

***Empowering the Nigerian Women through Open Distance Learning - Women  
Beyond the Kitchen: Implications for Counselling***

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**Abstract**

*This paper focused on empowering Nigerian women through Open Distance Learning. Education is a potent tool for developing the innate potentials and capabilities of individuals. It is a veritable instrument for emancipating individuals including women from all forms of oppression, discrimination, injustice and penury. It is a tool for individual and national developments. Despite the laudable objectives of education, women have suffered from exclusion especially in the area of access to quality education. A cursory look at the involvement of women in education is not very encouraging. This paper proceeds to take a look at Open Distance Learning and the importance of empowering women through this means of education. The paper also examines the concept of a woman and the need for a woman to be empowered; the implication for counselling was also discussed. It was concluded that encouragement of women to partake in Open Distance Learning will not keep them solely in the kitchen but will bring them to limelight to participate more in national building and development. It recommended that enabling environment should be created to encourage the participation of more women in Open Distance Education.*

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Distance Learning, Women and Counselling

**Introduction**

Education is one of the most powerful and important avenues for changing and shaping individuals' minds to become productive and useful members of the society. Education empowers individuals to improve their skills; it awakens their potentials and makes them take initiatives. It is therefore viewed as an instrument for change in any society. For the change to be significant, education must be for both males and females.

One of the fundamental human rights of a citizen of any nation is access to basic and quality education irrespective of gender, race or doctrine. All over the world, education has been a veritable tool for national development. Clearly education is a key to human development and progress (Arigbadu, 2016).

The world today is stocked with the achievements of the male folk and their enormous contributions to the developmental process; women, however have been relegated to the background and as such lack recognition as their male counterparts. They have been regarded as second fiddles. In some rural places, women are subjected to all forms of discrimination and marginalization by existing cultural and social practices in the society, especially in traditional African setting. Some women are denied access to education at the expense of their most fortunate brothers who are most preferred.

However, international events have led to a marginal shift in the marginalization of women. This is evidenced in an increase in the number of women pursuing meaningful educational programmes at all levels. It is obvious that women empowerment through education is a key factor to national development. Many countries are nowadays focusing on women by investing heavily in their education, skills development, health and leadership training (Eduwen, 2015). Nigeria as a nation cannot afford to sit on the fence especially as a developing country where women constitute majority of the population. One of the steps to achieve this dream is through distance learning which is for those who cannot acquire education through the usual traditional way of gaining knowledge by attending institutions.

### **Open Distance Learning**

Open and Distance Education refers to education and training which make use of training resources in place of attending regular classroom session. It is a form of educational delivery which embraces all forms of study without the conventional face-to-face classroom contact between the teacher or facilitator and the student/learner. The worth of distance education must not be measured simply from what a given individual can contribute toward community and national development but also in terms of the changes or improvement such an individual enjoys as a result of the skills and knowledge he has learned and acquired (Aderinoye & Ojokheta, 2004). Open and Distance education has many potential gains which include meeting the educational needs of the teeming population of students especially women who could not gain admission into tertiary institutions.

It is the general term for the use of telecommunication to provide learning (Maboe, 2017). Traditionally, it involved taking correspondence courses through post but nowadays it involves online education. Learners may choose the courses they want, when to learn, where to learn and how to learn. The open learning concept provides

an open system of learning in terms of admission, duration of study, distance, cost, social constraints and gender.

According to Etim (2006), distance learning is a method of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes which are rationalized by the application of division of labour and organizational principles and extensive use of media to instruct a great number of students at the same time wherever they live. However, Iwu (2004) views distance learning as a mediated technique of instructing, teaching or communicating with persons who are physically and emotionally separated from their teacher or communicating in space and time. It is a type of education a woman can avail herself of while staying at home to study, learn at her own pace and time. According to Anuonye and Ukegbu (2010), it is a cost-effective system of instruction, independent of time, location, space and place. It can be used for a variety of learning programmes at a distance, at primary, secondary, university levels and provides a complete programme as full-time, part-time, graduates and diploma certificates and continuing education for children and adults. Ali (2011) explained that just like in traditional education, in distance learning, enough interaction takes place between the students and instructors, courses are upto date and well designed, instructors are devoted, motivated and equipped with the required competencies.

