

DOES OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING ALLOW FOR REACHING THE UNREACHED? Assessing Women Education In Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Women amongst other categories of people can be regarded as unreached group when the issue of access to education is considered world over. The culture in Nigeria as it is in many other African countries support the education of boys than that of girls. This has substantially reduced the number of women that are found in many aristocratic professions today without consideration for their ability and capability.

This paper considers the education of womenfolk in relation to the opportunity which the distance education mode avail the entire people of the universe wherever it is in operation with a view to confirm if the paradigm change brought about by the introduction of open and distance learning mode of education actually gives access to the education of the womenfolk in Nigeria

Keywords: Women, Distance education, Empowerment, Reached, Unreached, Access

INTRODUCTION

Ker (1999) argued that women all over the world have been categorized under the disadvantaged groups of people and the society itself has systematically and consistently pursued the socialization of women into accepting the notion of being a 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 mode of education becomes imperative as an avenue for educating women within the functional framework of the general lifelong education process.

As big as Nigeria is, so also is the problem of access to education before the inception of Open and Distance Learning paradigm. If the number of those who want to acquire education in Nigeria is considered in relation to the number of available tertiary institutions and the number that is being offered admission although, noticeably from the time immemorial, the fact is that, access to education in general is a problem that is more prominent amongst the women folk.

Without mincing words however, it is obvious that the Nigerian traditional universities in totality cannot provide access to the number of applicants who intend to acquire university education in Nigeria. Furthermore, the fact still remains that the challenge of mass access to university education in Nigeria would continue to escalate by the day. This will continue to increase in progression as long as the higher education learning is tied only to admission into the four walls of the conventional universities be it government or privately owned. Currently, only 20 per cent of Nigerian secondary school leavers have access to places at universities in Nigeria, leaving many thousands without the chance to

continue their education in the country. (Ipaye 2010) The Population Reference Bureau, as far back as 2007 showed that 34% of Nigeria's population put at about 140 million are aged 10 to 24. Of this figure, about 47million of the total number of secondary school leavers were expected to prepare for university admission between now and the next four to five years. Yet, for a period of one decade now, Nigerian universities had been able to take among themselves only between 24% (in 1998) falling to 5% in 2002 and rising to 8% in 2004 of all applicants for placement in Nigerian universities. As pointed out above, regarding the education of women, the number of women in all these admissions can be imagined.

According to UNESCO statistics, 31% of women in Nigeria are literate against 54% for men. According to Egunjobi 2005, the women make up to two thirds of illiterate adults, because it is believed that a woman's place is in the kitchen and they are also perceived as parts of their husbands' properties.

At the end of 1996, there were 36 Universities in Nigeria which are all owned by the Government both at the Federal and State levels, with the total enrolment of 236, 261. In response to strong social demand, the Federal Government of Nigeria has repeatedly taken steps to expand access to its higher education system. Among such policy actions are: increase in the numbers of federal and state Universities; approval of the establishment of private Universities; introduction of admission quota system to address regional and class imbalance and lastly, the establishment of a National Open University. Open and Distance Education (ODE) was introduced into Nigeria for the first time in 1984 by the Federal Government. This idea was suspended and was re-introduced in 2002 as a response to admission, economic crises and its social consequences. Noticeably, the impact of this change in people's lives, both in the urban and rural cities was quite enormous.

The newly introduced educational paradigm brought new kinds of education mode outside the conventional system in relation to everyday life for adults and young people alike who are on a job and cannot afford leaving their jobs for further educational advancement. Also, those who had earlier missed an opportunity ditto house wives and the women in purdah and also, those incarcerated by the outcomes of their offences and thereby kept in the prisons were provided with a second chance to acquire higher education.

Within the short period of existence, NOUN has distinguished itself in providing equal educational opportunities for all irrespective of sex, location, tribe or culture. NOUN has established study centres in almost all state capitals and in some local governments in addition to the special study centres established for special cases such as incarcerated people in prisons, military formation and riverine areas of Nigeria for the purpose of promoting mass higher education. With this effort, NOUN has contributed effectively to the attainment of education and also the empowerment of women through wider access to education Before NOUN, the efforts of Nigerian Government in education have not yielded significant positive results on girls and women education. This was aptly observed by Onuebunwa (2003), through the remark that Girl-child educational attainment in Nigeria is still low as records have shown that fewer girls go to school than boys. Ofoegbu and Ojogwu (2011) in their paper, reported that UNICEF (2003) stated that the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER, 2001) indicate that 71% of out of school children are girls, while Mohammed (2006) revealed that the literacy rate for males was 58% as against 41% for females.

Indeed, ODL has been a grace saving devise to salvage women's course as far as education is concerned. 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. UNICEF (2002) have it that the National literacy rate for female is only 56% compared to 72% for male, and in certain states the female literacy, enrolment and achievement rates are much lower, for example, the net enrolment of girls in Sokoto state is about 15% compared to 59% for boys.

Although Uduigwomen (2004), observed that there is progress in women education with the exception of Northern Nigeria, the fact still remains that women are discriminated against in access to education for social and economic reasons. This has probably led to the greatest social harm of the twentieth century, where 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 of work and family as well as the huge costs associated with pursuing higher studies in conventional school system or universities. However, education is the only known bedrock of women empowerment, be it formal or informal education. Infact, Fafunwa (1971) viewed education as the aggregate of all the process in which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to the society in which he or she lives.

