

## **WOMEN IN DISTANCE LEARNING: 2 ND CHANCE OR 3 RD SHIFT?.**

**By Aggeli, A., & Vassala, P.**

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This paper will focus on the female way of being a distance learner. At first we will point out the crucial reasons why women attend open, distance, and flexible learning programs, as well as their objectives and their motives. Then, we will report on the factors they consider when they select a distance learning program or course. Finally, we will explore the obstacles hindering women's access to distance education or impeding their successful studies and we will suggest actions that would make their attending easier.

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# WOMEN IN DISTANCE LEARNING: 2<sup>ND</sup> CHANCE OR 3<sup>RD</sup> SHIFT?

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## Introduction

Distance learning offers flexible new learning routes and continually renewed opportunities for educational expansion and personal development and contributes to life-long learning. It is estimated that over half the several million world distance-education population are women. (Kramarae 2000, Furst-Bowe 2001). In the postgraduate "Distance Learning" course of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) female attendance is 57.2%, confirming the international data.

Women's testimonies concerning their experiences in distance learning internationally (Faith 1988) along with the reliable findings of much research according to which gender issues influence comparative levels of achievement, drop-out rates and motivation to learn, forced educational circles to become increasingly aware of the diversity offered by gender differences in various components of distance education. (Evans 1995, Burge and Lenskyj 1990). Moreover, it has been argued that recognition of diversity in any conception of the student body is a key area of successful development. So, if the designers of corresponding programs are willing to meet the needs and the expectations of not only women themselves, but also of society, it is important to understand that current and future student body.

This paper will focus on the female way of being a distance learner. At first we will point out the crucial reasons why women attend open, distance, and flexible learning programs, as well as their objectives and their motives. Then, we will report on the factors they consider when they select a distance learning program or course. Finally, we will explore the obstacles hindering women's access to distance education or impeding their successful studies and we will suggest actions that would make their attending easier.

## 1. The factors that motivate adult women to enroll in DE programs, to select specific distance learning programs and courses

Most women in distance learning share goals and ambitions similar to those of students in the conventional education system. This means that they are seeking degrees for a number of reasons including economic (career advancement, higher wages) and individual development. They take up vocations and skills for personal fulfillment from obtaining a degree itself or from gaining useful knowledge to fulfilling personal or social goals. They are searching for knowledge itself as well as the sense of achievement that this offers. (Evans 1995, Furst-Bowe 2001). Educators' research in the Hellenic Open University (HOU) investigating the reasons why women who followed the module "Course and curriculum design for the teaching of French" in the HOU enroll in a distance postgraduate program, confirm that career and personal concerns urged Greek French teachers to do so. More often they report their desire to be informed of the developments in education (specialization, education, theoretical training, and practical improvement of their teaching). The personal reasons - status and career development is one more answer yet remarkable is also their mentioning the chance of attending such a postgraduate/distance post graduate program itself. (Androulakis et al 2001).

Generally, women prefer distance learning because of its nature (May 1994, Kokkos and Lionarakis 1998, Keegan 2000), since studies of this type allow them to fulfill their family and career responsibilities. Furthermore, it enables them to learn at their own pace, while minimizing costs - saving money and time on commuting and child care. Older women students, in particular, comment that the "virtual classroom" minimizes the discomfort and alienation they sometimes experience on conventional college campuses populated by 18 to 22 year-olds. (Kramarae 2000, Furst-Bowe 2001).

When selecting a distance learning program, in addition to considering the nature or the degree and the type of delivery system, female students consider several general factors including the program availability

and quality, the institutional reputation and its location, the service quality and costs (Furst-Bowe 2001, Mowen and Parks 1997). Furthermore, adult women students may be more likely to select a distance learning program because of the way it fits in with the other demands of their lives. (Furst-Bowe 2001).

As far the selected courses are concerned, women choose to enroll in greater proportions in arts, human studies and social sciences. It seems that despite the development of technology over the past decade introducing to the home many more computers and the emphasis on computer skills within the school curriculum, (Lockwood 1995), "the belief continues to persist that females are by nature technologically ignorant and unable to absorb scientific and technological information or to acquire technical skills" (Deligianni-Kouimtzi and Zioogou 1993, Frangkoudaki 1985).

## **2. Barriers to participation**

Any learning at any age requires time, space and support. At a distance, the onus is on the learner to organize the necessary space and structure their available time, often accompanied by external and internal conflicts. These are conflicts related to a series of corresponding barriers whose relative significance varies according to the level of education and training, the age of the women (young/mature) and the cultural context. (Evans 1995)

Further to this point, we will summarize and categorize the barriers to women's participation in distance learning; barriers which are underpinned by contemporary ideological and social structures. Improving the indicators that concern the participation among women in distance learning will only succeed when the educational institutions comprehend these obstacles, given that despite high enrollment rates, a large percentage of female students drop out before program completion, for non-academic reasons. (First-Bowe 2001)

### ***2.1 Conflicting responsibilities (work, family, educational, social-political) – Lack of time***

For all the benefits of distance learning for women, these students still have to make tremendous sacrifices to balance the demands of work, family, and school (study, writing assignments, research etc.) being mothers, female partners, employees and citizens. That is why the majority of women declare anxiety, and many others (especially mothers of young children) often do their coursework while the other family members are sleeping (Morgan 1991, Stalker 1997, May 1994) commented that taking on distance study roles often results in "double duty" and Kramarae (2000) concludes that working mothers interested in furthering their education are adding a difficult "third shift" to their responsibilities. "We need to deal with the time bind that all parents and older students face if we want to make the rhetoric of "lifelong learning" for the "information economy" a reality", she suggests.