There are many women who are grossly incapacitated to go to school due to early marriage, teenage pregnancy, lack of sponsors and financial limitations at their tender and school age. Some women are willing to acquire knowledge, not from the formalized school system while some women are already old and with social responsibilities and families. However, some may be working and willing to go in for professional training or acquire better education. Distance Education is the panacea for such women. This calls for the empowerment of women in order to take them out of the kitchen and groom them for limelight.

### **Who is a woman?**

A woman is an adult female human being; biologically, she is the child bearing sex who is mainly concerned with producing, training, educating, moulding and caring for children especially in their formative years. As a wife, she is a spouse to a man and a partner in the making of a home, a caretaker of the husband in terms of caring for his needs. As a mother, a woman is the seat of life, a primary factor in the nurturing, sustenance and stabilization of life within and beyond the family. Her role is in the kitchen, and also more importantly beyond the kitchen. A woman is a manager, administrator, a teacher, a counsellor, a doctor, peacemaker and a judge of the family.

She is endowed with all the talents, potentials, capabilities required to function effectively and efficiently in impacting on all levels of life within the society. A

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woman is multi-talented and this implies that women should take part in decision that affects their lives and the country. Women education and empowerment is the single most effective way to improve the lives of families as well as bring economic development to all communities of the world.

### **Need for women empowerment**

Empowerment enables people to gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in women for use in their own lives, families, communities and in the society at large. Empowered women have freedom of choice and action. According to Bakari (2001), the process of women empowerment embraces area of self-reliance, internal strength and capacity that entail the social, economic as well as political aspects of women lives.

Women are the most important component of the society involving in various economic activities to feed their families, take care of homes and most importantly raise children. The need to empower women especially in the present 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be overemphasized. Women constitute the largest world population and they are endangered species because they are greatly ignored and seen as mere recipients instead of active participants in the society. For any meaningful progress to be obtained women must be protected from any form of abuse (physical, verbal, sexual) and exploitation.

One of the ways of fighting gender violence in any society is to empower women. Poverty is the major cause of gender based violence. Most rural women depend on men to cater for their needs. This dependence causes them to develop low self-esteem and continue to rely on men for sustenance. Women need to be politically and economically empowered so that they can develop their creativity, take part in decision making about their lives, develop good self-esteem and ability to cope with stress and emotions. An unhappy woman means an unhappy society (Jokes, 1997; Choudhury, 2009; Eduwem, 2015).

### **Empowering Women through Open Distance Education**

It has been observed that the practical reasons for getting women more access to education may be better accepted and appreciated, if one understands that the modern kitchen, home, schools, offices are full of technological gadgets that require women to be educated in order to be able to manipulate and use them. For a housewife to succeed in the present 21<sup>st</sup> century, she needs basic education which in the past was seen as mere waste of time and money. Education for women is very crucial for them to be able to participate actively in building a virile nation, they should not be marginalized educationally. Their place should not solely be in the kitchen; women should be empowered to bring out their innate potentials. Rufai (1996) states that education

empowers the individual, improves his/her skills, arouses his/her potential and makes one develop more initiatives to participate in nation building.

For any meaningful development to occur in this world, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, women education is essential (Sara, Sani & Hashidu, 2017). According to them, in Nigeria, the rate of girl child/women access to basic education especially in the Northern States has been something of great concern. This is because the ratio of boys to girls enrolment, retention and completion of secondary school education particularly in Gombe State remains alarmingly low. In the North–East region of Nigeria, it has been stated that only 20% of women in the region were literate (UNICEF, 2004).

There are various groups of women to be considered; first of all, the group of women who are full time house wives. Many of these women have never had access to formal education or had to give up schooling at early ages of their lives. Women in this group are not usually interested in acquiring formal education because their husbands had indicated that they are to stay at home and take care of the kitchen (food) and the children. These women cannot travel outside their homes to attend a conventional university system where they can acquire education and skills developments. Women who belong to this category will be grateful for distance education since the process permits them to stay at home and study in any field of their interests without abandoning their marriages and children. It is definitely a way of fulfilling the life dreams of many women who have been saddled with the functions of a full-time house wife.

There is also another category of women who are working and at the same time suffering in silence. In Nigeria, some working class women tend to live unfulfilled lives because some of them get married and the demand of raising a family and childbirth gets them to postpone going back to school. As the years pass by, the dream to go back to school vanishes especially as some families prefer the husbands to go for further education while the woman stays in the kitchen. The working women continue to suffer in silence, serve other family members while the man progresses educationally. The open and distance education is a sure way of relief to working class women who could not achieve career progression. It allows them to develop self-confidence, pursue qualitative education while still serving as a wife and mother.

