

Title: Open and Distance Education: A Contribution to Poverty Alleviation and Empowerment of Women?

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Abstract

Gender inequality and poverty are two serious problems for developing countries, where the majority of women have been victims of cultural, socio-political and environmental impacts of development. The gender dimension of poverty focuses on the dilemmas women face, their multiple roles as women and their roles in poverty alleviation. The literature on women and poverty abounds with evidence that women are disproportionately subject to the economic and socio-cultural effects of poverty. Women are also known to be discriminated against in terms of economic security, basic needs support, work access, opportunities and remuneration.

In Nigeria, as elsewhere in the world, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is used as a major vehicle to break the three vectors - access, quality and cost – that has constrained education time immemorial in order to improve women's wellbeing, reduce their vulnerability and act as a starting point in their empowerment. Using findings from two single-mode ODL institutions in Nigeria, - National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and National Teachers Institute (NTI) - this study explores the issues of poverty and women's empowerment. First, it considers poverty from gender and economic sustainability perspectives, second, it evaluates the impacts of ODL on women empowerment and poverty alleviation, and third, it highlights the role of ODL in enhancing accessible education for women.

The study argues that ODL has visible impact on both poverty reduction among women, gender equity, economic sustainability and accessible education. An interesting finding here has been a new conception of women empowerment which explicitly includes the development of 'self'. The possibilities of ODL to contribute to poverty reduction of women and their empowerment are, however, internally and externally constrained. Evidence from the empirical research conducted in three States – Kogi, Benue and Nassarawa shows the internal constraints (weaknesses in the institutions themselves) to include inadequate instructional materials, access to the internet, inappropriate technology and power failure. The external constraints (the socio-economic factors affecting the sustainability of the programmes) include economic conditions that deny educational access to women, and cultural factors that result in excessive burdens on women. Both diminish the effectiveness of ODL as a solution to poverty.

From the analysis of lessons learned from best practice in other countries, it is suggested that the Nigerian government's framework on Open and Distance Learning programmes need to be refocused to address these internal and external constraints, and allow for progress to be achieved in poverty alleviation and empowerment. The NOUN and NTI programmes in a revised form based on an improved delivery format, should continue to play a role in providing flexible, accessible, qualitative and cost-effective education to women, to encourage skill development, and capacity building to support the process of women's empowerment and to contribute to a more sustainable society.

Introduction

Education is the most important instrument to enhance human capabilities and to achieve the desired objectives of socio and economic development. Education enables individuals to make informed choices, broaden their horizons and opportunities and to have a voice in public decision-making. In Nigeria, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, lack of access to education stands in the way of realisation of the development promises education holds. In recent years, there has been

remarkable progress in Nigeria towards these promises; yet, growing evidence indicates that the conventional education remains ill-positioned to respond to this challenge. This is even worrisome when we consider the intricate link between accessible education, poverty and empowerment of the marginalised groups.

Women have since independence in Nigeria, remained marginal beneficiaries of educational programmes. Not surprisingly, their high poverty status has deepened, especially, with the introduction of structural adjustments in the 1980s. Despite its free education policy (FGN, 2004) at all levels of schooling, access to education for all remained unattainable, more so for girls and women (UNICEF, 2002). In some Nigerian administrative states like Sokoto and Zamfara, the female literacy rate is as low as 12 percent when compared to 59% for boys (UNESCO, 2003). The statistics indicated a wider gender disparity with 65.5% of males being literate as against 39.5% literate females. The same period revealed that of the nearly 7.3 million children of primary school age not in school about 62% were girls. This stark reality is confirmed by Ofoegbu (2009:47), who argues that in fact only about 33% and 28% of female children respectively attend primary and secondary schools in sub Saharan Africa. This could be generally as a result of negative challenges which include ineffective and inefficient implementation of the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2004) and reforms in the Nigerian education system, poor economy, poor management of scarce resources, poverty, early marriage and teenage pregnancy, culture and religious issues, and gender bias in content, teaching and learning process.

There has however, never been any period in human history, more now than ever, that the provision of education to women is been championed. Various efforts include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights where the international covenants in arts. 7-9, 11 & 13 mentioned that through the right to education, human beings are oriented to 'the full development of human personality and a sense of dignity'; UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO, 1999), the 1981 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 1990 Jomtien Declaration on Education for All (EFA), and the 2000 World Forum on Education For All, especially the EFA 2015 goal commitment of: "eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girl's full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality (World Education Forum, 2002). Though much progress has been made, it is however ironic and sad, that this is four years to 2015, the target date, and this goal is far from been realised.

