

## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AT THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY: A Case of Matabeleland North and Bulawayo Regions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper recognizes that women's participation in higher education is very low. Women's marginalization in higher education stems from the traditional patriarchal tendencies, customary law and colonialism. The paper discusses the opportunities and challenges that female students face in trying to access distance education in Zimbabwe. Female students are under-represented at ZOU, the sole open and distance learning institution in Zimbabwe. The female student population is worsened by the fact that a larger proportion of them than male students drop out. The reasons for this are multiple but revolve around women's multiple roles of home keeper, wife and mother. The paper focuses on Matabeleland North and Bulawayo Regions in order to compare a rural and an urban set up. Data was collected from ZOU students and lecturers through in-depth interviews. It is hoped the paper will bring to the fore the various challenges that female students encounter and finally emerge with some possible intervention strategies that could help increase the number of female students' participation in distance education.

The Gender approach to development (GAD) will also guide this study. GAD analysis highlights the incentives and constraints associated with the work of women and men and highlights differences in their roles, workloads, access to resources and decision making opportunities, the impact of interventions on them and the implications for planning and implementation. The gender approach to development advocates for the lessening of social inequalities between men and women. Gender as a policy criterion has been found to reduce poverty, raises farm efficiency and improves natural resources management (Ellis, 2000). It also emphasises participatory approaches as a tool to empower women through their articulation of their needs, rights and capabilities. Communities should be encouraged to embrace the gender approach when focusing on development issues in communities. Once women are empowered and have the social and economic resources the quality of life of their households improves. If women therefore contribute so much to the social well-being of families in particular and communities in general it is therefore necessary for policy makers to develop policies that enable communities to improve women's access to resources like distance education.

**Keywords:** Zimbabwe Open University, an Open and Distance Learning.