

Enhancing Women's Capacity in Peace Building Through the Open and Distance Learning System

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Abstract

The World Economic Forum reported in 2012 that women make up one half of the world's human capital. This study reveals that illiteracy among women often leads to poor self-image, and inadequate knowledge, making them susceptible to being deprived of their rights and ability to play active role in the society. In contrast, literate women express their talents constructively and give direction to their aptitude which enables them to lead a fulfilling and satisfying life. To improve their standard of education, there is need for alternative modes of education delivery that will enhance their educational opportunities. Open and Distance Learning has emerged as a boon to women of all ages to equip themselves intellectually through the acquisition of knowledge that translates to radical thinking, autonomous and liberation. The study explores diverse ways of enhancing women capacity in peace building through Open University system. It also details the challenges and obstacles that women confront in participating in peace building efforts unless they reach certain educational level especially in the contemporary time that involves a lot of variables in attaining a goal. It recommends that women should be protected from stereotyping and marginalization in the society and that women's engagement in peace processes be increased.

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Introduction

The significance of education in socio-political and economic development of any society cannot be overemphasized. Temitayo (2012) describes education as the aggregate of all the process in which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behavior which are of positive value to the society in which he or she lives. Education is also a self-enlightening process and also imperative to the overall development of an individual and the society at large. Besides, education for all has been the most imperative debate in all stages of society, progress and development.

Throughout history, women all over the world have been categorized under the disadvantaged groups of people and the society itself has systematically and consistently pursued the socialization of women into accepting the notion of being a disadvantaged group (Temitayo, 2012). Findings show that, systemic deprivation of women's access to schooling and the labor force amounts to reduced educated workforce, inadequate allocation of labor, lost productivity, and consequently crippled social and economic development. However, sufficient investment in women education will bring about healthier women-folk, improved participation in the formal labor market, increases economic empowerment, population control and provision of better health care and productive education for their children; all of which will eventually transform the well-being of all households and the entire community out of poverty.

In the context of peace building, the minority presence of women in conflict resolution, or the implementation of outcomes of such discussions, has a bearing on the long-term viability of solutions to issues that invariably represent deep-seated local or regional social dimension. In other words, men tend to dominate the formal roles in peace building process. We have mainly male peacekeepers, male peace negotiators, male politicians, and male formal leaders. Power is skewed in favour of men and women are hugely not adequately represented in local and national decision making processes. In this context, it would be apt to say that, women have been relegated to the backbench in the area of peace building, whereas, they bear most of the negative consequences of violence in conflicts such as rape, assault, abduction, sex, slavery, and forced human movement. Yet, the concerns and priorities of women in conflict resolution are ignored in most peace talks as well as in the development of most post-conflict reconstruction programs (Theorin 2000:7).

However, Klot (2007:2) submits that; involving women and gender expertise in peace building activities is essential for reconstituting political, legal, cultural and socio-economic and social structures so that they can deliver on gender equality goals. Gender equality brings to peace-building new degrees of democratic inclusiveness, faster and more durable economic growth and human and social capital recovery. Indeed, peace building may well offer the single greatest opportunity to redress gender inequalities and injustices of the past while setting new precedents for the future. However, these opportunities can be enhanced significantly or constrained by how the international community sets its priorities for recovery and uses its resources for peace building.

Diaz (2010:1) has observed that analysts on formal peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives have continued to ignore or marginalise issues of gender, and women's involvement in formal missions. Issues of equal gender involvement have

also overwhelmingly failed to address structural inequalities and power dynamics which are the foundation of gender discrimination (Strickland and Duvvury, 2003). Many of these arguments put forward in support of a gendered approach to peacebuilding and conflict resolution especially those which have been brought into mainstream discourse see women as instrumental in bringing about sustainable peace, and focusing narrowly on 'what women can do for peace', and neglecting the issue of what peace can do for women. Puechguirbal, (2010:177) in his argument supports essentialist definitions that women have been regrettably confined to their roles as mothers and caregivers, and thus denying them access to the broader agenda of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Consequently, there is inadequate space to create time for education. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is capable of filling this gap by affording them the opportunities to combine study with other responsibilities. However, in combining education with their other roles, women face an array of social and physical challenges. It is therefore important to stress the need for support from family, work and the university, through which they are engaged in the learning process as these are critical in determining the success and completion of their course of study.

