



## DISTANCE EDUCATION AND GENDER TRANSFORMATION

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### ABSTRACT:

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

Achieving gender equality in education implies equality of opportunities for males in relation to females, equality in the learning process, equality of outcomes as well as equality of external results after leaving education, (UNESCO, 2004). It is therefore more of a challenge to achieve gender equality. Hence the paper tries to focus on how distance education has led to gender transformation by addressing gender bias and inequality in women education. The paper also tries throwing light on how distance education can be a tool of women empowerment.

**KEYWORDS :** social realities , Distance Learning Model , face-to-face contact.

### INTRODUCTION

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 progresses. 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 Indian 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.

#### **DISTANCE EDUCATION AND GENDER TRANSFORMATION:**

The global education agenda has raised awareness for the support of gender parity and gender equality in education as the Human Development report for 1995 declares that 'If human development is not engendered, it is endangered'. Development goals now focus on gender equality and women empowerment. Goal number three of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), is to promote gender equality and women empowerment. The fourth target of this goal is to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005 and at all levels of education by 2015, (UNESCO Global Monitoring Report, 2005). Therefore, the shift in the international education goals beyond gender parity to gender equality has had a positive influence in promoting a meaningful education agenda towards the education of females in relation to males.

Achieving gender equality in education implies equality of opportunities for males in relation to females, equality in the learning process, equality of outcomes as well as equality of external results after leaving education, (UNESCO, 2004). It is therefore more of a challenge to achieve gender equality. Stromquist, (1996) identifies many challenges pertaining to gender, education and development. These are: concentration of women in typically feminine fields and over-representation of men in fields perceived as masculine, such as science and technology; economics and finances which reflects influence of multiple societal and cultural forces.

Similarly, Leach, (1988:50) points out that there is generally 'under representation of women in highly skilled and professional employment, in politics and until recently, in the design of development policy and strategy.' Therefore by controlling the access of the female students to some forms of knowledge, this may just as successfully exclude them from the mainstream of economic, social and political life as no education at all, (Fagerlind and Saha, 1992). The key issues which emerge from the literature are multi leveled and have many dimensions. The issues converge into a gender analysis framework.

The framework is adapted from the Social Relations Approach proposed by Naila Kabeer (Leach, 2003), which is multi-leveled and multi-dimensional. The approach identifies key institutions, namely the family and community; the market and the state, each of which pursues a dominant ideology on gender relations. 'The approach shows how features of one institution link to, reinforce, and influence those of the others, and how inequalities of gender, class, ethnicity, etc., interact and reinforce each other,' (Leach, 2003:100).

At the first level, there is female and male students' access to university education; retention and achievement in such education. At the next level, there is the immediate local context of the family and community, which influences the students' gender values and beliefs systems. Then there is also the labor market with gendered patterns, which has an impact on the education choices of the students. The last level is the state, which represents the gendered structure of society. This approach is adapted and will be applied in the gender analysis of the distance university setting at the IDE later in the next section.

Some authors question the role of distance education in promoting gender equality and empowerment. Distance education tends to be regarded as the second best choice to conventional education and is undervalued. Jenkins (2002) explains that distance education remains on the periphery in most countries and is underdeveloped, hence its low status. Similarly, Stromquist (1996:2) is skeptical of the view that women's education may be increased through their participation in distance education. She queries whether women, who are already devalued in society, will benefit from having a devalued education through distance education and Open University. 'By invoking such courses, there is accommodation to low prestige occupations that will perpetuate women's subordinate statuses,' (p.2). To some extent, distance

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education has not been as successful in Africa as it could have been, hence the justification of the concern about the implication of distance learning to the commonly excluded groups, comprising mainly of women and the rural poor.

#### **IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN EDUCATION:**

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 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 tend to appear healthier than that of her non-educated counterpart.

