Abstract

Poverty and gender inequality are some of the problems bedeviling the Nigerian society. The group most affected are girls and women especially those living in the rural areas. These are mostly those who had early marriages, school drop outs, and teenage mothers tied down by multifarious responsibilities and cannot attend face-to-face institutions. They also cannot take up income earning jobs. The reasons for this can be traced to illiteracy or ‘aborted education’, coupled with a lack of vocational skills. This inability to get an education or be trained for a vocation means that girls and women cannot contribute their quotas to self and societal development. This study seeks to investigate the availability and effectiveness of vocational skills acquisition for women as practiced by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). It would also ascertain the effectiveness of the skills acquisition training for empowering women. A sample of 50 open and distance learning female students would be randomly selected from five skills acquisition programmes of NOUN’s Centre for Lifelong Learning. The main instrument is a questionnaire which would be used to gather data. Data gathered would be analysed using frequency count and percentages.

Keywords: Vocational training, skills acquisition, empowerment, poverty, gender.

Introduction

Education for girls and women is becoming the most viable and effective solution for gender inequality, economic independence and growth in developing countries. UNICEF (2007) Nigeria Country Office information Sheet states that girls education does not only bring about the immediate benefits of empowering girls but is seen as the best investment in a country’s development. However, many girls and women are illiterates or semi-literates who do not have
a steady means of livelihood. Poverty, early marriages, teenage pregnancies among others are some of the factors preventing girls from going to or finishing school. Many adult women are illiterates and cannot fulfill their dreams of acquiring an education or vocational skill in a conventional school setting because of family responsibilities. It is against this background that the 1990 Jomtien Declaration of Education For All is important in making a case for ensuring that girls and women have at least basic education and vocational skills so as to become economically self reliant.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) synonymous with the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is adjudged the most viable means of educating the masses through functional cost effective flexible education which transcends all barriers. The NOUN Centre for Lifelong Learning(CLL) offers vocational skills acquisition programmes for people to acquire knowledge, skills and techniques as a way of empowering them. To actualize the Jomtien Declaration to the fullest, these programmes should be extended to all including women living in the rural areas. These are women who have had little or no education engaged in petty trading, childcare, house and farm labour and so on. The Centre’s vocational skills acquisition programmes is presenting catering mainly for city dwellers. This is not by design. However if the effectiveness of the programmes are to be totally felt, they must be extended to the rural areas for the benefit of rural women. They too need to be taught skills that would empowerment them for living within their environment.

Education and Women Empowerment

Education enhances lives. It ends generational poverty and provides a foundation for a nation’s development. Wiki defines empowerment as not giving people power but letting out the power in them. It opines that most women across the globe rely on the informal work sector for an income. If they are empowered to do more and be more, the possibility for economic growth becomes apparent.

Levelling the playing ground for women would offer huge potentials to everyone. For example, UNICEF information sheet (2007) states that educating girls and women help develop self confidence, protection from sexual exploitation, improved health care, better child education and poverty reduction for generations to come. Women empowerment is a global topic. The United Nations included gender and women empowerment in its development goals as it is an important tool for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In Nigeria, a good number of women are now found in many prestigious occupations such as law, medicine, architecture, the armed forces and so on. At the same time, an equally large number, especially those living in the rural areas are engaged in menial jobs to earn a living. Most jobs performed by women, according to Egunjobi (2005) have no economic values. Explaining further, Egunjobi
states that all the work and activities which do not require financial reward are the responsibilities of women. This would explain the global call for women empowerment. Women empowerment according to Saraswathy et al (2008:190), is a process of women “identifying their inner strength, opportunities for growth and their role in reshaping their own destiny”. It has also been termed by Malhotra et al (2002) as a process of women gaining more access to a steady income and economic power or security. However, Illiteracy, according to Olakulehin & Ojo (2006), remains at the centre of women empowerment problems in Nigeria and that there is a palpable deluge of problems besetting the Nigerian women, but all of them arise from illiteracy. And that the need for empowerment arises from people’s inability to actualize their dreams and reach their potentials due to artificial individual and group created barriers.

In a situation where there is the need for empowerment, ODL is perfect. Olakulehin and Ojo (2006) portray ODL as a strategy for empowering Nigerian women because of its flexibility and . . . ODL is highly flexible, and takes care of continuing and life-long learning. It transcends the barriers of age, place and time and takes education to the doorsteps of people. It affords a nation the opportunity to effectively transmit educational benefits to its citizens especially the unreached. These should include women living in the remotest parts and the itinerant nomadic women.

