

**EXCAVATING FACTORS THAT MILITATE AGAINST
SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH OPEN AND
DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL): A CASE OF WOMEN IN
MKOBA SUBURB OF GWERU**

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to establish factors that militate against women's social transformation through enrolment in ODL programmes. Purposive sampling was utilised to select participants in this study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with twenty-five women in Mkoba suburb Gweru. Recorded interview data were transcribed and thematically analysed by identifying emerging themes and their sub-themes in line with qualitative research approach. Several factors that emerged from the findings included lack of finances, misconceptions on ODL programmes, family and work responsibilities, and the questioning of the credibility and legitimacy of ODL programmes. Findings further revealed that some women were just lazy and un-ambitious, and some found it difficult to miss the social interactions in conventional universities. The study recommends rigorous marketing of ODL programmes through open days, print, audio and video materials, highlighting the benefits of ODL. The study further recommends setting up of scholarships for women by respective universities and corporate and non-governmental organisations as well as special funding from Government for women studying through ODL.

Key words; Education, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), women, transformation, equality, equity.

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INTRODUCTION

Studies have established the relationship between access to education, particularly for women, and increased national development (UNESCO, 2003). Education is the most powerful means for propagating social and economic development in that it promotes productivity and enhances high standards of living. ODL has emerged internationally as an acclaimed mode of education for socio-economic transformation, especially in the uplifting and advancement of women. Education covers economic, political, social, cultural, moral and ethical issues and is vital in transforming peoples' attitudes. It is on this premise that distance education becomes an avenue for education of the marginalised, women included (Timatiyo, 2012). It is the bedrock of women all over the world who have been categorised under disadvantaged groups (Ker, 1999). At Independence Zimbabwe enacted new educational policies which sought to redress inequalities institutionalised during the colonial era. These policies created opportunities for the marginalised, including women's access to education. Cognisant of this, the Zimbabwean Government established Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), which provides ODL as an alternative to enhance women's opportunity to access tertiary education. ZOU was established in 1993 as University of Zimbabwe Centre for Distance Education, which transformed into Zimbabwe Open University in 1999 through an Act of Parliament Chapter 25:20 Number 2/98, becoming the only ODL University in Zimbabwe established through an Act of Parliament. Its mandate was to preserve, advance and transmit knowledge through Open and Distance Education.

However, we observed that women in Mkoba are held back from registering with ODL programmes, making it imperative to explore the factors that militate against women's enrolment with ODL. The motivation is underpinned by NCCE's (1998) belief that if you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a nation.

What is ODL?

ODL is considered an indispensable new approach to attempting to resolve problems of access, quality and equity (UNESCO, 2002). It provides a remedy for the chaotic situations created as a result of the limitations and restrictions associated with the conventional system of education

(Adeyema, 2014). In developing countries, ODL is viewed as a way to train qualified workers in their own socio-cultural contexts with no need to migrate from South to North (Karsent & Collin, 2000). Adebayo (2010) views ODL as a type of education that takes place outside the conventional education system; it is imparted through unnecessarily having interaction with students and learners. In this respect, ODL increases access to education for those who have difficulty in accessing it through the main stream such as the poor, women, illiterate and the marginalised in remote areas (Morayo, 2013). Keegan (1992) in Ofoegbu and Ojugwu (2013) noted that ODL includes:

- The separation of teacher and student which distinguishes it from the conventional “face-to-face learning;”
- The use of remedial media, usually prints for writing by the teacher and the learner to convey the educational content;
- The provision of two way communication so that they benefit from, and initiate dialogues; and
- The possibility of meeting for didactic and socialisation purposes.

ODL meets the capability approach which stresses on the form of learning in which the provider enables the recipient to exercise choice of what they learn, how they learn, where they learn, how quickly they learn, and how quickly their learning is assessed (Andrinoye, 2001). According to UNISA (2008), ODL aims at removing barriers that underlie access to learning, and provides flexible provision of learning opportunities. Cognisant that ODL provides useful learning opportunities, some women in Gweru Mkoba Suburb fail to exploit the opportunity. The Nigerian National policy (2004) highlights that ODL,

- Provide access to equality in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied; and
- Meets special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their work place, among other objectives.