Distance education is a global and rapidly growing phenomenon which offers formal learning opportunities to people who would otherwise not have access to schooling or college education. As a result of large increase in population coupled with a growing awareness of the benefits of education, governments are now exploring the possibility of using alternative means to provide education on a large segment of the society particularly as conventional educational methods are becoming increasingly expensive narrowing opportunities for the less privileged. ODL is the best way to realize this as it provides equal educational opportunities for higher education for a large segment of the population including those in employment, women including housewives and adults who desire to upgrade their education or acquire knowledge and studies in various fields (Satyanarayana and Meduri, 2013).

The benefits of ODL cannot be quantified in any way. It is often a cheaper and qualitative alternative to pursuing a course of study that would have been lost in the conventional methods. Studying can be combined with work and makes possible to overcome geographical barriers and other confining circumstances such as personal constraints, cultural and social barriers and lack of educational infrastructure. ODL does not impose age restrictions and it uses technologies such as radio, television, and computers for providing education and its materials are self-teaching (Ibid).

Conceptualizing Peacebuilding, Open and Open Distance Learning

Studies have revealed that peace building and ODL do not have a univocal definition. In other words, both concepts can be defined in many different ways. For the sake of clarity, however, the distinction between the concepts begins with the conceptual analysis of peace building.

Johan Galtung (1975:297) in his work "Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, and Peace building," posits that peace has a structure different from peacekeeping and ad hoc peacemaking. His argument clearly shows that the aim of peace building is to institute structures that distinct it from peacekeeping and ad hoc peacemaking. He describes the nature of peace building as an endeavor aiming to create sustainable peace by addressing the "root causes" of violent conflict and eliciting indigenous capacities for peaceful management and resolution of conflict.

Peace building needs to involve every sundry to enable it meets the criteria described by Galtung.

The concept of peace building was magnified globally by the former United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) Boutros-Ghali in his work, “An Agenda for Peace”, which became a watershed on the issue of peace building efforts. His work is a clear evidence that peace building is one of the United Nations (UN) cardinal models of peace process. He defines peace building as an action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict. He added that, Peace building involves addressing not only the triggers, which are the immediate variables that mechanize the outbreak of any armed conflict, but involves addressing the root causes of the conflict and creating long term actions for sustainable peace and harmony between the parties (Kasali, 2006:1). His work represents UN’s cupidity for the maintenance of global peace.

Olawale Albert (2001) describes peace building as an art of repairing relationships, institutions and social facilities and putting in place schemes that can help the disputing communities to be united again. He added that, peace building primarily focuses on ways to address the underlying factors or root causes of conflict and sort for razor sharp ways to resolve them. Paul Lederach (1995:1) emphasizes that peace building is a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships. Lederach’s definition emphasized that peace building centrally involves the transformation of relationships.

In the bid to ensure human security, help individuals, communities, and societies transform the way they perceive and manage conflicts, the 2000 Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, otherwise known as the ‘Brahimi Report’, defined peace building as “activities undertaken on the far side of conflict to reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war”.

Kofi Annan (Former UN Secretary General) in his 2003 Review of Technical Cooperation in the UN corroborated Brahimi’s report. He called for an action plan to identify the ways in which different parts of the UN system might properly work together to devise country specific peace building strategies. This set the pace for other peace building efforts. For instance, the establishment of a Peace Building Commission and Peace Building Support Office was recommended in the 2004 report of the Secretary General’s High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change: A More Secured World. This was also true of the Secretary General’s report in May 2005, as endorsed by heads of state at the World Summit in September 2005, which was incorporated in the World Summit Outcome document. These developments culminated in identical resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly in 2005, establishing the Peace building Commission, Peace building Fund and Peace building Support Office (United Nations Secretary General’s Report, 2005).

As it is the case with peace building, (ODL) has no universally accepted definition. Historically, Men-Hu’s work has revealed that open learning evolved from the development of some initiatives belonging to the United Kingdom educational bodies such as National Executive College in 1963, Open University in 1969, Open

Technology Programme 1983-1987, Open Long Education 1988 and Open School 1989 (Men-Ching-Hu, 2005:325). Generally, however, ODL refers to an educational programme that is both open and offered at a distance. It is open in the sense that there are no barriers to accessing the programmes. It is worthy of note that the distance implies that the learner and the teacher could be at different places and time and engage in an educational transaction using an appropriate media such as print or electronic.

