers computer literate, the government should make projects that promote information and communications technology a priority.

Low Teledensity

Another major challenge to open and distance learning programme delivery is teledensity. Access to unhindered use of ICT tools such as telephone and internet has been very low (Asogwa, 2007).

Despite the advent of the Global System of Mobile (GSM) telecommunication, the use of ICT resources for educational purposes in general and open and distance learning in particular is still very low.

Technophobia

Most of the ODL students have no computer education background; hence they are afraid of using one. Some of them go to the extent of hiring experts at a cost to fill their admission, registration and other documents meant for them to fill online. However, the very few who have access to the computers do not know how to use it and take full advantage of its usage.

School Curriculum

Most of the students admitted have no information technology/computer education knowledge because it was not entrenched in the curriculum at their elementary and secondary education level. Not until recently when computer education is been introduced at elementary level and it is not yet a compulsory subject at the secondary level of our education.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, it is evident that there is no end to the various advantages accrued to Distance education as an empowerment strategy for women. Distance Education is important because it makes education accessible and reduces cost while maintaining quality. The use of distance education makes for equity of educational opportunities and services. The impact of gender disparity underlies the UNDP statement that 'for too long, it was assumed that development was a process that lifts all boats, that its benefits trickled down to all income classes- and that it was gender neutral in its impact (Akubue, 2001).

Open and Distance Learning, evidence shows, a better approach in Nigeria in democratizing education, poverty alleviation and the empowerment of the marginalized groups, especially women. Many of the difficulties and concerns experienced by women, particularly those in rural or low-income areas, point to the fact that distance education may be an ideal way for them to access education, since it potentially enables them to do most of their studying from home if they wish to do so, thus reducing the need to conflict with social or cultural requirements (Kanwar and Taplin, 2001:7).

In the context of Nigeria, women themselves allude to this benefit. Though most women are yet to utilize this window of rare opportunity to enhance their participation in the global economy, and to play a tangible role in their families, society and the nation at large.

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