



## BRIDGING THE GENDER DISPARITY IN EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN FOCUS

Amos Williams<sup>1i</sup>,

Jacob Istifanus<sup>2</sup>,

Beatrice Ajufo<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD, Directorate of Learner Support Services,  
National Open University of Nigeria,  
Abuja, Nigeria

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Sciences,  
National Open University of Nigeria,  
Abuja, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>PhD, Faculty of Education,  
National Open University of Nigeria,  
Lagos, Nigeria

### Abstract:

This paper is an attempt at highlighting the relevance of Open and Distance Learning in the education of girls and women in a country like Nigeria. Girls' and women's participation in education in Nigeria has been slowed down as a result of some barriers. Barriers to girls' and women's access to education are multifaceted. However, the ODL system has a philosophy that aims at removing barriers to education and allowing learners to study what they want, when they want and where they want. ODL can be effectively used to remove barriers to girls' and women's education in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** gender disparity, education in Nigeria, open and distance learning

### 1. Introduction

Nigeria like many other African countries is both multicultural as well as multi-religious. Its diverse cultures and religions reflect adversely on the way of life of its citizens especially its women folks. The native philosophy that the woman's place is at

---

<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [weture@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:weture@yahoo.co.uk)

home has in no distant past relegated women to the background (Kiteku, 2001). Religiously, the woman is seen as the weaker vessel who must submit to her husband totally. This and many other factors contributed to the gender disparity that is prevalent in Nigeria and many other African countries today. The position of the girl-child in the African society has been that of a second class citizen. The girl-child who eventually grows into a woman has always been seen as a visitor in the African family. She is never preferred in any way. In general, the girl-child is only groomed to be a good house wife, a good mother and a great house keeper. As such, she is never given any specialized education. The situation of girls and by implication women became a thing of concern to the whole world in the last millennium. Several attempts were made to bridge the gap between men and women in terms of education and the opportunities that come with education.

In May 1961, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and UNESCO educational plans for Nigeria were announced in a conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The purpose was to address the low girls' enrolment in school and the target was to achieve a hundred percent Universal Basic Primary Education by the year 1980. (Conference of African States on the Development of Education in Africa, 1961). The educational disparity remained up until the 1970's. During this period, more boys were participating in education compared with girls in spite of efforts by UNICEF, UNESCO and many other organizations who have sponsored research and conferences within Nigeria regarding the education of girls. However, with the intervention of the government and public enlightenment, parents began to send and keep their girl-children in school. Thereafter, increased number of women started getting involved with education.

Three decades after the UN Declarations in 1961, it was observed at the Pan-African conference held at Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in 1993 that Nigeria was still lagging behind other regions of the world in female access to education (UNESCO, 1993). It was also noted that gender disparity existed in education and that there may be need to identify and eliminate all policies that hinder girls' full participation in education (Obasi, 1997). The United Nations in 1967 passed a resolution which states among other things: that all appropriate measures shall be taken to ensure girls and women, married and unmarried, have equal rights with men in education at all levels. This laudable resolution is yet to be achieved.

In line with the philosophy of gender equality, UNESCO (1975) declared that: *"In the long run education will prove to be the most effective channel for achieving equality between men and women and ensuring the full participation of women in development."* According to the World Conference on Education for All (1990), 'nearly all the Third World

governments and education officials have declared their commitment to providing universal access to education. Many have recognized the need to target the females. However, the education gender gap persists in many countries and has not narrowed.' In a bid to address the issue of women education in Nigeria, UNESCO and UNICEF came up with a rights-based approach. Three interrelated rights were specified and must be addressed in concert in order to provide education for all (UNESCO, 2007). These rights are:

1. The right of access to education – Education must be available for, accessible to and inclusive of all children weather male or female gender.
2. The right to equal education – Education needs to be child-centred, relevant and embrace a broad curriculum, and be appropriately resourced and monitored.
3. The right to respect within the learning environment – Education must be provided in a way that is consistent with human rights, equal respect for culture, religion and language and free from all forms of violence.