It is against this backdrop that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has been identified as the panacea to the perennial educational challenges of equitable access to learning, equality of basic educational opportunities as well as providing a second chance for women and girls who had never been or had once been in the system but had to dropout for one reason or another. Even though this mode of education may not be the *magic umu* in solving all our educational ills, Pityana (2009:9) argues that, if properly conceived, could be the long-term strategy for national renaissance, since higher education, notwithstanding the social circumstances, remains an engine of development. Knowledge and its development and dissemination can transcend the confines of social deprivation.

The State of the Art

For the developing world, ODL is a promising and practical strategy to address the challenge of widening access thus increasing participation in higher education. It is increasingly being seen as an educational delivery model which is cost-effective without sacrificing quality. On the African continent where resources are scarce and higher education provision is poor, ODL has been accepted as a viable, cost effective means of expanding provision without costly outlay in infrastructure (Pityana, 2009:7). Scholars and commentators have highlighted the role of ODL as a means for democratising education, and empowering the marginalised groups. Aderinoye and Ojokheta (2004: 8) agree that distance education remains the primary mechanism for the information-driven age, a tool that bridges the gap between developed and developing communities. Their study shows that ODL in Nigeria and throughout the continent of Africa is helping to democratise and spread knowledge, even to those living in remote, marginalised, and isolated communities. The Aderinoye and Ojokheta study also acknowledges that ODL has helped individuals to acquire basic literacy and arithmetic skills, and in some instances, earn certificates in higher degrees, as well as obtain a multitude of broad-brush education skills that target whole populations.

Ambe-Uva and Adegbola (2009:5) contend that through this system, even the low-income people who have no access to education in formal universities can improve their qualification, which in turn contributes towards increasing the literacy rate, which in the long run can be useful towards eradicating poverty. In their study on distance education as a women empowerment strategy, Olakunlehin and Ojo (2006) surmised that ODL “is a scheme that affords a nation the opportunity to effectively disseminate educational benefits to all its citizens economically and more effectively, especially those hitherto unreached or denied access on the basis of one social consideration or the other”. Using elaborate data from Nigeria, they concluded that “Nigerian women undoubtedly fall within this category and this system of education affords them the opportunity to pursue knowledge without contradicting any societal dictates. The uniqueness of distance education as a strategy for women empowerment can be gleaned from the fact that it straddles so many facets of the social system” (2006:275). Khan and Gul (2006) found out that distance education is an effective means of reducing poverty in developing countries. In their study of rural development in Pakistan, they agree that ODL is an effective antidote for poverty alleviation.

This study builds on these studies, and offers a new conception of empowerment, accessible education and poverty alleviation as put forward by women, who have been beneficiaries of distance education programmes. How do they view these programmes? The study believes that it is better for these beneficiaries to provide their meanings and explanations.

Conceptual Clarification

Open Learning and Distance Education

Open learning refers to policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning. These policies need not be part of a distance education system but are complementary to it. *Distance education* on the other hand is the delivery of learning or training to those who are separated mostly by time and space from those who are teaching or training. The teaching is done with a variety of “mediating processes” used to transmit content, provide tuition and conduct assessment or measure outcomes (Glen, 2003).

With the recent improvement in modern information and communication technologies (ICTs), distance learning has emerged as an inevitable and phenomenal form of education in the history of educational developments internationally. While the formal system of education continues to be the mainstream of educational transaction, it has inherent limitations with regard to expansion, provision of access and equity and cost effectiveness. As Dickshit, Garge and Panda (2002:252) argue “with the emergence of modern ICTs, it is now possible to adopt flexible, constructivist, learner-friendly and multi-perspective approaches to teaching-learning, so essential for nurturing creativity, leadership, scholarship and integrated development of human personality.” In many regards, OFL is a suitable response to learners ill-served in the mainstream system (e.g. marginalised communities, illiterate with commitments that preclude full-time attendance at institutions, conflict areas, those with basic education, health, sanitation, food security, underqualified teachers in rural areas) etc. (IRFOL 2004).

Women Empowerment

The extensive use and popularity of the term women empowerment by many international scholars over the years leaves one to think that there is a commonly shared perspective on what it means, but its many different existing definitions and interpretations prove that the opposite is true. In fact, there is no straightforward definition of women empowerment, simply because the concept of power is such a societal contextually dependent concept that it cannot be streamlined internationally. Nevertheless, research on women empowerment has shown some definitional and interpretational similarities that are interesting to look into when trying to define women empowerment. Empowerment implies that an individual or a group hitherto lacked power or authority by circumstances, denial or default. The issue of women empowerment has become a part of popular debate (Olakunlehin and Ojo, 2006:272).

