

## **WOMEN AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Women have always been at the receiving end of environmental disasters in the world. As a result of these negative impacts, it has become paramount that these women are carried along in decision making processes, such that their voices are heard. In the home, women play pivotal roles in the family such as keeping the environment clean, waste management, and housekeeping, procurement of items, cooking, energy management and pollution control management.**

**Although women occupy critical positions in the growth of mankind, the severity of their environmental management roles are seldom understood. However, in considering the educational situation in Africa where girl's education is not consistent with women in positions of authority that are capable of causing positive environmental changes in the society; this paper emphasizes the use of open and distance education to create environmental awareness and education that would put women in a better position towards facing the challenges of environment management.**

**Keywords:** Women, distance education, environmental empowerment, awareness

### **INTRODUCTION**

**Over the years, education has been seen a means of communicating the values of our environment through appreciation of what they are, their relationship to man, his culture, surroundings and his ability to develop skills that will be used to management the environment. It is a form of liberation of the mind which brings about an improvement in the developmental of social and economic welfare.**

**A form of environmental education is linked with what could be seen now in terms of resource use, what is currently being used and what will be used in the near future. It recognises that both manmade and natural environment are interlinked, thus leading to a need to have an interdisciplinary understanding of major environmental issues from local, national and international points of view. With climate change, the environment is vulnerable in these circumstances including women and children. Thus, in order to adapt to the vulnerability of climate change, there is a need to involve women in the planning and implementation of policies wherever they are to be found.**

**This implies that various educational approaches to teaching and learning about the environment will be learnt either through practical activities or firsthand experience. In this way, more people can be sensitized about environmental issues through various media of communication. Although there are sufficient information about men's achievements and women regarded as a disadvantaged group, education at this time, plays a critical role in breaching this gap between gender achievements.**

Following this premise therefore is the open and distance learning which is seen as an effective tool for women empowerment and the solution to the adaptation and management of environmental vulnerabilities predicted for the future.

## **THE ENVIRONMENT AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

Various issues appertaining to women and the environment were extensively discussed at the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995. These issues focussed more on the role of women in development and how they can be empowered to contribute effectively to their immediate surrounding and in the larger society. It was more about social equity as a developmental goal in itself. The conference recognised women as the life wires of their families even though some of their roles were being overlooked, unpaid, unrecognized or undervalued (Cecelski,2000). Women in Nigeria still form an underclass and lack equality of opportunity, both in the contributions they make to development and the benefits they receive from it. This, according to Edozie (2007) is also an important dimension of the struggle for gender equality between the Christian South which permits education and the Muslim North which limits the education of the girl child.

Although men and women play different roles in a family, in most communities in Nigeria and in other developing countries, the woman assumes a lot of responsibilities within the family as the energy manager, health and safety manager, cook, waste manager, purchasing manager, children caretaker, housekeeper and at the same time, she is the wife and mother. Since she is naturally empowered to perform these roles, it is therefore critical that she is given more opportunities to be empowered to challenge certain environmental misgivings in the society; furthermore, to understand the implications of environmental mismanagement and the ability to adapt to the vulnerable conditions threatened by climate change. In analysing the definition of "empowerment" provided by Batliwa (1995), it shows that in a non-sentimental way, the less powerful in the society are given a voice, made powerful, such that they are capable of challenging societal misgiving in a positive and constructive manner.

This can be achieved through investment in the training and education of women for environmental protection. Organisations such as United Nations development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has been established to promote the participation of women at all levels of development planning and implementation. In Nigeria, the Ministry of education in conjunction with the UNICEF established a Strategy for the Acceleration of Girls' Education in Nigeria (SAGEN). These institutions are aimed to further expand the access of girls to education and ultimately the emancipation of women in Nigeria.

## **ANALYSING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN THE HOME AND WHY THE WOMAN NEEDS TO BE EMPOWERED**

Women play several roles in the home including the management of cooking fuels, the use of biomass. In most poor, developing countries, this biomass energy is used for cooking and comprises 80% household fuel consumption and these issues have been well documented (Agarwal 1986; Cecelski 1992). Rural women face a lot of challenges in terms of human time and human energy.

They are the primary collectors of wood and residue fuels for household use and this collection involves deforestation, agricultural clearing, and overgrazing), it directly affects the effort and time required for women to harvest biomass fuels.

Also, they play key roles in the health and safety of resources in the home. As the women cook more than men, they are therefore more exposed to indoor air pollution and other health related energy problems (Pandey, 1995; Smith,1993).

Other social issues such as the reports of bride suicides in India partially due to women's inability to meet their family's wood fuel needs have been recorded (Agarwal 1986) and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) documented hundreds of cases of refugee women who were raped and brutalized by bandits while away from their camps to collect wood fuel (*The Economist* 1993). All these are environmental issues that women now look into alternative means of energy use e.g. the use of modern stoves, gas and electric cookers. Furthermore, these issues are further aggravated by illiteracy which remains at the centre of women empowerment problems in Nigeria.

