Participation of Women in Open and Distance Learning in Zimbabwe: A Case of Commercial Banks and NGO's

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Abstract: *This paper is a report of an investigation of causes for low participation of Zimbabwean women in open and distance learning (ODL) and sought to identify strategies to boost participation. The study used a qualitative research approach in the form of the case study. Data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews and analyzed through content analysis. Two commercial banks and one NGO were purposefully sampled for the study. 45 women participated in the semi-structured interviews. Reports from Zimbabwe Open University academic registry were interrogated to understand the enrollment history of the organization from inception, (1993 to 2009). The findings indicate that many women in commercial banks and NGOs study through conventional university and or Institute of Bankers of Zimbabwe (IOBZ). The study shows the major causes for low participation of women in ODL as domestic responsibilities, lack of finances, time demands and lack of self confidence. Strategies to boost up women participation in ODL identified are subsidizing the fees for women and educating them about the benefits and processes of ODL. The study recommends that women be given scholarships and grants to study through ODL and research be undertaken to investigate the issue of women's lack of self confidence in studying through ODL.*

Keywords: Open distance learning, women, commercial banks, non-governmental organisations

1. Introduction

Zimbabwe has a population of about 13.3 million people of which 51% are women (Kaulem, 2007). The rural based population is about 65% and the country's literacy rate is about 91%. The number of people living in poverty was estimated in 2004 to be over 80% of the total population (Central Statistics; 2006). Issues affecting women include poverty, HIV and AIDS, domestic violence, rape, teenage pregnancy**;** divorce and marriage break up, prostitution, cross border trading and economic hardships being evident in both rural and urban Zimbabwean settings. Within the context of rapid technological change and deteriorating economic conditions, the Zimbabwean education system is challenged with providing increased educational opportunities without increased budgets.

Many conventional higher education institutions world over are answering this challenge by developing parallel programmes that use the delivery mode of open and distance learning. At its most basic level, open and distance learning takes place when a teacher and student(s) are separated by physical distance, and technology (i.e., voice, video, data, and print), often in concert with face-to-face communication, is used to bridge the instructional gap. These types of programmes can provide adults with a second chance at a University education, reach those disadvantaged by limited time, distance or physical disability, and update the knowledge base of workers at their places of employment. The higher education is expected to cater for educating and training high quality human capital with requisite skills to command the premium in the national development agenda. It has been documented that women in Africa have now developed and strengthened skills for lobbying, networking, and organizing, articulating and excising pressure where necessary for improvement (Kethusegile, Kwaramba & Lopi, 2000). A study undertaken in DE in India indicates that the enrolment rate for women is 37.56% (Rathore, 1996). On another note in Germany von Prummer (arning universities. 1993) in a study entitled "Women friendly perspectives in distance education" revealed that women were fewer in open and distance learning. However, the level of participation by Zimbabwean women in higher education and in particular ODL has been scarcely documented.

2. Reasons for Women's Low Participation in Open and Distance Learning

Development and poverty eradication are processes of structural change in the economic, political and cultural domains. These processes start with educating people since it is the primary and ultimate focus for development and poverty eradication. According to Ablodun (2008) there is a considerable evidence from South Africa, Ghana, Egypt, Nigeria and some other African countries that have significantly increased the participation of women in educational and leadership roles that the quality of their educational and political systems have improved. However, in Zimbabwe the enrollment trend at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has since 1999 been that one third of the students are women (Zimbabwe Open University Statistic Year Book 2003, 2005, and 2007). In fact the trend has continued because ZOU's Academic Registry records indicate that of those enrolled in 2009, 47% were female while 53% were male. On another note ZOU introduced higher degrees programmes in 2008 in the Faculty of Commerce and law and Arts, Education and humanities. To date only seven females out of 36 candidates are enrolled for DPhil programme in the Faculty of commerce and law while 27 females and 145 males are enrolled in Arts, Education and humanities. Furthermore, Zimbabwean women continue to face widespread poverty and heavy labour (Mutume, 2005). This is in contrast to what is happening in India where Janaki (2006) says open and distance learning has emerged as a boon to women of all ages equipping them intellectually through acquisition of knowledge, leading them to new

radical methods of thinking , and taking them out of abject poverty.