Spencer (1992:10) has submitted that:

...since open and distance learning hints on flexibility in delivery and recognizes that students can be at a distance from the teacher and can, therefore, overcome spatial and time barriers and if distance Learning seeks to provide open and accessible adult education that is open to traditional exclude individuals and groups, access to educational resources for those disadvantaged as opposed to individualized education, and encouraging critical reflection and practical democracy such as workers' self-management then all the barriers of distance learning itself need to be overcome

Spencer's argument is clear here. Openness should be widened to provide accessible and democratic education to all. In other words, ODL must project flexibility so as to accommodate everyone that is interested in the programme.

The perception of the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) on ODL complements Spencer's view on the flexibility of learning. It describes ODL as approaches to learning that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. The UNESCO (2002) further emphasizes that:

...in efforts to meet the new and changing demands for education and training, open and distance learning may be seen as an approach that is at least complementary and under certain circumstances, an appropriate substitute for the face-to-face methods that still dominates most educational systems.

ODL also relates to policies such as open admissions, freedom of selection of what, when and where to learn. It involves a process of helping learners to exercise their freedom of choice or move over the main processes of learning that is, ensuring a learner centre-learning approach whereby learners take responsibility for their learning related activities. The openness attends to the flexible organizational structures; delivery and communication patterns coupled with the use of various technologies to support learning and further differentiate it from the conventional face-to-face learning (Ibid).

Creed (2001:1) et al, defined distance education 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”. On the other hand, they defined open learning “as an organized educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which the constraints on study are minimized in terms of access, entry, or time and place, pace, method of study or any combination of these”. Thus, they concluded that the concept of open and distance learning suggest an educational approach designed to reach learners in their homes/offices/shops, etc, provide learning resources for them to qualify without attending formal classes in person, or create opportunities for life-long learning, no matter where or when they want to study. This definition explores the flexible nature of ODL. The malleability nature of ODL, was further described by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), as a learner-oriented system that allows greater flexibility in learning while students continue with their regular work (Onwe, 2013:124).

The foregoing analysis of peace building and ODL above, have explored the relevant concepts on this research. However, compared to men, women have limited access to peace building issues and education. Though this has been improved by the United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) Resolution 1325 passed in year 2000, which called for women’s equal participation with men in maintaining and promoting peace and security. It is therefore, imperative for state actors and well-meaning members of the society to put in place measures towards enhancing women’s education with a view to promoting women participation in peace building. Such opportunity could easily be attained cheaply through ODL, which is flexible and less cumbersome unlike the conventional educational system.

Theoretical Framework

Many theories have been propounded on gender equality as both a movement and scholarly discourse. These include sexism, feminism, functionalism, structuralism and post-modernism. However, this work focuses essentially on feminism which seeks to establish equal opportunities for women in the areas of education and employment. It also seeks to establish and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal and social rights for women. Feminist theory is a response to gender inequality and social construction of gender culturally formulated as a result of distinctions by sex (male and female). It espouses the nature of gender equality and inequality respectively, by examining women social status, roles, experiences and positions in a social setting. Construction of gender as both ethical and pragmatic issue is important to feminist discourse.

Analysts on feminism have also highlighted women's specific experiences in institutions such as the family and drew attention to the significance of sexual divisions in the workplace and in the home and exploring the interconnections between public and private lives. Looking at women’s historical activities from the women's own points of view, they questioned the familiar chronologies and notions of time and argued that family concerns, emotional support and personal relationships were just as important as wage-work and politics (Hannam 2011). In the same vein, it is also observed that there is a wide gap between men and women educational attainments globally but more prevalent in Africa and Asia. These include school enrolment, degrees achieved, positions attained, and even representation at all strata of the society in critical and decision-making levels. In this context, this may also

include women not being represented in both conflict resolution and post conflict reconstruction levels.