One of the similarities in the literature defining women empowerment is captured in the concept of women’s decision-making power as an indicator of women empowerment. Kabeer’s (1999) dimension of resources, the dimension of decision-making agency reflects the capabilities women

have to shape their live according to their own desires (Kabeer, 1999: 438). All definitions of empowerment pointing towards decision-making power share the characteristic that it is about women having individual control over their lives, either economically, socially or psychologically. Another way in which empowerment is conceptualised is by referring to the importance of social inclusion (Malhotra, et al., 2002: 4). Here, empowerment is to be obtained by the participation of women in society and by, as Malhotra, et al., 2002:4 states it: “the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them.” Connected to the concept of social inclusion is the dimension of political and social awareness of women which explains part of the empowerment process. Saraswathy, et al. (2008:190) moreover pointed out that women empowerment is (a result of) a process of women “identifying their inner strength, opportunities for growth, and their role in reshaping their own destiny”. Finally, women empowerment has frequently been termed a process of women gaining more access to a steady income and economic power or security (Malhotra, et al., 2002).

These definitions are not essentially exclusive, but refer to different components of empowerment. For this study, we follow Alcott (1988:432), who defines empowerment as a process which women come to believe in their ability “to construct, and take fg and [their] choices”. Powerlessness, in contrast, we see as the continuing subordination of women by men in public and private spheres, supported by cultural messages of devaluation internalised, in varying degrees, by women. These messages form the basis women’s doubts about their power to shape their lives (Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea, 1991:607).

Accessible Education

The purpose of adopting ODL as a policy option is ostensibly to increase access to higher education especially by non-traditional learners. Access implies the facilitation of people, in this case women, to get education, the opportunity for enrolment as well as the facilitation and the encouragement of sustaining enrolment by learners in appropriate education programmes. UNESCO (2002) equally stated that ODL represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from constraints of time and place and offering learning opportunities to individuals and group of learners. In Nigeria, women are discriminated against in access to education for social and economic reasons. The *Human Development Report 2002* puts the statistics of illiterate women at 57 percent as against 43 percent for males. As seemingly insignificant this difference may appear, it is completely unacceptable, if the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are to be achieved. In Nigeria, girls and women comprise about 49.69 percent of the total population. Incidentally, about 61 percent of the total female population reported to be illiterates against 37.7 percent of the male population. Thus, the objective of ODL in Nigeria is to enhance the opportunities that support education for all and life-long learning and at the same time provide avenues for the acquisition of qualitative education for all categories of learners especially women. As Calvert (1986) notes, OFL helps extend the market for education to clientele who have not been previously served. In developing countries, particularly in Africa, this clientele has continued to increase in geometric proportion.

Poverty Alleviation

Definitions of poverty are as varied as poverty itself. We do not intend to reconcile them here, as this is done elsewhere. However, based on our respondents, poverty is best captured in the basic needs approach. Aluko (1975) refers to poverty as “a lack of command over basic consumption needs, which mean, in other words, that there is an inadequate level of consumption giving rise to insufficient food, clothing and/or shelter, and moreover the lack of certain capacities, such as being able to participate with dignity in society. Poverty has been defined as the inability to attain a minimum standard of living (World Bank Report, 1990). In Nigeria, the prevalence of both relative and absolute poverty is duly recognised and even mentioned in various National Developments Plans and Conferences of the Nigerian Economic Society. Poverty has a gendered face, and any attempt at its alleviation must take cognisance of this fact.

We have favoured a basic needs framework of poverty (see Ogwumike and Ekpenyong (1995) which sees poverty as a household’s inability to provide sufficient income to satisfy its need for food, shelter, education, clothing and transportation. Minimum standards for food are based on nutritional requirements in terms of calories and protein consumption habit and customs are also allowed for in the selection of the food items to give the required national stock. Shelter and

education, the number of person per room and the number of children attending school (and the level of schooling) respectively, are adopted as minimum standard. However, the problem of defining minimum standard for clothing and transportation has persisted.