The last category of women is those who have been denied access to formal education due to religious principles. These women with the advent of Open and Distance Education can still access qualitative education right in their homes. Distance Education is therefore an alternative to encourage this group of women to access education in any field of their interest and ability. In this way, they can contribute to

national development instead of remaining as full time housewives and in the kitchens. The nomadic women who are usually on the move with their families can also access quality education through Open and Distance Learning if they are properly empowered and sensitized about the advantages of education.

### **Implications for counselling**

Most Nigerian women are not empowered and they are still being denied the chances of enjoying full social, political and economic rights. Women empowerment can be achieved by the counsellor creating public avenue where women can voice their opinions and be heard. In order to assist the Nigerian women, counsellors should adopt any or all of the following:

(1) **Cognitive restructuring:** Parents who refuse to provide equal opportunities to their female children and women who lack confidence in themselves could be guided and assisted by the counsellor through the use of cognitive restructuring technique. This involves the counsellor urging the women to think logically and rationally and not to be fully dependent on men but to see themselves contributing economically to the stability and growth of the home. Women should be made to realize that a woman's place is not solely in the kitchen but women can progress from kitchen to limelight. The need for women to acquire functional education through Open and Distance Learning necessary for their economic, political and social emancipation should be stressed by the counsellor.

(2) **Guidance services:** Counsellors should endeavour to make guidance services such as individual and group counselling as well as information services available to all the people, most especially women in the community. Seminars, career talks, workshops, symposia could be organized to sensitize government and non-governmental organizations to make available the necessary assistance to empower Nigerian women. Provision of educational opportunities and scholarships to females by various organizations would expose them to employment opportunities and assist them to occupy important leadership positions. This will enable them to contribute immensely to the economic, political and social development of the nation.

(3) **Assertive training:** Females or clients who are not able to demand for their rights due to low self-concept, low self-esteem, shyness can be assisted by the counsellor to do so through the use of assertive training technique. This involves acquisition of some useful skills by women (clients) to aid them develop self confidence and self-worth and seek for their rights without being aggressive.

(4) **Public advocacy:** Counsellors can use men as ambassadors to advocate for women's rights to education, in particular Open and Distance Education. The counsellors could enlighten the masses, in particular women, on the importance of investing heavily in educating the girl-child from primary to tertiary institutions. Awareness could be created by the counsellors that parents should not compel their girls into early marriages to prevent their future place being solely in the kitchen.

## **Conclusion**

Modern electronic technology has offered the great advantage of acquiring education without the physical presence of a teacher. The use of online lectures is adding quality to traditional teaching and learning tasks which a housewife at home can easily utilize for her academic progress. The need to empower women cannot be overemphasized particularly in a country like Nigeria which recognizes the importance of its citizens to develop their potentials and contribute immensely to the overall development of the country. Education is recognized as fostering the worth and development of the individual for the general development of the society. There are various women who are grossly incapacitated to go to school due to lack of sponsors, financial limitations, teenage pregnancy, early marriage and religious factor at their tender age but are willing to acquire knowledge not from the formalized four walls of an institution of learning.

However a cursory look at the involvement of women in education in Nigeria is still not very encouraging inspite of all the laudable goals and objectives of education. It is therefore imperative for women to be empowered by government, non-governmental organizations and society at large by providing good qualitative education through Open Distance Learning. This will invariably not keep women solely in the kitchen but take them beyond the kitchen to limelight where they will be opportuned to participate actively in national building and development.

## **Recommendations**

From the foregoing, this paper recommends the following:

- ❖ Creation of enabling environment to encourage the participation of more women in Open Distance Education.
- ❖ Provision of compulsory education, scholarships, subsidized education and non-formal educational intervention for women, drop outs (girls) due to teenage pregnancy or early marriage.
- ❖ Provision of flexible education programmes (Open Distance Education) for re-entry of drop-out girls as pupils and students.
- ❖ Non-governmental Organization, women organizations and pressure groups should create more awareness on “women beyond the kitchen” for women to be more enlightened on their roles in nation building.
- ❖ Women’s access to high level decision making positions in political, social and economic sectors should be promoted.
- ❖ Parents should be sensitized on the ills of forced early marriage of girls and the need to encourage girl-child to acquire the type of education that will empower her and give her self-confidence and self-esteem.

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