

WOMEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: The Challenges

Christine VASKOVICS

M.Ed Student Athabasca University, Canada

25 Fairview Rd West, Unit 911

Mississauga, Ontario, L5B 3Y8, CANADA

ABSTRACT

Distance education has the ability to reach anyone anywhere and thus is widely accepted as a method of educating large populations of people in developing countries. The women in particular, are able to reap the benefits distance education has to offer by overcoming many of the barriers faced through conventional methods of learning.

The Internet is said to increase access to education, and no doubt the developing world has seen an influx of Internet based distance learning opportunities. Few will argue, this mode of learning can offer unparalleled, up to date educational opportunities and at a reasonable cost to the user. Unfortunately, there exists a huge gender gap in Internet access in developing countries. Will the increase in Internet accessed learning widen the gender disparity in higher education in the developing world? If this gender gap does not change, the women will miss out on quality and affordable learning opportunities.

Keywords: Distance education, women in developing countries,
Internet gender gap.

INTRODUCTION

It is accepted by many that distance education is an excellent mode to reach adult learners who, for various reasons, are unable to attend classes in traditional face to face classrooms (Bates, 2005; Moore and Kearsley, 2005). It can be concluded therefore, that distance education is a catalyst to higher education for those faced with barriers of time, geography and economics in the pursuit of their education.

Distance education is not without its obstacles, however, there are technical and cost considerations faced by all adults when considering distance learning opportunities. In developing countries, women can be seen to be especially challenged to overcome not only technical and cost barriers, but also cultural norms. Even with these additional barriers faced by women in developing countries, there are research studies (Kanwar and Taplin, 2003; Temitayo, 2012; Zuhairi et al, 2008) evaluating the role distance education has played in women's education in developing countries. Ultimately the studies support the claim: distance education has helped women in developing countries overcome barriers to higher education.

In developed as well as developing countries, distance education has evolved considerably over the past twenty years and correspondence classes utilizing postal services to deliver all course materials is fast becoming a distant memory. It is said that the Internet has expanded access to learning (Pena-Bandalaria, 2007; Osang, 2012) and, increasingly, the Internet is the means by which distance education courses are delivered (Wagner et al., 2008; Osang, 2012).

As the means to develop distance learning opportunities progresses, what is the outlook for generating enhanced learning opportunities for women in developing countries? Has

the influx of Internet accessed learning opportunities created new barriers to education for women in developing countries?

DISTANCE EDUCATION: A Method For Reaching All?

Distance education is said to be an excellent mode of learning which is able to meet the education needs of all students, regardless of location, class or gender, specifically for those students unable to attend traditional face to face classes (Kanwar and Taplin). Distance education can offer a wide variety of formal and non-formal courses and programs of study utilizing print, radio, television, audio and video cassettes, CDs, and Internet based technologies (Kanwar and Taplin, 2001; Spronk, 2001; Usman, 2001; Bates, 2005; Pena-Bandalaria, 2007).

In addition to the constraints of geographical location, limited available time and financial resources, women in developing countries face additional obstacles to furthering their education that their male counterparts do not. Misogyny is a term used to describe a group, most often men, who display negative, demeaning and oppressive behaviours towards women (Stalker, 2001). Many women in developing countries who do endeavour to further their learning are faced with misogynistic responses from both male relatives and their society, which makes their pursuit of learning extremely difficult.

According to research studies, (Kanwar and Taplin, 2001; Sultana and Kamal, 2002; Mhehe, 2001; Usman, 2001; Zuhairi and Zabadah, 2008) women in developing countries face many obstacles to furthering their education:

- their families preferred to send the male members of the family to school;
- they were not allowed to travel outside the immediate neighbourhood without a male escort;
- they needed their husbands consent to access education;
- having a university degree would be a threat to the male authority;
- they had to do all the housework and child rearing, consequently did not have any free time for studies or were too tired at the end of the day;
- they were not allowed to leave their families and children, which made attending classes or tutorials impossible;
- they did not want to start a course because they felt their family responsibilities and/or work responsibilities would prevent them from completing the course.

Regardless of the obstacles women in developing countries face in the pursuit of furthering their education, there are various research studies that purport distance education does indeed reduce the barriers these women face and it does afford many women an education they wouldn't otherwise be able to achieve.

For example Kanwar and Taplin's (2001) *Brave New Women of Asia: How Distance Education Changed Their Lives*, is a book of case studies examining women's experiences with distance education in China, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The case studies aim to encourage women to further their education by demonstrating that most of their doubts concerning the furtherance of their education are unfounded (Kanwar and Taplin, 2001). The case studies assert that higher education is achievable by women in Asia through distance learning because: "they do not have to leave their multiple commitments to attend classes, thus presenting the argument that distance learning 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 (p.7)."

Another research study conducted by Hussain (2008) titled, *Distance Education as a Strategy for Eliminating Gender Disparity in Pakistan*, examines the role of distance education and how it addresses the issue of gender disparity in Pakistan. The study concludes that distance education provides equal opportunities to all in the society and it is possible for women to access education, particularly those women who are culturally restricted.

And yet in another research article titled, *Does Open and Distance Learning Allow for Reaching the Unreached: Assessing Women Education in Nigeria*, the author, Olowola Temitayo, (2012) presents a similar conclusion: the advantages of distance education for women in Nigeria are infinite. Consequently, Nigerian women are able to further their education using distance learning methods.