A study of the commonwealth developing countries by Green and Trevor-Deutsch (2002) cite causes for low participation by women in open and distance learning as lack of access to electricity, lack of technology equipment coupled with socio cultural factors, lack of mobility, lack of relevance to content and lack of infrastructure. The same study cited costs as a major cause for fewer women participating in ODL. The costs include but are not limited to ICT equipment, maintenance and course fees. Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010), in a study of challenges of implementing open and distance education in Uganda, state that access to tuition loan systems is minimal in ODL institutions. Thus potential students for ODL and their parents have limited access to extra funds. Therefore tuition fees, books, educational supplies, and living expenses must be paid by parents and students which becomes a major barrier especially to women. Tanye (2008) and Kramarae (2001) echo the same sentiment when they state that women face barriers to participating in ODL such as costs, time demands, family demands and accreditation. In addition Ablodun (2008) asserts that some of the reasons for low participation of women in ODL in Africa are:

- Lack of inadequate support to promote voluntary vocational skills development
- Unequal access to major sensitive information and educational activities
- Gender inequalities in management of distance learning programmes
- Stereotyping and lack of respect for the human rights of women
- Under representation of women in higher education.

The question of accreditation and credibility of ODL degrees is also addressed by Jurich (2000) in a study of quality assurance in open and distance learning when she postulates that the problem of credibility in ODL has been critical since quality in higher education tends to be linked to tradition and selective standards. The above studies indicate that there are numerous reasons why there is low participation by women in ODL. The major reasons cited in all the identified studies that of costs and lack of time to study due to heavy domestic responsibilities.

3. Strategies that Boost Women's Participation in Open Distance Learning

A study in Australia by Clayton and Lynch (2002) on strategies to increase participation of women in computing programs cites government policy as one of the major strategies used to boost women to participate in educational programs. The sentiment is echoed by Zuhairi, Zubaidah and Daryono (2008) who give the following as ways to improve participation of women in ODL:

- Develop programs to accommodate the interest of women which will benefit society at large, such as programs in child psychology, women studies, health sciences, foreign languages, business management and communication.

- Improve support system that facilitates the learning process for women in attending higher education at a distance
- Provide scholarships for women and other form of financial support – partnerships with local governments and other interested agencies and institutions
- Build good image and awareness of the community about the capacity of distance education to develop skills and competencies and improve the quality of human resources.

Although literature search on strategies to boost participation of women in ODL gave a limited number of studies, the few studies indicated the need to motivate women to embark on ODL through different policies and practices.

4. Open Distance Learning in Zimbabwe

Open and distance learning (ODL) in Zimbabwe has been in existence since 1928 when the oldest of the correspondence colleges, Rapid Results College was founded. It was followed by Central African Correspondence College that was founded in 1954. 1980 saw the establishment of the Zimbabwe Distance Education College (ZDECO). The first two correspondence colleges and other less prominent ones offered studies to pupils from Grade 5 up to 'A' Levels, while ZDECO offered and still offers secondary and professional studies for middle and senior managers.

In Zimbabwe ODL at University level only became locally available with the establishment of the Centre for Distance Education (CDE) at the University of Zimbabwe in 1993. In 1999 the CDE transformed itself to become Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The second Open University is Women's University in Africa (WUA) that is a private university. Prior to the establishment of ZOU and WUA, the University of South Africa (UNISA) and St Andrews College for long distance education provided and still provide tertiary education to Zimbabweans through open and distance learning mode. Of late, Technikon college of South Africa, Derby University in United Kingdom (UK) and many other European Colleges that have joined the group of colleges are offering tertiary education through ODL to many Zimbabweans. In addition almost all conventional Zimbabwean Universities are also offering parallel programmes that use the Open Distance learning mode of delivery. However, not much has been researched to establish the level of participation of women in these institutions.

5. Zimbabwe Open University

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the only distance and open learning institution established by Act of Zimbabwe Parliament Chapter 25.20 number 2/98 with a mandate to preserve, advance and transmit knowledge through distance education system. The university started in 1993 as Centre for Distance Education within University of Zimbabwe and evolved to College for Distance Education before becoming a state University in 1999. ZOU is a multi disciplinary inter faculty institution offering degrees and non-degrees through open and distance learning to youth and adult learners. At present it has four faculties that are: Arts, Education and Humanities; Commerce and Law, Sciences

and Social Sciences. The University has over thirty diploma and degree programmes on offer. The course delivery methods include print media, compact cassettes, video cassettes, telephone, fax, e-mail, CDs and E- learning. Unfortunately as mentioned before the enrolment numbers of women has since inception been lower than that of men and not much research has been undertaken to understand the reasons.

