DISTANCE EDUCATION AS A WOMAN EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Studies over time have revealed that education is the most potent instrument for the emancipation of any group of people (Azikiwe 1992; Ocholi 1999; UNIC, 2000). Sambo (2000) also opined that mental freedom, which usually precedes all other forms of freedom, can only be guaranteed by an effective education system.

This view was further crystallised by Okeke (1995) when she observed that education is a sure pathway to the liberation of the mind and the improvement of socio-economic status of people.

History, the world over, is replete with the achievements of men folk and their contributions to the development processes and from time immemorial the position of women in the structure of society has never been considered on the same plain a s that of men, they have been regarded as a second-fiddle. It is on this believe that Ker (1999) argued that women all over the world have been categorized under the disadvantaged groups of people and society itself has systematically and consistently pursued the socialization of women into accepting the notion of disadvantaged group.

Given the preponderance of this categorization of women as a disadvantaged group of people, a social reengineering process is required to introduce equality through emancipation of the mind. This is where education has been found to be useful as a liberating force and agent of social change especially in developing countries like Nigeria.

It is on this premise that the Open and Distance Learning scheme is hereby considered as an effective strategy for women empowerment, within the functional framework of the general lifelong education process.

Keywords: Women, education, distance education, empowerment, Nigeria.

ISSUES IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The need for empowerment arises from the inability of an individual or a group of people to actualise their dreams and reach their greatest potentials due to artificial barriers created by individuals and other groups within the same society.

It is the manifestation of an incontrovertible inequality, segregation or marginalization. To Oxfam (1995) "Empowerment involves challenging oppression which compels millions of people to play a part in their society on terms which are inequitable, or in ways which deny them their human rights" Okeke (1995) submitted that "to empower means to give power to, to give authority to, to enable a person or a group of persons gain power".

Batliwa (1995) in her definition of the term empowerment stated that:

Empowerment is the process and the result of the process whereby the powerless or less powerful members of the society gain greater access   and control over material and knowledge, resources, challenges and ideologies of discrimination and subordination and transform the institutions and structures through which unequal access and control over resources is sustained and perpetuated.

The foregoing definitions show that empowerment implies that an individual or a group had hitherto lacked power or authority by circumstances, denial or default. The issue of women empowerment has become a part of popular debate. It has however been misconstrued in a myriad of ways; to a great majority empowerment suggests women's power to fight men, including their husbands.

The very mention of the term empowerment generates strong emotional connotations that construe violent revolutionary action of some sort or the other, organized by the women against the established institutions. Since the days of yore, the oppression of women has been a major global dilemma and a source of concern to many international institutions like ECOWAS, UN, AU etc. The concept of empowerment based on assuaging the oppressions of the women has led to the establishment of the United Nations development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) whose primary role is to promote the participation of women at all levels of development planning and implementation. Recently in Nigeria, the federal ministry of education in conjunction with the UNICEF established a Strategy for the Acceleration of Girls' Education in Nigeria (SAGEN). It is hoped that SAGEN will lead to a further expansion in the access of girls to education and ultimately the emancipation of women in Nigeria.

PROBLEMS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

The issues of women have been viewed differently in social relations including economic activities. This has formed a barrier even when democratic movements have sought to extend the base of participation of women. It will be fallacious to assume that the problems of Nigerian women have been totally solved through the various emancipation initiatives (Beijing conference 1975; 1985; 1995, International decade of women, Strategy for the Acceleration of Girls Education etc) or through the collaborative efforts of the various Government and Non-governmental Organisations. Certain inequalities and segregations, which have been established over the ages and reinforced through the male-dominated structures still persist inspite of the various instruments of the United Nations and the concerted efforts of the federal government and a number of NGOs on alleviating women discrimination.

Without gainsaying, illiteracy remains at the centre of women empowerment problems in Nigeria. Majority of the womenfolk and a large number of girls in this country are still grappling with the problems of basic reading and writing skills (Unicef 2003).

The gross enrolment rate (GER 2001) indicated that 71percent of out-of-school children are girls. According to ARFOL (2000) the literacy rate for males is 58 percent but only 41 percent for females. The Human Development Report 2002 published by the United Nations development programme puts the statistics of illiterate women at 57 percent as against male's 43 percent. As seemingly insignificant as this difference may appear, it is completely unacceptable, if the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) must be achieved. In Nigeria, girls and women comprise about 49.69 percent (SAPA 1993) of the total

population. Incidentally, about 61percent of the total female population are reported to be illiterates as against 37.7 percent illiterate male population.

Women are discriminated against in access to education for social and economic reasons. For instance, the Islamic practice of *Purdah* precludes many women from benefiting from school instructions and/or participating in economic activities, which are likely to elevate their positions. The most egregious segregation is probably the prevention of girls to go to school in some communities. This has probably led to the greatest social harm of the twentieth century, when a whole group of females were denied access to education, on the basis of gender differences.