It was discovered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that women were largely absent from standard history texts and this inspired them to write their own histories. However the work of Rowbotham (1973) "Hidden from History" produced a pioneering study that detailed investigations into varied aspects of women's lives, including employment, trade unionism, women's organisations, family life and sexuality. Further to this, various women organizations across the globe have protested their second place to men through the "concept of gender mainstreaming". The concept of gender mainstreaming is a worldwide product of this protest. The UN conferences in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, and Nairobi in 1985 are examples where women developed recommendations on how to empower women and to improve their situation globally. When it was noticed that those recommendations were largely ignored a new assertive strategy towards ensuring that women were heard was developed in 1995 at the UN Beijing Conference (Sandole-Staroste 2009: 226).

Long before their actions of the 70s, women had protested against inequality with men. The Aba Women Riot in 1929 when women protested a new tax regime in the colonial Nigeria was a watershed in women's activities against discrimination. There have been in recent times women's protests in Zimbabwe against low representation in the country's cabinet against their male counterparts. According to Ngoboka (2015), today, Rwanda leads the world in terms of women's representation in parliament, increasing from 56.3 per cent in 2008 to 64 per cent in 2013 elections. This was made possible through the women's undeterred agitations against discriminative treatment in the government of that country.

Feminists generally agree that, in any investigative process, the power relations between women and men must be addressed (Ingrid, S., 2009: 227). Any attempt therefore in analyzing conflict either at the level of conflict resolution or peacebuilding without taking proper cognizance of equal participation of both men and women would be discriminative. It must be recognized too that women are not only active participants in their communities and societies but also perpetrators of conflicts. Yet, when ceasefire is declared and armed conflict ceases, politicians, scholars, and other professionals including negotiators do not always notice their absence at the negotiating table.

Discrimination Against Women and the Need to Strengthen Women's Participation in Peacebuilding

Gender oppression and violence against women have been exacerbated by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and increase in violent conflicts. Unfortunately, women that have been major victims of violence, rape and other unimaginable treatments of war and even perpetrators of war have been relegated to the background during peace negotiations. It would have been more honorable to even place women at the forefront of negotiation for peace, because they see everything about war.

Put succinctly, women have been brutalized in the war front when caught in the cross fire, they suffer the absence of their husbands and children who are members of the various forces in combat; they therefore could better understand of the causes of the many wars around the world. But the high-level negotiations are identified as male

domains. As a result, women lack direct influence in the identification of reconstruction priorities that are usually part of a peace agreement. The average numbers of women participating in peace negotiations in official roles as negotiators, mediators, signatories or witnesses remain notably negligible. Statistics on the numbers of women in peace talks are scarce, as this information is not consistently tracked by any authority. For instance, in 2008, there were 33 peace negotiations of 280 participants, out of which only 4 percent were women. Again, there were also 31 major peace processes between 1992 and 2011, in which it was revealed that only four percent of signatories, 2.4 percent chief mediators, 3.7 percent of witnesses and 9 percent of negotiators are women (United Nations Women, Second Edition, 2012: 3).

Nevertheless, women are identified to play an influential role through their work in grassroots organizations working for peace and reconciliation. Through these organizations, women have demanded for variety of positions such as full participation in peace processes, non-discrimination, accountability, recognition of their fundamental human rights, among others.

When included as meaningful participants in peace processes during decision-making forums, women can enlarge the scope of agreement, focusing on issues such as human rights, justice, national reconciliation, which are critical but often overlooked in formal negotiations. They also act as mediators and help foster compromise, as well as proffer solutions.

In the past two decades, attention has been directed to resolving the long standing victimization of women and girls during conflict and developing strategies to ensure their effective participation in peace building. National and international action on women, peace and security (WPS) is gaining strength. The objectives of WPS include: to protect the human rights of women and girls, to incorporate a gender perspective in conflict prevention activities and strategies, to recognize the important role women play in all aspects of peace and security, and enhance women's meaningful participation, both domestically and overseas, and to ensure a gender perspective is incorporated in all relief and recovery efforts in order to support the specific needs and recognize and strengthen the capacity of women and girls (National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security, 2012-2018:17).

An important step forward in increasing women participation in peace-building is the United Nations Council's Resolution 1325 passed on October 31, 2000 on women, peace and security. This resolution was a landmark, as it marks the first time the Security Council addressed the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women; recognized the undervalued and underutilized contributions that women can make toward conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and peace-building; and stressed the importance of their equal and full participation as active agents in peace and security.