However despite the enormous benefits of ODL, observably some women in Mkoba suburb are not taking up the opportunity, hence the motivation to excavate the factors militating against the desire.

ODL benefits for women

ODL integrates well with a variety of learners including women. Women constitute a substantial proportion of those facing access problems. Quresh (2002) cited in Kwapong (2007) postulates that this mode of learning attracts more married women (non-traditional college student) than on the campus forms, and argued that ODL helps women circumvent constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic disabilities. ODL reduces cost of learning and debunks the exclusivity of higher education (ICDE, 2009). Arguably, ODL has a potential to lift socio-economic barriers limiting women's access to higher education, there by contributing to their empowerment (ICDE, 2011). It broadens opportunities for women to access education as first and second chance (FAWE, 2000). Thus women are, in the first, teachers of all children from all generations of people in the world, hence the need to access education (FAWE, 2006). However despite the opportunities to attract female students to higher education through ODL, some women in Gweru Mkoba suburb appear reluctant to enrol into ODL programmes.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Education is the primary agent for transformation and empowerment toward sustainable development. Both men and women need education. However unlike males, females encounter several factors that prevent them from accessing education. The introduction of ODL through the Zimbabwe Open University meant to cater for the marginalised who included women. To this end, some women still fail to grab the opportunity presented to them by ODL.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study sought to explore the factors militating against women from enrolling in ODL programmes, and to proffer possible solutions that could circumvent the problem. Thus, guiding this study were the following research questions:

- What factors militate against married women from attending ODL programmes?
- How can the negative factors be circumvented?

METHODOLOGY

Informed by the feminist belief that only women can articulate their experiences and issues (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013), the interpretive research paradigm underpinned this study

where we sought to capture participants' perspectives drawn from lived experiences regarding impediments to studying through ODL. A qualitative approach assists in providing a real life translation of what is being conveyed (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Within a case study design, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty five purposively selected participants. These were mostly married women and a few young, post-high school unmarried women. Purposive sampling aimed at collecting information-rich individuals or cases, that is, those who were likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena under investigation, as Johnson and Christensen (2000) advise. The researchers first sought participants' informed consent, with their rights to withdrawal, and protections through anonymity and confidentiality assured. Data collection proceeded until saturation point. Unstructured interviews allowed participants to freely discuss their interpretations of the reality which they lived, and express how they regarded the situation from the point of view of their own reality or experience. The participants said exactly what they conceived as the factors that militated against women from enrolling in ODL programmes. Data analysis followed reading and re-reading of transcripts and progressive reviewing of emerging themes and categories. Verbatim excerpts from interviews were selected as rich data to all illustrate the categories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study findings indicate the emergence of a recurring themes that clouded around factors that adversely militated against women from participating in ODL programmes. These included lack of finances, misconceptions on ODL programmes, family and work responsibilities, and the questioning of the credibility and legitimacy of ODL programmes. Further findings revealed that some women were just lazy and un-ambitious and some found it difficult to miss the social interactions in conventional Universities.

Financial Constraints

Evidence from women interviewed indicated that women failed to participate in ODL because of financial problems. They all cited that their children were at different levels of education; primary, secondary and tertiary, and as result they channelled financial resources towards the education of their children as a matter of priority. The women also cited Zimbabwe's poor and harsh economic environment as another reason accounting for depleted family incomes. Notably,

finances served as a major drawback for women to attend ODL programmes. The following comments were made by women.

My major priority is to put food on the table for my children.

All my children are in school and we can't compete for the meagre salaries we earn with my children.

Family Responsibilities

A number of women also reported that they were held back by family responsibilities which included domestic chores, taking care of the sick and children, which left them with no time to study. One woman lamented, “*My hands are full, and I do not have the time to study with all these responsibilities.*” This concurs with Von Phummer (2004) findings who noted that social division of labour in the home has remained unchanged along traditional and gender lines, according to which full responsibility for the private sphere is assigned to women with the men occasionally helping with some domestic chores. It would appear women faced a formidable task in having to study through ODL and taking care of other responsibilities. Studying through ODL thus emerged as an extra burden because women found it difficult to cope with house hold chores, childcare, caring for the sick, and meeting their job demands at the same time.