There is palpably a deluge of problems besetting the Nigerian women, but all of them arise from illiteracy. This suggests therefore that a large part of the empowerment process is associated with education of the women themselves. The root of the problem is the degree of importance women themselves have attached to education. Many of them believe that the life of a successful woman revolves around her children, her husband and domestic chores. This lack of personal ambition prevents her from thinking about pursuing other educational goals, which may have great influence on her life.

In the case of the workingwomen in the cities, there had been a gradual predilection to abandon further training because of the demands work and family as well as the huge costs associated with pursuing higher studies in conventional school system or universities.

THE PLACE OF EDUCATION IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Education according to Fafunwa (1974) refers to the sum total of experiences that a person acquires in partaking in everyday activities and how these experiences have served to make the individual a better person. Many social commentators hold the view that education is a sine qua non to any meaningful development process The impact of the level of educational attainment in any society and the corresponding level of development (in terms of the Science & Technology) is a true yardstick of this phenomenon. Majasan (1997) had asserted that 'Development in any society is anchored primarily to Education progress'. In a similar vein, Lockheed and Verspoor (1994) had earlier described education as a cornerstone of economic and social development. According to them, the future of the world and of individual nations hinges, more than ever before, on the capacity of individuals and countries to acquire, adapt, and advance knowledge.

Education has been viewed traditionally as a social leveller, it is the only instrument designed for piercing the social barrier that has been created by all other structures of society. The only effective way to meaningful contribute to the emancipation of women in Nigerian Society is to widen the access of the women and girls to quality education. There is the need to take the issue of women empowerment 'beyond mere rethorics'. It is quite easy to canvass for small credit loans for a few women, or negotiate a secondary political appointment for some others, just to align with the sentiments of the time. In fact, it is easy to pass legislations couched in very elegant language against women discriminations in all spheres of national life, but it is far easier and ultimately more cost effective to educate women. Creating access to quality formal education gives women a sense of belonging and their individuality will then be projected beside their husbands'.

According to the UNFPA (1994) education opens the opportunity and choice for women. When women are given the requisite education, relevant to their needs and environment, they will gradually become more visible and recognised in the mainstream of activities both at home and in society at large. Given the fact that education enhances a person's

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sense of self-worth, confidence and also creates an awareness of capacity, women will become more assertive of their roles in social activities and take initiatives for themselves rather than wait for the decisions to be made for them. It can also be surmised that their income-earning potential and development will rise with the new educational status.

Another crucial advantage of women education is the role it plays in reducing women fertility levels and infant mortality. It is incontrovertible to state that the family of an educated woman tends to appear healthier than that of her non-educated counterpart.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AS A WOMEN EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY

The social realities in contemporary times has shown that the limitation in the access of many women to Education Opportunities which would have enhanced their empowerment is due chiefly to the inability of the learner and the instructor to be in face-to-face contact. There are above 880 million illiterate adults in the world (UNESCO 2002) who have been deprived access to education, because they are required to be present in the four walls of a conventional classroom before they can gain access to quality education.

Each day, the futility of this arrangement becomes clearer to most educational planners as the unfolding fact shows that the knowledge based society of the twenty-first century demands more effective methods of dissemination of Information/Knowledge. It is obvious that due to limitations in resources; both human and financial, the traditional conventional approach of teaching in classrooms can no longer satisfy the snowballing population of a country like Nigeria, which has estimated population of 120 million people (Common Country Assessment, 2001) and an average annual population growth rate of 2.3% (Mabogunje 1999).

Clearly a realistic alternative is long overdue, and this is what has necessitated the introduction of the Open and Distance Learning Model otherwise referred to as Distance Education.

The term Open and Distance learning reflects both the fact that all or most of teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the leaner, and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. The desire to anchor as much as possible to the train of globalization demands that all sectors of society must be literate and this kind of mass education can only be afforded through the distance-learning scheme. Jegede (2003) observed that all nations of the world desirous of a cost-effective, convenient, conducive, efficient and comprehensive way to educate all its citizens have embraced Open and Distance learning'.

The concept of open and distance education is a scheme that affords a nation the opportunity to effectively transmit educational benefits to all its citizens cheaply and more effectively, especially those hitherto unreached or denied access on the basis of one social consideration or the other. Nigeria women undoubtedly fall within this category and this system of education affords them the opportunity to pursue the gift of knowledge without contradicting any societal dictates. The uniqueness of distance education as a women empowerment strategy can be gleaned from the fact that it straddles so many facets of the social system.