#### **GENDER BIAS & INEQUALITY IN WOMEN EDUCATION:**

When examining gender bias, it is important to define & understand the term. Gender is defined by the American heritage dictionary as "classification of sex." According to this source, bias is defined as "preference or inclination that inhibits impartiality; prejudice". Thus gender bias is separation of gender in a way which prefers one sex over the other. This gender bias in turn leads to inequality be it access to food, shelter, healthcare, education, employment. There is little denying the fact that investing in human capital is one of the most effective means of reducing poverty & encouraging sustainable development. Yet, women in developing countries usually receive less education than men. More so, women in general enjoy far less employment opportunities than men the world over. Any claims & efforts then, to remove poverty, can show results only if they address the issue of gender inequality. In recent decades, there have been large gains, no doubt on comparable levels, in basic rights & opportunities, in life expectancy & enrolment ratios for women. But despite these gains, the stark reality has not changed. There still are large gender disparities in basic human rights, resources, & economic opportunity, & in political rights the world over. So until we are able to address this issue of gender inequality & resolve it, the vicious circle of poverty will continue to pervade. This is because poverty leads to & aggravates gender discrimination- it is in the poorer sections & nations that instance of gender biases & inequality are more evident. Women & girls, who are at the bottom of the social, economic & political ladder in these societies, get even lesser opportunities to have a command over productive resources such as land or credit. Access to the means to influence the development process is a rare & difficult possibility. The issue of gender equality then, needs to be at the core of development policies- both in national & international arenas. Just because gender inequality is inextricably linked to societal norms, religion or cultural traditions, it should not be either a deterrent or an excuse to gender sensitive development planning.

Education is widely recognized as the gateway to economic security & opportunity particularly for girls & women. Figures in literacy relate a sorry tale. The figures only go to show how in most regions of the world, specially the developing societies, gender bias impinges on the girl's education. The foremost factor limiting female education is poverty. Economics plays a key role when it comes to coping with direct costs such as tuition fees, cost of textbooks, uniform, transportation & other expenses. Wherever, especially in families with many children, these costs exceed the income of the family; girls are the first to be denied schooling. All this despite the fact that educating girls is one of the best investments a society can make. An educated woman has the skills, the self-confidence & the information she needs to become a better parent, worker & citizen. Girl's lack of access to education isn't always related to scarcity of places in schools. It also

emerges from expectations, attitudes & biases in communities & families. Economic costs, social traditions & religious & cultural beliefs limits girl's educational opportunities.

### CAUSES OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN WOMEN EDUCATION:

The three major reasons for low investment in girl's education are.

- 1- Low return from girl's schooling:** - The major reason for the low investment in girl's education is that the return from girls schooling is considered to be lower than that for boys. This may only be possible if the labor of males and females are imperfect substitutes in sound activities. In this case, the lower investment on girl's education than boys could be an efficient economic choice.
- 2- No direct benefit from investing in girl's education.** The social returns to educating boys and girls are the same, but then parents expect more direct benefit from investing in sons if, for example son typically provide for parents in their old age, while daughters tend to leave and become a part of different house hold economic unit. In this case the wedge between private and social returns generates a market failure, and the private decision to invest in girls schooling is likely to be inefficient.
- 3- Social reforms.** Parents may simply have a preference due to many reasons like traditions culture or regional traditions etc for educating boys or girls. A low investment in girl's education would then reflect the underline population preferences.

### The social & cultural preferences about gender role:

Almost in every society the social, regional and the cultural factor play a vital role in formation of the behavior and the attitudes of the people. Hence the gender inequality can be explained by the differences in the cultures, religious preferences, regional factors and underlying characteristics of societies such a civil freedom the fact that gender inequality to a considerable extent can be explained by civil freedom, social and cultural values, regional variables, and religious factors of a society in a optimizing growth model, any religious social, and cultural preference not to educate girls in distortion that can hinder the economic growth.

### ODL SYSTEM AS A TOOL OF WOMEN 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. 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. 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 learner, 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. Indian 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 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 (Azikiwe1992).

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 orthodox and conservative families who restricts their girls going out to acquire knowledge. These girls 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. Distance education is an alternative that affords this group of girls' 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 India, 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 India 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 working woman 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 India 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 their 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 foregoing 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 India. Lots of market women, traders, and itinerant businesswomen, 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 a long way in increasing on the literacy level of Indians 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.

The potential of open and distance learning in widening access to tertiary education for women is tremendous. In view of the need to use higher education to facilitate development and for that matter women's empowerment several efforts (such as expanding educational infrastructure and affirmative action to reduce the qualifying aggregate by one for women) have been made to enable existing polytechnics and universities increase their intake. Though these efforts have contributed to modest increase in enrolment, the norm of attaining 50:50 male-female ratio is yet to be achieved. This is as a result of growing mismatch between the existing tertiary educational facilities and the large number of qualified applicants in addition to limited opportunities for recurrent education and lifelong learning.

Statistics from open and distance learning institutions confirm the potential of open and distance learning in achieving parity in education between males and females. Theories of distance education has also outlined the underlying principles for using open and distance learning for educating women. The onus is on policy makers, development partners/workers and educators to harness the full potential of open and distance learning for women in higher education.

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