With all of these declarations notwithstanding, 'Education for All' is still a mirage. Of recent, the Millennium development Goals (MDGs) came up with some laudable proposals aimed at bridging the gender gap among other things. According to the (MDGs), gender disparity in primary and secondary education will be eliminated preferably by the year 2005 and at all levels of education by the year 2015. The millennium development goal targeting education for all by the year 2015 was never attained. The problem is that pronouncements and declarations are not always translated into actions and as a result, gender-neutral rather than sex specific programmes are implemented. Thus, by operating in gender vacuum, underlying factors constraining girls' access to primary and basic education are often ignored. From the ongoing, it is clear that 'Education for All' is far from being achieved in any reasonable time frame using traditional methods. As a UNESCO report has noted, 'A developing country has to find new methods that will dramatically improve both its children's schooling and its continuing education system (Moore & Tait, 2002:18).

This paper is an attempt to proffer solution to the seemingly unending challenge of bridging the gender disparity in education in Nigeria. The following were discussed in this paper: the merits of women education, women education in Nigeria, barriers to women education in Nigeria, open and distance learning, the merits of open and distance learning and finally, the role of ODL in increasing access to education in Nigeria.

## **2. The Merits of Women Education**

Education has been linked to development. The lack of education in women has disastrous implications for socio-economic and political development of a nation. This is because the deprivation of educational opportunities to women is very likely to deprive them of participation in the future development of the nation, resulting in underdevelopment of the nation and most likely, increase the dependence of women on men. Rapid socio-economic development of a nation has been observed to depend on the caliber of women and their education in that country (Nussbaum, 2003). Education bestows on women a disposition for a lifelong acquisition of knowledge, values, attitudes competence and skills (Aliu, 2001). Educated women generally have a higher socio-economic status and enjoy better health and employment prospects. According to UNESCO (2007), girls' education does not only bring immediate benefit of empowering girls; it is seen as the best investment in a country's development. Educated girls develop essential life skills including: self-confidence, the ability to participate effectively in society and protect themselves from sexual exploitation and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Girls' education also helps in cutting down children and maternal mortality rates, contributing to national wealth and controlling disease and health status. Children of educated women are more likely to go to school and consequently, this has exponential positive effects on education and poverty reduction for generations to come. Thus, an educated woman is an asset not only to herself and her family, but to the nation to which she belongs. The question now is *'What is the state of woman education in Nigeria?'*

## **3. Women Education in Nigeria**

With regard to women's education, Nigeria education policy has evolved towards a gender focus since the 1980s (Aja-Okorie, 2013). Some key policy initiatives embarked by the Nigerian government to show policy commitment on education equality include:

**Table 1: Policy Initiatives with gender Focus in Nigeria**

S/N	Policy Initiatives	Year
1	Blueprint on Women's Education	1986
2	Nomadic Education Programme	1986
3	National Commission for Mass Literacy and Non-formal Education	1991
4	Family Support basic Education Programme	1994
5	Universal Basic Education	1999
6	National Policy on Women	2001
7	Education for all-fast Track Initiative	2002
8	Strategy for acceleration of Girls' Education in Nigeria	2003
9	National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS)	2004
10	Universal Basic Education Act	2004

**Source:** Gender in Nigeria Report, 2012.

With all of these initiatives notwithstanding, gender equality in education is still far from being a reality. This is because of the many barriers that are standing in the way of women education in Nigeria.

### 3.1 Barriers to Women Education

A barrier is any hindrance in the way of progress. Generally speaking, there are several barriers to women education in Nigeria.

These barriers according to UNICEF (2007) include: poverty and economic issues, early/forced marriages, teenage pregnancy, inadequate school infrastructure, cultural and religious misinterpretations. Similarly, Obasi (1997) also identified the following barriers to girls' education in Nigeria:

1. Nigerian traditional belief that attaches higher value to a man than a woman whose place is believed to be in the kitchen;
2. The long-held belief in the male superiority and female subordination as a link to the gender imbalance in participation in schooling.