Poverty specifically has traditionally warranted significant attention by all governments and civil society if only because it's most fundamental characteristic is deprivation, which denies the people and communities the options necessary to exercise choices about their lives. Such deprivation is strongly linked to a host of risk factors, identified by the World Bank to include "low level of nutrition, illness, and the inability to access information or to take advantage of educational opportunities at the primary and secondary level" tend to exclude its victims from the enjoyment of any developmental gains seen in the macro economy. The World Bank has also pointed to a reasonably strong correlation between poverty and illiteracy in Nigeria, and has confirmed the dearth of human capital among the poor in the country. However, it remains to be added that the foundation of poverty eradication and women empowerment is ensuring that the vast majority of the people are equipped to participate in the knowledge economy of the 21st century, especially through programmes that would encourage their enrolment in large numbers, in a wide swathe of courses for educational and skills development. Training in this case includes social skills, introduction to entrepreneurship, and workplace etiquette. Distance education qualifies to be a feasible vehicle for making such training programmes available and accessible to women.

Research Approach

The research reported here is part of a larger endeavor, the aim that was to explore the potential benefits of ODL in sustainable development in Nigeria. The data was derived from a pilot study conducted in 2009 in three states in Nigeria. The study addressed the following questions: To what extent does ODL contribute to poverty alleviation, accessible education and the empowerment of women? What are the challenges of accessing education? How has ODL enhanced the status of women in Nigeria? What are the impediments of accessing distance education?

Given the complex nature of the research questions, both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used in gathering data for the study. Survey, in depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions were triangulated to the explore issues relevant to the subject. A total of seven hundred and fifty-four respondents were sampled in the survey, using questionnaire schedule that was designed in open and close-ended precoded form. Table 1 represents the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Age	Below 30	88	13.5
	30-39	243	37.2
	40-49	250	38.1
	50+	30	23.3
	No response	7	3.8
Religion	Christianity	454	60.2
	Islam	274	36.3
	Traditional religion	15	2.0
	Others	6	0.8
	No response	5	0.7
Marital Status	Single	52	6.9
	Married	655	87.1
	Divorced	10	1.3
	Widowed	19	2.5
	Separated	16	2.1
	No response	2	-
ODL programme	NTI	534	70.8
	NOUN	147	19.5
	Others	69	9.2
	No response	4	0.5

Occupation	Teacher	435	57.7
	Trader	110	14.6
	Civil Servant	89	11.8
	Farmer	34	4.5
	Others	79	10.5
	No response	7	0.9
Geographical distribution	Kogi	232	28.51
	Benue	307	40.7
	Nassarawa	215	30.8

Has ODL Enhanced Accessible Education for Women in Nigeria?

Olakulehin and Ojo (2006) argue that the only effective way to meaningfully contribute to the emancipation of women in the Nigerian society is to widen the access of women and girls to quality education. Since the conventional structures of education have not been able to adequately meet the demands of female education in Nigeria, ODL readily fills in this void. Our respondents agreed that this mode of delivery has afforded them the opportunity to benefit from education, which they would not otherwise had the opportunity. According to our respondent in Benue:

I got my National Certificate of Education before my colleagues, who in the first place considered the NTL programme I was enrolled in a second class. It was called various derogatory names, especially Torfam (referring to its seasonal nature). By the time I was certified, they had just gotten admission to a conventional College of Education. I have not stopped from there; I am now taken a BA (Ed) in Early Childhood at the NOUN.

Another respondent in Kogi affirmed the way ODL has transformed the educational landscape in Nigeria. She graphically informed us that:

If you know the challenge we women have in combining domestic work and studies, you would agree with the double work women perform. I never had a slight idea that it was possible for me to look after my children, go to work at the Local government Council, and at the same time attend a University. NOUN has literally and figuratively carried education to our doorsteps.

UNESCO and other United Nations agencies have identified access as one of the ways of reducing gender inequality in the society. Reviewing the submission from the literature, three reasons have been identified as being germane for equality of opportunity and access in education: (a) equal access for individuals regardless of social circumstances (b) equal chances to take part or share in the system (c) equal educational results: equal gains.

Has ODL Enhanced Poverty Alleviation for Women in Nigeria?

Olakulehin and Ojo (2006:273) suggested that ODL will increase the income-earning potential and development of women. Kanwar and Taplin (2001) citing Le Vine (1982) also suggest that educated women would afford to buy goods and services for their children and have a greater chance of helping them to find employment through their contacts. Furthermore, educated women have demonstrated a better ability to keep control of their husband's expenditures and to maintain their own economic independence, to improve household management, and be more able to save money and generally contribute more to the family income pool (Chaudry, 1995).

What impact has ODE had on poverty reduction of women in Nigeria? The responses were diverse, as they were respondents. One common theme, however, was the fact that, at the initial enrolment into the programme, it appeared that the women were becoming poor and poorer. However, after the painful challenges of completing the programme, their living standards and those of their families increased.