Yet, King and Hill (1993) point to the phenomenon of upper class women who bring in low-paid domestic labor of other women in order to pursue their educational/career aspirations. This phenomenon, though, can be found only in developed and developing countries and is an advantage that is limited to the privileged affluent classes.

### ***2.2 Emotional barriers: guilt, fear of success, lack of confidence and self esteem, as far as educational goals are concerned***

Even though they try hard to combine study with their other various responsibilities and roles, and despite the motivation and dedication on-line learners demonstrate, many are still made to feel that they are letting their families down when they try to further their education. (Kramarae 2000) Distance learning demands devotion and time and there are male partners that experience anxiety owing to the extent that they are alienated from this new concern in women's lives. Tolerance is conditional based on length of time spent and potential neglect of relationships and responsibilities, but on the understanding that this is an aberration. Some women felt obliged to "pay back" this tolerance through restricting time spent and normalizing relationships. (Burke 2000).

Dowling (1983) argues that the fear of women achieving success leads them to choices beneath their possibilities and generally hinders their social development. "It seems as if women are consumed by "gendered panic" in the face of success", she points out. One can assume the consequences that this

attitude will have on women's self-esteem and confidence." (Nova 1994) and evidently on their studies, especially in the distance learning mode, where initiative plays a decisive role.

### ***2.3 Lack of partner support, the children and the wider family – gender stereotypes***

As feminists have pointed out for decades, when women pursue an interest or activity which does not relate directly to their domestic role, and effectively expose and challenge unequal power relations within the family, they often meet with strong resistance from male partners because of suspicion/jealousy as well as ridicule. (Evans 1995)

Sometimes wider family (children, parents and parents-in-law) creates and sustains (internal and external) barriers to studying, reinforcing gender stereotypes. Greek grandmothers while baby-sitting during the face-to-face Team Counseling meetings usually state, "She should be at home taking care of her family. What does she want with this course of action?"

Common patterns in lack of family support for women engaged in distance learning are the cultural and cross-cultural social norms and traditions by which the subservient status of women is maintained. (Effeh 1991, Kirkup and Abbot 1997, Athanasiadou 2002). However, the intersection of discourses in the home is located where traditional and postmodern gender expectations collide. Burke (2000) cites vigorous examples of women's experiences: "Sometimes I work from home. On these days I usually put some washing in the machine early on in the day and dry it during coffee breaks or between tasks. Although my husband is supportive if he is working from home then he is WORKING and would not dream of incorporating domestic tasks into his day." "My partner is also in academia. He prioritizes his work over mine every time even when I am working to a deadline. I work at college as much as I can although child care responsibilities mean I cannot often work during the evening or weekends because my partner has the computer."

### ***2.4 Lack of sufficient or appropriate support from the state: cost of studies, child-care availability***

Tuition fees in distance learning are very expensive in some countries. It is obvious that the high cost of the studies inevitably hinders women's participation. This is a crucial factor especially for those who depend on their family for financial support or on sponsorship from their employers. Even women who have their own source of income are on average paid less than their male counterparts, and as a result the economic obligations for study become insurmountable.

In Greece, for example, not only is the issuing of student loans for distance learning not foreseeable (even though the Hellenic Open University provides scholarships for economically disadvantaged students), the lack of low-cost, all-day child care for the children of students is clear. Paying private baby-sitters at home is also economically difficult. The mention by women of childcare as a factor preventing study center use clearly shows that children are the responsibility of women. Good, affordable childcare is difficult to arrange. In this way, women find it difficult to ensure the necessary time for study, the completion of assignments and research as well as the attending of face to face meetings.

### ***2.5 Learning obstacles: undereducation, difficulty in adapting to principles - methods - tools of distance learning, women's ways of learning***

The undereducation of women due to cultural restrictions at their expense, not only in developing countries (Commonwealth Secretariat 1987), and in many developed countries (United Nations 2000, Vergidis 1995) is one more limiting factor since it deprives women of the basic prerequisite necessary for distance learning studies. The principle of the autonomy of the program participants with their interaction with the teaching material, as well as the development of critical thinking abilities, that are applied in distance learning, create additional problems of adaptation in women that follow the general model of passivity of their gender. (Evans 1995, May 1994)

Further difficulties may present themselves in lessons that demand the extended use of computers for example. (Furst-Bowe 2001, May 1994) due to the fact that women may have (whether they believe or not) less ease of use and experience working with technological interfaces. Female students may have less experience with working with technology than do their male counterparts and may become frustrated with

distance learning courses that require extensive use of computers. Despite this, the belief continues to persist that females are by nature technologically ignorant and unable to absorb scientific and technological information or to acquire technical skills.