In a key note address presented at the Commonwealth Africa Workshop on gender stereo-typing in Science, Technology and Mathematics education, Williams (1987) identified the following as reasons for low enrolment of girls in formal education:

1. Relegation of women to the home;
2. Parental perception of costs/benefits of educating girls, affecting low income families;
3. Patriarchal female seclusion practice and early marriage;
4. Fear of cultural lost and emancipation;
5. Poor facilities, including teacher supply, teacher quality and equipment;
6. Lack of role models and career counseling.

Barriers to girls' and women's access to education are multifaceted as can be seen above. Removing all of these barriers transcend the mandate of all policy initiatives embarked upon by the government. There is now a widespread recognition that the way forward is to make greater use of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) whether in the form of print-base distance learning course, interactive radio, computer-based learning or web-based learning. These methods offer more education for the same unit resource, easier access and higher quality than can be obtained by traditional methods in countries with poorly financed education systems (Moore & Tait 2002, p. 19).

#### **4. What is ODL?**

There are several approaches to defining the term Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Creed (2001) defined distance learning as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone far removed in space and /or time from the learners. The Federal Ministry of education (2002) defines ODL as any form of learning in which the provider enables individual learners to exercise choices over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning and distance learning as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/ or in time from the learner. Alaezi (2005) refers to open and distance learning as educational patterns, approaches and strategies that permit people to learn with no barriers in respect of time and space, age and previous educational qualification – no entry qualification, no age limit, no regard to sex, race, tribe, state of origin etc. On the other hand, Adebayo (2007) defined open and distance learning as the type of education that takes place outside the conventional school system; it is imparted without necessarily having personal interaction with students or learners. Distance education aims at increasing access to education for those who have difficulty in accessing it within the mainstream such as the poor, illiterate, women, marginalized and those living in remote areas. Distance education is the means by which the teacher is taken literally to the student. It is a teaching and learning process in which students are separated from the teachers by a physical distance which is often bridged by communications technologies (Dhanarajan, 2008). Generally, open and distance learning education courses are made up of a number of course components or learning materials which can include any of the following: teaching texts, study guides, course guides, readers or anthologies, assignments (with or without an accompanying tutor guide), television broadcasts or videotapes, radio broadcasts or audiotapes, software or online information and data, CD-ROMS, textbooks and laboratory materials. Tuition materials are sent with questions to be answered, it could be recorded electronic

materials and the students do this at their spare time. In addition, some student support may be provided, either through personal communication at local universities or through online student tutors. Both the media used for open and distance learning and the student support arrangements affect the possible level of interaction in open and distance learning courses.

From these numerous definitions, it can be concluded that open and distance learning provides educational opportunities needed by anyone, anywhere and at any time. It provides increased educational opportunities to a larger population in different situations and needs. Both students and employees with distance problems can benefit because it is more flexible in terms of time and can be delivered anywhere.

#### **4.1 Advantages of ODL**

According to the International Council for Open Distance Education (ICDE), open and distance learning is now mainstreamed in a new learning landscape created by the availability of technologies, supporting flexible, accessible and personalized education. While originally conceptualized for the learner who may be unable to attend traditional learning setting for numerous reasons, or for the 'second chance' learner, today open and distance learning is viewed as an option amongst the many now on offer for those who need flexibility in where, when and how they study. Open and distance learning systems of education has several advantages for students, employers, as well as the government.

1. For students, ODL offers increased access and flexibility as well as the ability combine work and education. It offers reduced travel time and cost. It may also mean a more learner-centred approach relevant to authentic learning needs, enrichment, higher quality education and new ways of interactions. This is in agreement with the stated objectives of the National Policy on Education that 'maximum efforts shall be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to it. Such access may be through universities or correspondence courses or open universities or part time, e learning and work study programmes (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004).It also provides opportunity for the acquisition of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills necessary for the work place.
2. For employers – ODL offers high quality and cost effective professional development at workplace. It provides reduced travel time and cost. It allows easy and regular upgrading of skills, increase productivity and development of new learning culture. It allows men and women of all works of life to enroll without the fear of being transfer or of being found wanting at work. A large

number of men of the armed forces and other security agencies are registered in open and distance learning to enhance their social status.