In NOUN, as rightly observed by Alaezi (2006), the courses are organized for easy access, grasp, retention and retrieval. The programmes are made available to students at their chosen places (e.g. home, school or workplace) at affordable costs and are to be completed at the students' own time and pace. These are part of NOUN's efforts to move against the Issue of Access to education which has always been a problem because of inadequate funding and facilities to meet the admission demands.

WOMEN EMPOWERED THROUGH ACCESS CREATED BY OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

There are many groups of women who have been denied access to formal education because of one reason or the other. These examples include women who because of obedience and adherence to Islamic religion practice of purdah or as full time housewives or for other reasons have been denied education.

These groups of women have immensely benefited from open and distance mode of educational system. An empirical example can be found in the number of women who have been empowered through completion of one programme or the other. Records from the Distance learning Institute of the University of Lagos, Nigeria indicates that of the major programmes offered by the institute as at 2001, 2874 students offering Administration Degrees were women while 164 of the women offered science Degrees. According to Baikie et al(2005) the National Teacher's Institute which trains teachers in order to improve the quality of the nation's teaching force, records that within it, the number of students enrolled for the National Certificate of Education were 93,000 out of which 68,000 were women;

For the Advanced Diploma and Postgraduate Diploma Programmes, the students enrolled were 8000. Of this number, 5000 were women; the Pivotal Teacher Training Programme

(PTTP) (which was last offered in 2003 had an enrolment of 29,000 and 21,200 were women (National Teachers' Institute, Kaduna 2000); and the Grade Two Teachers' Certificate (TCII) Programme designed for teachers who do not possess the TC II had an enrolment of 103,000 students and of which 77,250 were women. (National Teachers' Institute, Kaduna 2001) At the National Open University of Nigeria which is a single mode university, started her open and distance learning academic activities in 2004 and has records of women who have completed a post-graduate diploma programmes in various disciplines amounting to 2,341 while those who have completed master's degree programmes were numbered to be 4,182. These arrays of students were from different religious backgrounds including Islam, Christianity and other traditional religions. Amongst these graduated women, 5,034 of them were full time housewives.

The undergraduate learners are not considered since none of the students of the undergraduate programmes have graduated for now. Following these figures, it is obvious that women in spite of their conditions could access education and get empowered because the mode of education allows them to sit at home as housewives and study for a programme of their choice without jeopardizing their marriages and also enables them to contribute to the development of their various localities (Olakulehin and Ojo 2006). This statement is further confirmed by a study carried out by Onyishi (2004) at Nsukka, the South eastern Nigeria that non-formal distance education is a woman empowerment strategy in Nigeria.

INSTANCES OF PROGRAMME OF STUDY THAT HAVE HELPED WOMEN TO GET EMPOWERED THROUGH ODL ACCESS

As in other countries of Africa, many programmes have been put together at one time or the other in order to assist women to get empowered. In Nigeria, women education programme was first launched in 1986 (Ohiri-Aniche, 2000). After that, lots of other programmes have come onboard.

There was the Mass Literacy programme, Family Support Programme, Better Life for Rural Women and many other developmental programmes developed by Non-Governmental Organisations. Through these programmes, training was provided for women in different areas such as skills' development in different trades such as soap making, garri (Cassava flakes) processing, pomade making, oral dehydration therapy (ORT), fashion designing, hairdressing and numerous lifelong skills that are put together in order to make women to be more self-reliant and at the same time promote their sense of self-worth. It is certainly a means of fulfilling the life dreams of many women who have been saddled with the function of being full time housewives. Azikiwe (1992) remarked that the issue of women education is essential for rural development and women were not well equipped to contribute their useful quota to the society as a result of illiteracy.

In the academic sphere, teacher education programme which unarguably is the first field that witness extensive use of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Nigeria was promoted by The National Teachers' Institute (NTI) Kaduna in 1976 by the Federal Government of Nigeria.

This aimed at producing qualified teachers that would meet the needs of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) which then was established basically to take care of the primary education of the young ones.

The enrolment statistics for the programmes of the NTI reveals that women have benefited tremendously from the ODL system in the area of teacher training at both Grade II (for those that teaches in primary schools) and National Certificate of Education (NCE)[for those that teaches in secondary schools] levels

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) AND THE NIGERIAN WOMEN

The Nigeria Government has taken ODL as an instrument that will achieve its educational goals following the statement in the Country's National Policy in Education (2004) which states that the goal of ODL shall be to provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied. This policy has been instrumental in reducing illiteracy rate, drop out rate, and furthermore creating accessibility and immense opportunities for the Nigerian woman. Many Nigerian women from all walks of life have continued to seize the opportunities of ODL programmes in order to improve on their education, get better jobs, and improve on their standards of living. Today, ODL has brought succour to women education and subsequently, empowerment.

The social realities in contemporary times have 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. 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 creation of access for women education strategy can be gleaned from the fact that it straddles so many facets of the social system.

Another group of women are the itinerant nomadic women who can immensely benefit from this radical ODL 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 their families. Their subsistence lifestyle is based solely on this means of living and educational pursuit is secondary, if at all it exists. For generations, women in these societies have been denied access to quality education of whatever form due to the peripatetic nature of their livelihood. Women in this category through NOUN benefits from the open and distance learning model as they are properly sensitised about the advantages that education holds for them and their families.

Therefore, 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 seriously, reinforces this.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, there seems to be no end to the palpable advantages of the distance learning system in relation to women accessing education. While the focus of this work is primarily on the women, the distance learning system holds great advantages for the entire society.

Almost anyone can benefit from this unique system of education and at limited costs. 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.

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