6. Findings

The findings of the study were categorized into the following two major themes of reasons for low participation of women in ODL and strategies to boost up their participation. The themes were further broken into sub-themes which relate to issues that hinder women from participating in ODL. The majority of the participants in this study had not participated in ODL. Most of them, that is, 35 (88%) had done their graduate studies through conventional universities or institutions such as Institute of Bankers of Zimbabwe (IOBZ). 10 participants (22%) had enrolled and studied through open distance learning.

A total of 84% of the participants reported that they could not participate in ODL because of the heavy domestic responsibilities. They all cited lack of study time after working hours due to family commitments. Some of the participants from the banking sector reported that they sometimes work late and find no time to study after work. Thus the burden of domestic responsibilities and lack of time to study are some of the major reasons for low participation in ODL by women as captured in the following three representative responses.

> *I have no time to study at home because of the heavy domestic responsibilities I experience at home.*
> *Pressure from my family duties; taking care of my kids and being tired from work prohibit me to study through ODL. This leaves me with no time for studies.*
> *I have so many responsibilities at home in addition to being involved at work. I do not have time to study at home.*

Quite a number of participants (66%) reported that lack of finances barred them from participating in further studies including through ODL. Some of the participants said:

> *Fees are my major problem for not pursuing further studies through ODL. My children's fees are a priority for me.*
> *I cannot afford to pay the fees to take further studies. I would rather pay the fees for my children. After all I already have a job and I don't think I need to stress myself by looking for money to pay for studying through ODL.*

A substantial number of women (73%) reported that they lack self confidence for studying through ODL. They said it was a difficult way of learning as captured in the following three representative responses.

> *I prefer going to a conventional university and have face to face interaction with the lecturers. I am afraid to study on my own. I don't have confidence to do that.*

> *I lack confidence to undertake independent learning. I would rather if I had money go to universities such as University of Zimbabwe where I am taught face to face.*
> *I fear to learn on my own. I don't have confidence to study at home. I think it is the most difficult thing I can do. No, I am afraid of this open distance learning. I don't have the confidence to do this independent learning.*

5 of those who did their degrees with ZOU and completed successfully when probed on how they had managed to complete their studies had this to say:

> It was not easy especially *when it came to paying the fees. The other problem was creating time to go for tutorials. Studying at home is difficult I do not want to underestimate the problems of lack of time to study.*
> *Although I completed successfully it was not ease. I have two children who are still going to school and I used to pay their fees before I paid mine. It is difficult when you* do *not get scholarship. I don't think I will do it again.*

Although, 22% percent of the participants have participated in ODL the general observation from the responses is that many women think ODL is a difficult way of learning and as such many lack self confidence to do open and distance learning. Furthermore participants indicate that they have limited time for further studies, lack financial resources and are afraid to undertake independent studies such as ODL.

7. Strategies that Can Boost Women's Participation in Open Distance Learning

Participants in this study suggested quite a number of strategies that ZOU as an open and distance institution and Zimbabwean government can implement to boost the participation of women in ODL. These were categorized as subsidies and education. 88% of the participants suggested financial subsidies as a major strategy to boost women participation in ODL. The subsidy strategies were exemplified in the following sentiments as expressed by some of the participants;

The Zimbabwean government should subsidize women's fees at post graduate level. It should give women who study at post graduate level through ODL bursaries.
Government needs to subsidize women's tertiary education. It should give grants and bursaries to women studying through ODL.
Government should put in place incentives for women to go back to school especially at post graduate level through ODL.
66% of the participants indicated educating women about the ODL process and benefits as one of the strategies ODL institutions can use to increase the numbers of women participating in ODL as expressed by some of the participants as follows;
ZOU should educate women on the importance and benefits of ODL and provide scholarships for women especially at post graduate level.
ZOU should communicate the benefits to women for studying through ODL; explain how it is done to women so that they can understand the process for ODL.
Educate women to understand what is involved in learning through ODL, provide funding schemes.