Questioning the legitimacy of ODL Programmes

Some of the women questioned the legitimacy, credibility and relevance of ODL programmes and indicated their preference of conventional learning programmes, which they have known since time immemorial. One woman commented, “*I wonder if I will get a job after studying with ZOU*”. This was exacerbated by the bad publicity ZOU received during the period 2011-2013 (Kurebwa, 2014), and the attendant non-recognition of certain programmes or qualifications from ZOU then.

Poor perceptions of ODL Programmes

It also emerged from this study that some women had negative attitudes towards ODL programmes and these negative attitudes prevented them from enrolling in ODL programmes. Evidence revealed that some of the women were sceptical about ZOU programmes because of some misconceptions about ODL programmes. The misconceptions included.

- *ODL is inferior to face-to-face learning;*
- *is for people who have failed in prior levels;*
- *recruits unqualified staff;*
- *is ineffective;*
- *programmes are limited in relevance; and*
- *is for adult learners only.*

Notably, the low level acceptance of ODL as a viable and credible mode of tertiary education, as Kurebwa (2014) observed, hindered some women from enrolling with ODL programmes.

Lack of confidence

A number of women interviewed believed that ODL was a difficult mode of acquiring education. They exhibited lack of confidence in handling course materials without continuous face-to-face tuition. One woman commented, “*Surely I would need a teacher to guide me and help throughout the programme. Reading all the modules and understanding them on my own would be a difficult and stressful task.*”

Other factors

The interviewed participants also showed lack of knowledge on ODL entry points and how ZOU operates. Some participants commented

“I do not know anything about ZOU”.

“I have a hazy idea about ZOU.

Young unmarried women revealed that they would not want to study through ODL because it would not afford them an opportunity to interact and enjoy campus life. Some reported that they would want to be free from their parents at home. A sizeable number of such young women made it clear that they did not intend to study through ODL for the above mentioned reason.

Some married women interviewed indicated that their husbands felt threatened by a woman attaining university qualifications, and as a result they were denied from accessing any higher education. One woman commented, “*My husband is reluctant to support my education at degree level. He is threatened by higher qualification.*” According to Olowola Jemitiyo (2012), many women believe that the life of a successful woman revolves around her children, husband and domestic chores. It would appear that some women were compelled to listen to their husbands and refrain further education because their husbands were not keen on it.

It emerged also from this study that some women lacked ambition to study. Some were just too lazy to embark on study as indicated by a few of the participants.

The study revealed numerous factors that limited women from enrolling with ODL programmes. The major reason was financial constraints to fund ODL programmes. Although ODL programmes were found to be cheaper than conventional universities, women found it difficult to compete for financial resources with their children. Furthermore, some women lacked support from their husbands who were not eager to see their wives acquire higher or further qualifications. Financial difficulties are largely blamed for dropouts among black students (McGvey, 2004).

As evident from the findings, participants were also held back by domestic chores, family and job responsibilities. Von Phummer (2000) noted that women in developing countries are affected by barriers such as time, inadequate support, lack of child care services and enabling learning space.

The results of this study also indicated that some women’s’ poor conceptions about ODL programmes resulted in having low opinions about, and reluctance to enrol in ODL programmes. As such this might have led women not to realize the value in pursuing ODL study programmes. ODL, its potential and its application, is poorly understood by many key stakeholders (UNESCO, 2002).

The study has also revealed that some women lacked confidence to study through ODL while some resented ODL for not affording them the opportunity for social interaction. Some women were just unambitious` and lazy to go through the rigors of ODL. While ODL presents several opportunities for women's social transformation, the study presented several factors which limit women's chances of enrolling in ODL programmes.

CONCLUSION

From the study findings, it is evident that numerous factors militated against the enrolment of women in ODL programmes. The researchers believe that some of the recommendations proffered can boost women student numbers in ODL.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, propose the following recommendations:

- Universities, Government need to assist in financing the education of women through setting up of scholarship funds to be maintained through rigorous fundraising initiatives.
- There is need for increased awareness of ODL programmes to learners, prospective learners and employees to reduce prejudices and misconceptions of ODL.
- There is need to engage stake holders through meetings, conferences, and advocacy workshops.
- ODL institutions need of provide information on benefits of ODL to potential learners through fora such as open days, print, audio and video media to showcase products and achievements.
- Further research on a wider scale is needed in order to be able to generalize the findings.

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