Low environmental awareness in Africa, according to Ekpenyong (2009), are numerous including illiteracy and poverty and this meant that poor families were more concerned about daily survival than keeping an eye on environmental issues. Majority of the womenfolk and a large number of girls in Nigeria are still grappling with the problems of basic reading and writing skills (UNICEF, 2003). The woman plays other key roles such as purchasing of goods and items in the home, particularly food stuff, equipment and appliances are significant. The concept of green procurement demands that only what is needed should be bought and used in order to reduce and minimise waste generated. The purchase of items which are not needed or which consumes a lot of electricity contributes to the consumption of natural resources such as energy which is usually from coal. Cooking appliances such as blenders, etc. light bulbs, refrigerators when bought and used should be environmentally friendly.

In most cases where people buy items for the sake of it and not for its intended use, it is a waste and constitutes a problem in terms of disposal and management. In identifying with these challenges, the prospect of empowering women plays a critical role if the Millenium Development Goals have to be achieved. Nigeria's 2006 National Gender Policy is consistent with the global consensus when it states that women's empowerment and gender equality underpin the achievement of all the other MDGs. Women are politically under represented.

Their upper and lower house representation fell from 7% in 2007 to 4% in the 2011 election (the African average is 19%). Only 7 of 109 Senators and 19 of 360 Representatives are women. So, if the gross enrolment rate indicated that 71percent of out-of-school children are girls, the literacy rate for males is 58 percent but only 41 percent for females.

#### **THE ROLE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR WOMEN ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS**

The research of Ganguli et al., (2011) emphasises the role of education in transforming the long term position of women in the society. In 2001, the Nigerian National Policy on Women enhanced access to education by locating facilities close to communities.

Other projects have been launched since them such as the Strategy for Acceleration of Girls' Education in Nigeria which was launched in collaboration with UNICEF which also brought about the launch of the Girls' Education Project that focussed on an integrated approach to achieving gender parity.

These projects are important because according to UNESCO (2002) there are above 880 million illiterate adults in the world 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.

Thus, in a circumstance where education is made accessible and flexible to women through open and distance learning, the benefits are amongst economic empowerment include bringing down the levels of poverty and increase capacity to participate in the economy and in policy making decisions. Jegede et al. (1995) defined "Open and Distance Learning" as a non contiguous form of study which affords learners the flexibility of study independent of time and space.

Open and Distance Learning allows learners who are traditionally disadvantaged, under-privileged, under-represented segments of the world's population with limited access to education to have an opportunity to acquire an education (Howarth et al., 2000). In particular, women are included in the group termed the "traditionally disadvantaged" either by history, perception or structures. These women are the victims of a social order that treats them largely as second position role players (Anugwom, 2009.) With open and distance learning, women, even as housewives, can sit at home and study for their programmes without affecting their homes or their private businesses. When the concept of ODL was introduced to a religious group of women, most of them were ignorant of the fact that they could actually study from home. The facilities that were provided for them including documentaries of waste management, CDs and course materials for exhibition encouraged them all the more to register for the programme through ODL.

However, there are cases where high numbers of females are recorded in supposedly male terrains. For example, the number of students enrolled for the Environmental Science and Resource Management Programme at the National Open University of Nigeria, recorded 67% of the students to be females and 33% males in 2012. This was attributed to the reason that the programme was an integrated one-science, technology, public authority control systems and social science; hence opportunities were created for more people including women. In managing the vulnerability of climate change in the environment, it was important that studies in distance education would have a far reaching effect. This implied that education as a women empowerment strategy breaches the gap of many social circles with accessibility, equity and flexibility. Also, in a feedback report of students being facilitated at few of the University's study centres noted that most of the students including women had registered for the programme because it breached the conventional mode of education and also was affordable to them.

Thus, women education has far-reaching and positive consequences for the societies in which they live (OECD Observer (2005); World Economic Forum, 2007; Anugwom, 2009.) They can contribute positively in imparting environmental knowledge and application in the homes and communities which would consequently affect the larger society positively for attitudinal changes and behaviours (Abdelmuhdi et.al, 2010).

To further assess the knowledge of environmental awareness among working women, Ojo and Medupin (2011)'s study at NOUN study revealed that although more women were aware of the use of natural resource, they do not know the dire consequences of some of their activities including waste management, It also revealed that the attitudes and applications of environmental issues by most respondents noted that women in administration can play a critical role in the management of office resources such as stationeries, use of paper, and ink by printing out only what was required.

In identifying with issues like these, more women need to be included to participate in policy/decision making processes since they are mostly affected by the vulnerability of changes in the environment. The achievements of Wangarii Maathai, a Noble Peace Prize winner and her establishment of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya is highly recorded.

## CONCLUSION

Environmental education and awareness creation is important if the global climatic problems are to be resolved.

Open and Distance Learning creates opportunities to educate and to empower a large number of people at various times and places. Women are at the helm of these affairs.

They have the capacity to contribute through the home, workplaces, markets, in their localities and the government, and therefore need to be empowered in all ramifications.

If the future is to be shaped in order that key decisions are to be made in order to mitigate the vulnerability of climate change impacts especially among women and children, it is critical that the home (the mother, potential mothers) are educationally empowered to undertake these challenges and be given an opportunity to apply their knowledge in key decision making areas.

Consequently, the applications and management of the environment is continuous and therefore needs capable, specialist, technical and critical minds who will take the environment as theirs for the future.

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