22% of the participants indicated the need for ZOU to provide programmes that they would want to pursue. They said although they were keen to do ODL they did not get their areas of interest being offered by ZOU. The following statements are representative of the views aired by the participants:

Please let ZOU introduce more related programmes like Masters of Public health (MPH). I am really dying to take this up. I wish ZOU could introduce programme for Masters of Public Health. Doing distance education with United States of America (USA) universities is beyond my reach but can afford through my local ZOU.

Generally, the observations from the above responses indicate that women believe that financial subsidies and educating women about the ODL process and benefits could boost up their participation in ODL. Those who had done the education through ODL also said fees were the difficult thing that can deter women to participate in ODL. They also gave the impression that providing programmes of their interest would also boost up their participation.

While there are few participants in this study that have participated in ODL, the findings indicate that there are many reasons that hinder many women from participating in ODL. However, findings indicate that there are also strategies that can be implemented to boost up women to participate in ODL.

8. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate a number of reasons that hinder many women from studying through ODL. The major reasons for low women participation in ODL of lack of time due to heavy domestic responsibilities and lack of finances have been found to be consistent with studies by Badza and Chakuchichi (2009), Tanye (2008) , Green and Trevor-Deutsh (2002) and Kramarae (2001). Studies by Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010) have further stated that access to tuition loan system is minimal in ODL institutions. Thus it is important to examine the issues of women in view of the time for study and finances in relation to supporting their education through ODL.

As evident from the responses the participants lack confidence and have fear of failure to progress in ODL is something consistent with results from a study by Ablodun (2008). The participants show that they lack confidence in studying through ODL. A literature search for lack of confidence in ODL by women did not yield any positive results. However, study by Klein (2007) indicates that women lack confidence in education administration. Another study by Tom, Pickering and Thompson (2002) identified top obstacles for women entering technical fields as cost of training, male domination, no previous experience, lack of self confidence, conflict with family responsibility, lack of education, lack of moral support and no mentor.

While there are no specific studies on women and lack of self confidence in ODL it is evident that studies have established lack of self confidence by women in education administration. Thus, there is a need to further investigate how women's lack of self confidences deters their participation in ODL.

The study has also revealed that ODL institutions need to provide programmes according to the needs of society. This is in agreement with the study by Zuhairi, Zubaidah and Daryono (2008) that says to boost up women participation there is need to develop programs to accommodate the interest of women which will benefit society at large.

Results for this study have indicated that there are strategies that can be implemented to boost the participation of women in ODL. These have been identified under financial subsidies and ODL campaign. This is consistent with studies by Clayton and Lynch (2002) and Zuhari, Zubaidah and Daryono (2008).

Furthermore the results indicate that there is paucity of research on strategies to fund women's participation in ODL from urban and rural areas. Therefore, there is urgent need to investigate the funding mechanisms that can increase enrollment numbers of women in ODL. Studying through ODL might make women improve on their economic and social empowerment. Thus, ODL practices should be interrogated to see how they can allow women to study regardless of the heavy family responsibilities and lack of self confidence.

9. Recommendations

Thus, the study recommends that Zimbabwean ODL institutions and in particular ZOU offer programmes that satisfy the needs of women and society at large. It is critical that ZOU looks into the issue of providing scholarships or bursaries to women especially at post graduate level. It is crucial that the fees be made affordable to weaker sections of the society especially women.

It is recommended that further research be undertaken at a larger scale to ascertain the issue of lack of self confidence in undertaking ODL by women and reveal solutions to boost the confidence of women so that they study through ODL. It is recommended that Zimbabwean government crafts and implements policies that provide grants, scholarships and loans systems to women who want to study through ODL.

It is highly recommended that the ODL institutions and in particular ZOU investigates the issue of confidence building in order to help women to overcome resistance in open and distance learning. Women should be motivated to study through ODL. It is also recommended that the contact sessions for programmes in open and distance learning be flexible to suit to the timing of working women in urban and rural areas.

10. Conclusion

This study concludes that there is low participation in ODL by Zimbabwean women in the banking and NGO sectors. It is clear that women in these sectors have various reasons for not participating in ODL that are consistent with what previous researchers have noted. Furthermore, the study has revealed a unique reason that of lack of self confidence in undertaking studies through ODL. Although this finding is

not generalizable to the population studied because of the few participants involved in the study it is an issue that warrants further investigation. The study has also revealed that women like to do programmes that satisfy their needs.

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