Much existing scholarship on violence in conflict settings sees women as victims and men as perpetrators. On any discussion on women as combatants, the tendency is to take for granted that women do not participate in acts of violence, whether by choice or because women are assumed to play merely supporting roles to their male combatant counterparts. This is a wrong assumption as recent studies on gender and conflict, and the related issues of reconstruction and development have revealed. More nuanced analysis has given credence to women's active involvement in

nationalist movements and communal violence. Studies have equally supported the argument that women are also perpetrators of conflict. For instance in Sierra Leone, women actively participated as combatants on both sides. According to Cohen (2013) female combatants were overwhelmingly part of the RUF, which was 24 percent female, while making up a small minority of the SLA and the CDF, at 9 percent and 2 percent, respectively. This is to say that there is no aspect of conflict that women are not involved and therefore it is pertinent that they should stand side by side with men when discussions on peacebuilding are taking place.

According to the Gender and peace building working group and the Canadian Federation of University Women, the two main reasons women need to be involved in peace building and why peace building processes need to account for the particular needs and experiences of women are pragmatic and ethical reasons. In pragmatic terms, the failure to involve women in peace building processes leads to a less secure peace and lost opportunities for conflict resolution and prevention. In ethical terms, the global world must be committed to ensuring respect for women's human rights and promoting gender equality and empowering women (Women Building Peace, 2009:4). It is therefore expedient to deter all forms of discrimination against women in peace building, and enhance their capacity through ODL.

Enhancing Women Capacity Through Open and Distance Learning

Education is an important means of sensitizing and empowering women with skills, knowledge, and self-confidence needed to participate in peace building and national development. It is also regarded as a key factor in overcoming the barriers that women face and the basic tool for empowering women and bringing them into the mainstream of development. Education not only provides knowledge and skills to improve health and livelihoods, but it empowers women to take their rightful place in the society and development process. On the contrary, gender discrimination practice has become a problem to educational achievement in promoting peace and security in the society. Similarly, gender biased policies have been encouraged in various cultures. Women are considered inferior to men. This plight has incapacitated most women in terms of education and their access to strategic positions in peace building, economy, society and governance.

However, ODL has emerged as a boon to women of all ages to equip themselves intellectually through acquisition of knowledge, leading them to new radical methods of thinking, and alternative lateral perspectives on existing information, thus rendering them more autonomous and liberated. At this juncture, it is expedient to variously illustrate the means in which women have been denied access to formal education because of one reason or the other, and how ODL has provided opportunity for these women to acquire education.

Full Time Housewives

Most full time house wives have been reduced to nothing and are only famous for household chores and other domestic works. As a result, they may not have time to enroll in a conventional educational program if they desire to further their education; since it can be incredibly tough to juggle the household chores and school activities. The challenges posed by this social system is far reaching, in the sense that woman cannot venture out of the home to a formal school system where she can pursue the

much craved training, skills development and education. However, ODL is an alternative opportunity for this category of women to further their education by taking the advantages of its flexibility; they can study at their convenience. Women in this category will definitely benefit from distance education, since it allows them to sit at home and study for a programme without jeopardizing their marriages or abandoning their children. It can also assist them by easing the extra load of educational activities that an on-campus system brings with it. More importantly, ODL provides women with qualifications to enable them set up a venture of their own to contribute to the financial wellbeing of the family while still studying. Given the fact that education enhances a person's sense of self-worth, confidence and also creates an awareness of capacity, ODL provides full time house wives with education which makes them to 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.

Refugees and Internally Displaced People

Two educationally disadvantaged groups are the refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) who are often deprived of opportunity of having formal education due to the circumstances of war surrounding their displacements. Refugees are people who left their home country to live in another country as a result of war situation while IDPs are those who left their home for safe areas but live elsewhere other their homes within their country. These groups of people cut across different ages and because of war situation may stay for a long time away before returning back to their country and home respectively. Most probably, this group of people may fall within 20-39 age groups – typically a period of one's life that is quite demanding in terms of balancing occupational obligations and family responsibilities. If they fail to utilize this period to acquire the required education, by the time they finally return home; it might be pretty difficult to cultivate the idea of returning back to school.