Accessing Learning Using the Internet

According to Bates (2008) in, *What is Distance Education?*, Taylor (1999) identifies five stages of distance education:

- print-based correspondence education;
- integrated use of multiple, one-way media such as print, broadcasting or recorded media such as video-cassettes;
- two-way, synchronous tele-learning using audio or video-conferencing
- flexible learning based on asynchronous online learning combined with online interactive multimedia;
- intelligent flexible learning, which adds a high degree of automation and student control to asynchronous online learning and interactive multimedia (<http://www.tonybates.ca>).

Until recently, developing countries did not have the required infrastructure to support online learning. In recent years, however, this has changed and Internet accessibility in developing countries is rapidly increasing. There exists a steady expansion of broadband access as well as a drop in user cost, both of which have led to increased accessibility (Women and the Web, 2012).

Additionally, there is an upsurge of mobile telephone use in developing countries and cell towers supporting mobile voice, SMS, and 3G Internet now cover most areas (Women and the Web, 2012). Mobile Internet requires less additional investment than broadband Internet and most Internet enabled mobile phones are less expensive than computers or tablets (Women and the Web, 2012).

It is true that distance education is delivered using print based correspondence, one-way media such as print, broadcasting and recorded media in developing countries today; however, the use of the Internet for online learning is growing at a rapid rate (Osang, 2012; Pena-Bandalaria, 2008). There are quality, state-of-the-art, low cost online distance learning opportunities available to anyone anywhere providing they have Internet access, and it is widely expected that these learning opportunities will promote growth in the developing world (Mulder, 2013).

Through the Internet, students in developing countries have access to not only affordable and quality learning opportunities within their respective countries, they also have access to tuition free, top-quality online learning opportunities outside of their home countries. For example, The Open Education Consortium provides free and open access to education and knowledge. It is "a worldwide community of hundreds of higher

education institutions and associated organizations committed to advancing open education and its impact on global education" (<http://www.oeconsortium.org/about-oe/>). Carnegie Mellon University's Open Learning Initiative is another source where one can find free quality online courses (<http://oli.cmu.edu>).

Also, students with English language skills can obtain a university degree tuition-free from University of the People, which is the world's first non profit, tuition-free, accredited online university (<http://uopeople.edu/groups/online-education>).

Additionally, there is Kepler, which is a new non-profit university designed for the developing world. Kepler currently has a pilot campus in Rwanda which combines online academic learning with face to face instruction to deliver American accredited degrees:

We combine the best of online learning and an American competency-based degree program with in-person seminars and intensive education-to-employment support. Kepler's pilot campus opened in Rwanda in 2013, and our goal is to create a global network of universities that deliver the skills that emerging economies need for a price that our students can afford. For that, we're setting an ambitious target: provide an American-accredited degree, a world class education, and a clear path to good jobs for thousands of students for around \$1,000 tuition per year (<http://kepler.org>).

THE INTERNET GENDER GAP

Using the Internet to access education in developing countries of course can be challenging; (Osang, 2012; Pena-Bandalaria, 2007) however, accessibility to the Internet in developing countries is quickly expanding and, as such, it will become less of an issue. There are other challenges such as being able to obtain the required technology to access the Internet, to overcome, which, of course, can also be problematic for many households (Reshef, 2011; Osang, 2012).

Regardless, there are increasing numbers of households that do overcome these challenges, but will the women in these households access the Internet? Will overt gender roles get in the way?

At the turn of the 21st century, Barbara Spronk (2001) is not the same as their male counterparts in both the developed and developing countries; women lag behind. Today perhaps the situation is better in developed countries; however, this is not the case for developing countries.

There is a substantial gender gap when it comes to Internet use in developing countries. According to the research report, *Women and the Web* (2012): "On average across the developing world, nearly 25 percent fewer women than men have access to the Internet, and the gender gap soars to nearly 45 percent in regions like sub-Saharan Africa.

Even in rapidly growing economies the gap is enormous. Nearly 35 percent fewer women than men in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa have Internet access, and nearly 30 percent in parts of Europe and across Central Asia (p. 10)."

The report cites gender based barriers for the disparity in Internet access: lack of awareness, lack of perceived ability and cultural norms (*Women and the Web*, 2012).

The report also provides many startling statistics such as: "1/3 of non-users have a desktop in their homes and 90 percent have a mobile phone in their home (p.13). 40% of

women who do not use the Internet cite lack of familiarity or comfort with technology as a reason (p.13).”

If this gender gap in Internet access persists, women will miss out on current and affordable learning opportunities. The disparity in higher education will widen rather than decrease as time progresses.

CONCLUSION

Distance education has the ability to reach anyone anywhere and thus is widely accepted as a form of educating large populations of people in both developed and developing countries.

Internet based distance learning continues to grow and can offer unparalleled, up to date educational opportunities at a reasonable cost to the user.

The Internet is expected to bring education to all people all over the world. It is expected to widen access to learning and thus provide equal opportunity for all.

Accessing these opportunities will require leaps over the hurdles of acquiring technology and, most importantly, moving beyond the cultural limitations found in most developing countries. If the Internet gender gap does not change, women in developing countries will miss out on quality and affordable learning opportunities, and the gender disparity in education will widen rather than decrease as time progresses.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESS of AUTHOR



Christine **VASKOVICS** is a student of Athabasca University's Master of Education in Distance Education (MEd). She graduated from Athabasca University's Bachelor of Human Resources and Labour Relations in 2009 and from Athabasca University's Post-Baccalaureate Diploma in Distance Education Technology in 2012. Distance education has enabled Christine, a single parent, to participate in tertiary education. Christine is also a serving member of the Canadian Armed Forces.

Christine VASKOVICS,
25 Fairview Rd West, Unit 911, Mississauga, Ontario, CANADA
Mississauga, Ontario, Canada L5B 3Y8
Email(s): christyvaskovics@gmail.com

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