First to be considered are the class of women who are full time house wives, many of who have never had access to formal education or had to give up school at early stages of their lives. Women in this group are not usually enthusiastic about formal education because their husbands had indicated that they are to sit at home and take care of the

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home and the children. Such women are usually unable to leave their spouse and children to travel away to a conventional university system.

The challenges posed by this social system is far reaching, in the sense that the woman cannot venture out of the home to a formal school system where she can pursue the much craved training, skills development and education.

Many of them have to be contented with seeing their dreams come alive in their children's lives and they unconsciously transfer their dreams to their children's lives. Women in this category will definitely be grateful for distance education, since it allows them to sit at home and study for a programme without jeopardising their marriages or abandon their children. It is certainly a means of fulfilling the life dreams of many women who have been saddled with the function of a full time housewife. The issue of women education is essential for rural development and women are not well equipped to contribute their useful quota to the society as a result of illiteracy (Azikiwe 1992)

Another group of women, whose position is only slightly different from the previous group, are those women who have been denied the access to formal training provided by schools and colleges because of their obedience to the Islamic practice of *Purdah*. These women can still have access to qualitative education through the open and distance learning approach that allows them to pursue their education at a 'safe distance' from the instructors. They can study, turn in assignments and write examinations after adequate arrangements have been made. A woman in Purdah can be trained and given the opportunity to contribute her own quota to national development without disobeying any of the injunctions of her religion. Distance education is an alternative that affords this group of women access to quality study materials on any field of their choice without any of the barriers associated with the conventional system and her religious dedication.

A third group, which has, for long been suffering in silence are the workingwomen. The plight of the workingwomen has been that of an unrecognised and unremunerated labour. In Nigeria, workingwomen tend to live unfulfilled lives, having their dreams aborted prematurely. After a college degree, a workingwoman finds herself in marriage and the demand of childbirth makes her postpone going back to school a little longer. By the time her last child will be out of primary school, she finds that the first is already grappling with the challenges of prepubescent years. Her family of creation and her family of procreation places so much social demands on her and her husband's family are not relentless in their demands.

All these family duties make the workingwoman postpone furthering her education one more time. As the years roll by she finds that it is becoming increasingly difficult to actualise the dream of going back to school. The socio-economic factors against the family of a typical workingwoman in Nigeria today are multifarious. Society prefers that only the husband pursue further educational improvement while the funds available should be spent on taking care of the children.

This of course is never to the best advantage of the workingwoman but she has to continue to suffer in silence. The open and distance learning mode of education is the sure answer to the prayers of many working women in Nigeria who could not abandon their families and their work to pursue better educational qualifications which will enhance their career progression. It allows them to pursue qualitative education that will improve on their sense of self-esteem in the estimation of their family friends and husbands. These can be achieved without jeopardising either the important family relationship or the relatively responsible position in her place of work that she has worked so hard to create.

The itinerant nomadic women are yet another group of women who could benefit immensely from this radical approach to instructional processes. The social dictates and the vocational practices of women in these nomadic societies require that they be always constantly on the move with there families.

Their subsistence is based solely on this means and the educational pursuit is secondary, if at all it exists, to subsistence. For generations, women in these societies have been denied access to quality education of whatever form due the peripatetic nature of their livelihood.

Women in this category can benefit from the open and distance learning model if they are properly sensitised about the advantages that education holds for their lives their subsistence and their families. Introducing the ODL scheme, which does not take them out of their social environments, yet seeks to deliver qualitative education about their social environment and other societies can then reinforce this.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, there seems to be no end to the palpable advantages of the distance learning system. The fore going shows that the functional implications and advantages of the scheme cover a broad spectrum of society such that everyone and anyone can benefit at no great a cost. While the focus of this work are primarily the women, the distance learning system holds great advantages for the entire society, almost anyone can benefit from this unique system of education.

The system however holds special implication for the women, especially in a developing society such as Nigeria. Lots of market women, traders, and itinerant businesswomen, women in *Purdah*, working women as well as women and girls resident in the sub-rural societies could benefit from this scheme. Another implication of the study is that it would go along way in increasing on the literacy level of Nigerians generally and the women especially. This observation confirms the assertion of Okeke (1995) that education is the most effective strategy for promoting women empowerment and the United Nations report on human development which states that in sub-saharan Africa education seems to be the only effective means of empowering women. The influence of quality education in these societies have been much discussed, it is a poverty reduction scheme, it can be used to sensitize women about family planning issues, HIV/AIDS issues, issues relating to peace and governance within their societies, primary health maternal and infant mortality as well as environmentally sustainable practices.

Editor's Note: This article is republishing after yeas for intWOJDE readers by TOJDE Official permission. It pblishing info is Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE January 2006 ISSN 1302-6488 Volume: 7 Number: 1 Article: 13, Turkey.

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