But to be more useful and contribute their necessary quotas to the development of their communities after the war, they do not need to stop their education. They should take advantage of ODL as a field of education that focuses on teaching/learning methods and technology with the aim of fostering teaching and learning processes, to students who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting such as a classroom. ODL is a process that creates and provides free access to electronic learning resources when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both. Recently, because of the Boko Haram uprising, many students of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) who were displaced in the northeastern part of Nigeria had their examinations rescheduled. This was made possible because of the flexible nature of ODL system which might be impossible in a conventional educational system.

Domestic Workers

Another set of people which can benefit from ODL are domestic servants who for one reason or the other could not successfully complete their education in the conventional system. Many of them fall within those who not only cannot afford the condition of payment in the conventional educational system but also because of time and space cannot be in the classroom.

The need to change the perception of domestic workers has attracted the attention of the international community. In particular, attention has been drawn to the vast human rights abuses that occur within this sphere, and to transform the conditions of life and work for domestic workers for the better. Ending violence, respecting their rights and promoting decent work are key if they are to have the freedom and space to pursue their wide-ranging aspirations (Megha :2015). These domestic workers can only contribute to this debate if well educated and ODL is the best opportunity for them to attain such level of education judging its flexibility. ODL can also assist them to complete their education and belong to professionals who hold stakes in affairs of their communities and at the international level where they can participate in peacebuilding, peacemaking and conflict resolution process.

Women in Purdah

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has also been helpful to the women in Purdah. Purdah is the strict enforcement of seclusion rules upon (typically) married Muslim women. They are expected to remain indoors, except in extreme cases such as to receive medical treatment or to attend marriages and funerals subject to their husbands' permission. If women do venture out, they need to be completely covered by a hijab, and in some instances also escorted. Violating these regulations may result in accusation of promiscuity or even divorce (Verecke, 1993: 217).

Historically, the practice was said to have originated in the Persian culture and to have been acquired by the Muslims during the Arab conquest of what is now Iraq in the 7th century. However, the practice took root in Nigeria as part of Islamic traditions upon the conquest of the Northern part of Nigeria by Jihadist Othman dan Fodio in 18th Century (<http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu>).

This Islamic practice precludes many women from benefiting from school instructions. They are also confronted with other social challenges such as their personal care, medical, social and economic activities outside their immediate homes. Other challenges this group of women face is that they are not exposed to sex education or AIDS awareness programmes. They are often only aware of their HIV status while they cannot ascertain the status of their husbands.

This is so because they are denied access to formal education and practical training provided by schools and colleges because of their adherence to the Islamic practice of Purdah. Many who ought to have belonged to professional bodies such as nursing, pharmacy, medical, even lawyers and judges to be able to assist their fellow women and communities cannot do so. However, ODL is an opportunity for this category of women to secure access to qualitative education at safe distance from the instructors. Another striking benefit of ODL to this category of women is that, it trains and gives them opportunity to contribute their quota to national development without violating any of the injunctions of Islam. ODL is seen as an alternative that affords this group of women access to quality study materials in any field of their choice without any of the barriers associated with the conventional system and their religious dedication.

Illiterate Women

The best way of empowering human being is to educate him/her. There is palpably a deluge of illiteracy problem besetting women. The root of this problem is the degree of importance women attached to education. In other words, illiteracy remains at the centre of women empowerment problems across the globe. Majority of the womenfolk and a large number of girls are still grappling with the problems of basic reading and writing skills (UNICEF 2003). A huge number of these women believe that life of a successful woman revolves around her children, her husband and domestic chores. This lack of personal ambition prevents her from thinking about pursuing educational goals, which may have great influence on her life. According to UNESCO, a huge number of women are part of over 880 million illiterate adults in the world who have been deprived access to education, because they are required to be present in the four walls of a conventional class room before they can gain access to quality education (UNESCO 2002). The gross enrolment rate indicated that 71 percent of out-of-school children are girls (Gross Enrolment Rate, 2003). In the same vein, the Human Development Report (2002), published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) puts the statistics of illiterate women at 57 percent as against male's 43 percent.

However, these women can benefit from ODL in a number of ways. Being a flexible programme, ODL provides them with requisite education, relevant to their needs and environment. This will make them to become more visible and recognized in the mainstream of activities both at home and in the society at large.