One more obstacle related to the nature of distance learning programs is that students experience isolation and lack of individual attention. The sense of isolation that women students experience in their studies is due to the lack of natural contact with their peers. (Kirkup and Von Prummer 1990, Furst-Bowe 2001). Gilligan (1982) confirms the difference of women, supporting that the tendency of women to share their studies with their classmates, their friends and their families is not connected to any type of inferiority or to any negative personal experiences, but to a positive stance of participation and "dependent - connection." This stance probably extends from their social role that strengthens a model of behavior which is less independent. (Beauvoir 1989).

### **3. Strategies for reducing the barriers**

In order to eliminate or at least minimize the barriers that women experience in distance learning education, the educational organizations and the professors-counselors of distance learning education should become activated along with the women themselves and wider social groups.

#### ***3.1 Principles - methods - tools - content of distance learning education***

The educational institutions that provide distance learning education must recognize that student learning environments comprise the home and local center from which women study as well as the educational institutions itself. First and foremost, the role that the house and the local setting play in the learning environment of the woman student must be recognized and the fact that this education, like technology must be adapted to local circumstances (May 1994). The next step is to conduct research into the special way in which women engage in distance learning, into the types and levels of interaction between students and tutors that suit a female way of learning, as well as the documentation of the major social aspects that influence women's learning.

As far as the program of study is concerned, more women's studies courses must be made available via distance learning programs and a feminist perspective must be incorporated in the curriculum in other disciplines. More women administrators, teachers and students should be involved in the planning process for on-line courses so that their experience can contribute more directly to the benefit of others. (Kramarae 2000). This means that the possibility of adapting study programs to the needs of women can be utilized in such a way that steadily the educational demands of other categories of learners can also be satisfied.

#### ***3.2 Supporting Services***

The scholarships, the low tuition costs and the widening of economic assistance for distance learning study programs are ways in which the educational institutions and the state can make it easier for women with economic dependence to break free of social and educational isolation. The establishment of more local study centers is one way to counter the isolation that women distance learners experience (thus ensuring a quiet place for study - supportive services and one-on-one lessons). (Effe 1991)

Educational policy-makers must be sensitized to the needs in particular of working mothers who are engaged in distance learning programs. The services for professional orientation, finally, belong to that category of supportive mechanisms which give meaning to all of the previous effort. Otherwise, there exists the strong possibility that women distance learners will be unable to utilize the knowledge and skills that were gained through the program thus rendering their efforts futile both typically and essentially.

#### ***3.4 Professors - counselors***

Professors and counselors can decisively contribute to the removal of barriers that women in distance learning encounter by treating distance learners as responsible and intelligent human beings, not as passive educational consumers (Kramarae 2000) and by creating a safe and supportive environment in accordance with the principles of adult education (Rogers 1999), with the intent of dispelling women's

fears concerning education. Educators need to be sensitive to women's personal and unique circumstances and to investigate ways to help students develop effective support systems. Supportive conditions which raise the self-confidence and self-awareness of the learner in the context of distance learning education can be ensured by the use of a variety of communication means and pedagogical methods - strategies as well as with the promotion of interaction between students, professors- counselors and technology. (Furst-Bowe 2001, Kirkup and VonPrummer 1990).

### **3.5 Women students and the social-cultural context**

In order to promote distance learning education, the broad dissemination of information to women's populations that can benefit from the advantages of distance learning programs of study but for whom it would be impossible otherwise to access the typical sources of information such as web sites must be ensured. Within this category are unemployed women, older women, women living in rural/agricultural areas, and women in prison. Women themselves can contribute to this effort through the network of the women's movement and of women's professional organizations.

Discrimination against women must be confronted more generally. This means that parental prototypes must be changed that assign to women the bulk of child care (important here is the role of the mass media), and at least the legal provision of dependable - specialized and economic child care during the course of study and of work for parents.

## **Conclusions**

Distance learning offers an essential opportunity for the beginnings or continuation of education for women (especially for women living in rural agricultural regions or mothers of small children), precisely because the program can be adapted to the rhythm and the life style of each woman individually. These same women believe that distance learning education is easier for men and that of course "it does not constitute a panacea" for all the problems of access to the traditional educational system, while at the same time "it is not for all" (May 1994). It demands self-discipline and self-confidence and the dilemmas that are present that have been addressed by the women's movement are those stemming from the male-centered concepts that persist in the area of education.

Nevertheless, the local and global restrictions that operate at the expense of women's educational efforts should not obscure the issue that " women constitute a varied and complex category so that we cannot speak of educational opportunities for women generally, as if they were all the same amongst themselves."(Burke 2000) Distance learning education, as "open", is characterized by a lack of restrictions. This characteristic must not lead to the assessment of learners as a homogenous body. On the contrary, emphasis must be given to the personal dimensions of distance learning, that is based in the self-determination of distance learners, whether they be women or not.

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