One commercial farmer in Nassarawa said:

...they were times I decided enough was enough. We had three children in the secondary school and the fourth had written matriculation examinations for university admission. I could see that my husband was not supportive of my part-time programme again. Allah be blessed, I have since completed my studies, and with connections and the knowledge from my course, had gotten a

small loan. I can say now that my husband collects enough money from me, as I collected from him during my studies.

A large proportion of the respondents were in agreement that with the completion of the programme, they were now able to provide sufficient income to satisfy the basic necessities of life, including the need for food, shelter, education, clothing and transportation.

Can we say that ODL is empowering women in Nigeria?

This question is at the heart of this study. Since accessible education, leads to poverty reduction, we hypothesise that there is a continuum between access, poverty reduction and empowerment of women. Chaudry (1995) has aptly demonstrated that women who attended adult education classes became more confident, which in turn equipped them with better mobility, expression, understanding and ability to make decisions and accept responsibility. There were benefits not only for the women themselves, but for their husbands, children, families and communities. For example, it has been found that educated mothers are able to contribute more effectively to the quality of their children's education (Raj, 1982; Chaudry, 1995).

Table 2 Empowerment score percentages as demonstrated by women

Activity	Average Empowerment Score per Indicator	
	Empowered	Not Empowered
Mobility	88.3	12.7
Economic security	56.9	43.1
Ability to make large and small purchases	84.4	15.6
Involvement in major decisions	56.6	43.4
Relative freedom from family	86.7	13.3
Political and legal awareness	44.0	56.0
Public participation/protests/campaigning	92.0	8.0
Aggregated Percent	72.7	28.3

It is not easy presenting data on women empowerment in quantitative terms based on the subjective component of empowerment. However, table 2 attempts this. The conclusion to be drawn from the field study analysis is that ODL overall leads to higher women empowerment if women empowerment is measured by all seven indicators (mobility, economic security, the ability to make small and large purchases, involvement in major decisions, relative freedom from domination by the family, political and legal awareness and participation in public protests and campaigning) together. Looking at the effects of ODL on the empowerment indicators as separate dimensions, it can be said that ODL leads more substantially to public participation, mobility, ability to make purchases, and relative freedom from domination by the family. About 72.7 percent of the female respondents agreed that these programmes have empowered them compared to 28.3 percent that think otherwise.

Challenges Women Face in Participating ODL Programmes

Despite remarkable progress made in empowering women in Nigeria, there are still considerable obstacles to this feat. Poverty, early marriage and teenage pregnancy, culture and religious issues, and gender bias in content, teaching and learning process are still a hindrance. There is still a pervading expectation that education is more important for males than for females (Tremaine and Owen, 1984), especially since after marriage women leave to join their husbands' families and, hence, are not regarded as being useful to their own families in the long term. An outcome of this attitude can be lack of emotional and financial support or even demonstrated hostility concerning studies (Lunneborg, 1994). Yet for those who have scaled these first hurdles, there are fundamental challenges of timely receipt of instructional materials, access to the internet, inappropriate technology and power failure. These and many more frustrate women's effort to participate in ODL programmes.

Conclusion

The impact of gender disparity underlies the UNDP statement that 'for too long, it was assumed that development was a process that lifts all boats, that its benefits trickled down to all income classes- and that it was gender neutral in its impact. Experience teaches otherwise' (Akubue, 2001). Open and Distance Learning, evidence shows, seems a better approach in Nigeria in democratising education, poverty alleviation and the empowerment of the marginalised groups,

especially women. Many of the difficulties and concerns experienced by women, particularly those in rural or low-income areas, point to the fact that distance education 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 (Kanwar and Taplin, 2001:7). In the context of Nigeria, women themselves allude to this benefit. Yet, most women are not utilising this window of opportunity to enhance their participation in the global economy, and to play a tangible role in their families and society. The findings of this study are supportive of earlier ones (Kanwar and Taplin, 2001; Olakulehin and Ojo, 2003; Aderinoye and Ojokheta, 2004) that explained the potential of open and distance learning in overcoming barriers. This study suggests that ODL is a promising and practical strategy to address the challenge of widening access thus increasing the participation of women in higher education, poverty reduction and empowerment. This in the final analysis is a sought out option for womenfolk to catch-up with their male counterpart. However, the Nigerian government and other stakeholders must be actively seen in transforming the ODL landscape to address both the internal and external challenges that women encounter in accessing education.

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