A study of enrolment in the Zimbabwe Open University shows that there is quite a fair percentage of women participating in university education in the country. The statistics shows a significant improvement in 2005 in the number of women accessing higher education through ODL as compared to 23.76% in the early 90s. From 2005, there has been a steady increase in women participating in ODL from 41.4% to 43.4% (Gudhlanga et al 2012). This is a demonstration that ODL can assist in improving the educational standard of poor women all over the world.

Prison Inmates

The prison is a place for reformation and ODL is an opportunity to make the prison thoroughly so. ODL gives prisoners positive student identity, resilience and high hope for a better, crime-free life on release. These qualities help them to tackle the immense challenges facing ex-prisoners on release. If they are also able to continue studying after being released, they are better placed to fully integrate into the society.

In a study in England and Wales, Schuller (2009:5) observed that there are about 4000 inmates (out of which over 30 percent are women) studying through distance learning. As a way of improving their plight, prison-based Higher Level Distance Learning (PHDL) is offered in most prisons in England and Wales. The Open University is the largest provider of PHDL, with approximately 1600 students across most prisons in the United Kingdom (UK in 2011) and funding for an initial access course is partially subsidized by the government (McNeill, 2012:18-36).

Studies have also revealed that the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has provided educational opportunities for a number of female prison inmates in Nigeria. It all started in 2009 when the idea to establish Special Study Centres of the NOUN in

Nigerian Prisons Service. The first Special Prison Study Centre (SPSC) was established at the Maximum Security Prison, Kirikiri, Lagos. At present, there are four Special Study Centres of the NOUN viz: The Maximum Security Prison, Lagos, Enugu Prison, Enugu State, Awka Prison, Anambra State and Port Harcourt, River State.

Reports have shown that over two hundred female prison inmates are pursuing Degree and Post-Graduate courses in these centres while more are waiting registration. Through these efforts, NOUN has extended educational opportunities to these female inmates who would not have had the opportunity to study in the conventional universities (Afujue, 2014). Additional advantage that women inmates could gain having attained sound education through ODL is being bold to fight for their right. Majority of these women inmates are jailed on flimsy reasons which would not have been the case if they had had good education to expose them to fight for their rights.

Women in Abject Poverty

Research has shown that poverty is an integral part of a huge number of women around the globe. Nearly six in ten poor adults are women, and nearly six in ten poor children live in families headed by women. Poverty rates are especially high for single mothers, and elderly women living alone (Poverty and Income Support, National Women's Law Centre, 2014). Most women in rural areas must labor not only with this burden, but the burden of being the backbone of the rural economies, farming small plots, selling fruits and vegetables and providing the basic necessities for their families. A number of them often travel long distances to the markets via dirt roads that are largely impassable, especially during long rainy seasons. Closely related to this, the poverty rates for women remained at historically high levels in 2013, according to United States' (US) Census Bureau (2014) data released in September 2014.

However, ODL provides skills to enhance women's capacity for poverty reduction. It also provides girls and women with equitable access to education, particularly vocational training and apprenticeship. ODL creates policies and strategies that promote opportunities for women and girls and also create an enabling environment to support their self-determination and economic empowerment which will in turn enable them participate constructively in the process of peacebuilding.

Conclusion

Education has become prominent among the various strategies for promoting women's empowerment. By its nature of overcoming time and space and meeting the learning styles of women who play triple roles (reproductive, productive and societal/communal responsibilities) in society, open and distance learning is a sure way of making education accessible to women no matter their location, status or situation.

As a result of ODL, women have become more visible and recognized in the mainstream of activities, both at home and in the society at large. A number of women such as full time house wives, women in Purdah, inmates, women in abject poverty, illiterate women, and sexually assaulted women, amongst others have benefitted from the ODL.

It is expedient for all and sundry to encourage open and distance learning in its efforts to enhance women capacity. It would lead to the encouragement and the promotion of women's involvement and leadership in the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts through engagement with the UN, NGOs and other multilateral organizations for and in the development of best practice guidance. Women should be protected from stereotyping and marginalization in the society.

There is also the need to advocate for wider interaction and support of women's groups and the use of gender-based indicators, helping women to identify a range of indicators that highlight trends in the society. It is also significant to consult with women's groups regularly to learn about conflict trends at the community level, their impact on women and women's potential roles in mitigating violence.

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