3. For government – ODL has potentials for increasing the capacity and cost effectiveness of education and training systems to reach target groups with limited access to conventional education and training, to reduce gender inequality by allowing women to access higher education, to support and enhance the quality and relevance of existing educational structures to ensure the connection of educational institutions and curricula to the emerging networks<sup>4u</sup> and information resources, and to promote innovation and opportunities for lifelong learning (Moore & Tait, 2002).

## 5. Discussion

Three important aspects of life that open and distance learning have greatly impacted are: access to education, enhance social life and economic growth. Several barriers stood in the way of girls' and women's education in Nigeria. These barriers include: early/forced marriage, teenage pregnancy, cultural and religious consideration, the belief that the woman's place is in the kitchen etc. Though these barriers may still be prevalent in Nigeria, access to education is now made a lot much easier with the proliferation of open and distance learning.

The removal of physical distance will allow several disadvantaged groups of women to access education. These groups include: women who were forced into early marriage, women who dropped out of conventional system as a result of unwanted pregnancies, women who were barred from attending school due to cultural and religious considerations, women who hail from poor rural backgrounds, who could not attend schools due to poverty and women whose family obligation made it impossible for them to attend conventional schools. Removing the distance from education will allow them to study at their own place, time and pace, hence, the flexibility in open and distance learning. Access to education is further enhances with the advent of e-learning where the learner can access every needed help in the confine of his or her bedroom. E-learning is very much welcome especially in the Northern part of Nigeria where women are kept in purdah, thus making it impossible for them to attend conventional system of education.

In addition, ODL system of education permits learners to work and study at the same time. This advantage allows women who could not continue their studies due to one reason or the other to further their studies when they are ready. This advantage also permits women to hold a paid job while they study.



Though Open and Distance Education has to a large extent eliminated the problem of access to education especially for women, there are still some pertinent issues that may remain a challenge for some women educationally. The bulk of Nigerians are rural dwellers and most rural dwellers live without power supply. Power supply is a major factor to the success of information and communication technology (ICT). This is because without power supply, the function of ICT is completely impaired. The issue of poor power supply could pose a serious concern to women living in the rural environment. This challenge could be surmounted with the use of solar energy.

Another important issue is the problem of culturally and religiously inclined husbands and parents who may still forbid their wives and daughters from acquiring western education on the ground that western education is evil. They may on the other hand, permit them to study only to deny them the opportunity to express themselves in a career after acquiring western education. It is not enough to be an educated woman just so that she could be of help to her children. Since most of these women cannot go out especially those ones in purdah, the question now is *'How do they profit from their educational pursuit?'*

Another serious problem is the fact that most of these women never had the opportunity to attend primary education. This will therefore make it nearly impossible for them to profit from distance education. The government should therefore consider coming up with an Outreach Programmes which is preparatory in nature to prepare women who were not opportune to attend primary education to be able to learn how to read and write so that they may benefit from open and distance education. This may be costly in terms of personnel and funding. However, it may turn out to be a worthy venture.

All ODL systems permit learners to work and study at the same time, thus making it possible for women who were denied education because of family financial constraint to still go back to school when they start making their own money since schooling at the open and distance education does not militate against holding a paid job or being self-employed.

The kind of grooming most women and girls receive in Nigeria is exclusively meant to make them subservient in nature. Tradition makes it clear that the woman is not the bread winner in the family and does not have to exert herself. Hence, even those who made it to school are given the impression that they don't have to exert themselves after all one day a man will come along and marry her and take care of all her needs. This is expressed in the idea of removing girl children from school to be married off. This practice is still on in the Northern part of Nigeria. The idea of not utilizing the certificate obtain from school also makes schooling a worthless venture for so many

women. Considering the fact that learning becomes a meaningful and a worthwhile venture only when it has survival value for the individual. Women education will become more meaningful if the government comes up with a policy that makes it mandatory for women to be gainfully employed on successful completion of studies. Since human beings are goal directed in nature, learning will be motivated by the survival value attached to it.

These and many other factors contribute to make the Nigeria woman and indeed African woman what she is today. Challenging these ideas and removing these barriers will go a long way to encourage parents to send their girl children to school and also motivate girl children to exert themselves at school. So far, many parents do not see the survival value in sending girl children to school.

## 6. Conclusion

Access to Girls and women education can be effectively widened through the effective use of the ODL systems of educational delivery. This is made possible through the philosophy of ODL which are to remove barriers to education and also the wide spread use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). In addition, government should ensure that pronouncements and declarations are backed up with actions. Gender equality in education and by implication 'Education for All' may not be achievable within the time lines given, but with commitment on the side of government, the disparity currently experienced will gradually narrow down with the effective implementation of open and distance learning system of education..

## References

1. Adebayo, A. M. (2007a). Open and Distance Learning in South/West geopolitical Ado – Ekiti, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State.
2. Alaezi, O.A (2005). National Open University Plan: Enhancing Higher Education
3. Aliu, S. (2001). "The Competitive Drive, New technologies and Empowerment: The Human capital Link". A Paper Presented at The 2<sup>nd</sup>Tripartite Conference of Manpower Planners. Chelsea Hotel Abuja.
4. British Council. (2012). Gender in Nigeria Report 2012; Improving the Lives of Girls and Women in Nigeria.
5. Conference of African States on the Development on the Development of Education in Africa. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. 15-25 May 1961.

6. Creed, C. (2001). *The Use of Distance Education for Teachers*. Cambridge: Defining and Sustaining Useful Results. *Education Technology*. 41(3), 19-26.
7. Dhanarajan, G. (2001). "Combating Poverty through Adult Education. Silver Jubilee Celebration of the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education. University of Guyana. 5th March, 2001.
8. Gender in Nigeria Report (2012). *Improving the Lives of Women and Girls in Nigeria: Issues, Policies and Actions*. British Council, Nigeria.
9. Federal Ministry of Education (2002). *Blue Print and Implementation Plan for the National Open and Distance Learning Programmes*, Abuja: Government Press.
10. Kiteku, C. (2001). 'Gender in Education: A Overview of Developing Trend in Africa' CRILE Working Paper, Egerton University, Kenya.
11. Kutner, M.; Greenberg, E.; Jin, Y.; Boyle, B.; Hsu, Y. and Dunleavy, E. (2003). "Literacy in Everyday life: Results from the 2003 National assessment of Literacy" National Centre for Education Statistics.
12. Moore, M. & Tait, A. (Eds.) (2002). *Open and Distance Learning: trends, Policies and Strategy Considerations* Paris: UNESCO.
13. Nussbaum, M. (2003). "Women Education a Global Challenge" *Sign: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*; bVol 29.2: 325-353.
14. Obasi, E. (1997). Structural Adjustment and the Gender Access to Education in Nigeria. *Gender and Education*, 19: 161-177.
15. Opaluwah, A. B. (2007). "Nigerian Women and Challenge of MDGs", *Daily Independent*, Monday, March 12, 2007, pB5.
16. UNESCO (1975). *International Women Year*.
17. UNESCO (2000). *The Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments*, adopted by the World Education Forum Dakar, Senegal, 26-28. April 2000: UNESCO.
18. UNESCO (2007). "A Human Rights-Based Approach to Education For All" United Nations Children Funds; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. [www.unicef.org/publication/files](http://www.unicef.org/publication/files).
19. UNICEF (2007). *Girls' Education: Nigeria Country Office: Information Sheet*.
20. United Nation (2010). *Global Millenium Goals 2010 report*. New York: UN.
21. Williams, G. A. (1989). "Science and Technology and Mathematics Education For All, Including Women and Girls in Africa" Key Note Address at the Common Wealth Africa Workshop on Gender Stereo-Typing in Science, Technology and Mathematics Education Report of a Common Wealth Africa Regional Workshop Accra, Ghana.

Creative Commons licensing terms

Authors will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Physical Education and Sport Science shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflict of interests, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated on the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).