Vocational skills acquisition programmes through distance learning mode is a sure means for women learners to gain basic education and or a vocational skill. The NOUN Centre for lifelong learning vocational skills acquisition programmes are designed to enhance the skills and knowledge of students for immediate employment whether in the private or public sector or be self employed. As at June, 2013, enrolment figures stand at 1066, 381 of this figure are females. These run their programmes in study centres in the cities with the exception of Awa-Ijebu, Ogori and Gulak.

**Statement of the Problem**

Education ends generational poverty and provides for a nation’s development. International organizations such as the UNICEF, the UN, the World Bank and the Nigerian government support educating and empowering women. However, the fact remains that a large number of women especially in the rural areas are not realizing their full potentials and cannot contribute to societal development because of the lack of basic education and vocational skills with which they can become economically independent. There is the need therefore for an education system that transcends all barriers which can reach them in their localities to train and empower them for self and society development.
**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to find out the availability and effectiveness of NOUN centre for lifelong learning programmes in empowering women. It also seeks to find out if these programmes are extended to women living in the rural areas.

**Research Questions**

1. Are vocational skills acquisition programmes of NOUN Centre for Lifelong Learning available to women?
2. Are these programmes extended to women in the rural areas?
3. Have the programmes been empowering women?
4. Is DE/ODL a potential solution to women empowerment?

**Methodology**

A questionnaire was used to elicit information from fifty (50) students from five (5) skills acquisition programmes of the NOUN centre for lifelong learning. The five skills programmes are make-up artistry, medical office practice, hotel and catering, call centre skills/office receptionist and business communication. Data gathered was analysed using frequency counts and percentages.

**Results**

**RQ 1:** Are vocational skill acquisition programmes of NOUN CLL available for women?

**Table 1:** Frequency count and percentages of availability of NOUN CLL’s vocational skill programmes for women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid SA</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>56.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Results on table 1 showed that all the sampled women agreed that Noun vocational skill programmes are available for women.

**RQ2:** Are these programmes extended to women in the rural areas?

**Table 2:** Frequency count and percentages of the programmes being extended to rural women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid SA</td>
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<td>48.0</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>48.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>92.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.0</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 results showed that 30 out of the respondents are of the opinion that women in the rural areas do not have access to NOUN vocational skill acquisition programmes. 20 are of the opinion that women in the rural areas do have access to these programmes.

**RQ3:** Have the programmes been empowering women? Are the graduates employed by others or self-employed?

**Table 3:** Frequency count and percentages of the effectiveness of the programmes in empowering women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid SA</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>66.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<td>34.0</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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</table>
The results on this table indicated that all the respondents agreed that NOUN CLL vocational programmes do empower women. In addition, they agreed that the graduates of these programmes are either self-employed or are employed by others.

RQ4: Is DE/ODL a potential solution to women empowerment?

**Table 4:** Frequency count and percentages of DE/ODL being a potential solution to women empowerment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 results showed that the respondents all agreed that DE/ODL is a potential solution to women empowerment.

**Discussion**

Findings of this study revealed that NOUN vocational skill programmes are available to all. This in itself is a good development. However, findings also revealed that women in the rural areas have little or no access to these programmes. This is worrisome because DE/ODL is meant to reach the unreached. Rural women fall into this category and should therefore not be forgotten. On a positive note, the findings also revealed that NOUN vocational skills programmes empower women as the graduates are either employed by others or are self employed. It was also revealed that DE/ODL can be a potential solution to the problem of women empowerment. This buttresses Olakulehin and Ojo’s (2006) assertion that ODL is a strategy for empowering Nigerian women because it transcends all barriers and takes education to people’s doorsteps.

**Conclusion**

NOUN and its mode of life-long learning have come to stay in Nigeria. It is breaking grounds by delivering education to people’s doorsteps. However, to effectively achieve its mission and vision, it has to reach the unreached especially women living in the rural areas. Reaching them and giving them the opportunity to learn a trade or vocation will unleash their potentials and bring out their abilities therefore making it possible for them to contribute to self and societal
development. To empower women, all avenues must be explored and used. It is therefore recommended that:

- NOUN CLL should find a way of setting up skills acquisition centres in the rural areas. This maybe in the ratio of one per local government area.

- In addition, there should be skills acquisition programmes and centres for the itinerant nomadic women. The programmes could include dairy/cattle business, how to make cheese for export, tailoring and basic education.

- The programmes for the rural women should be those that can be economically useful for them. For example, rural women are mostly agrarian, so they would need vocational skills that would tend to agriculture and related skills. They could also be taught skills like tie and dye, bead and wire making, cobbling, business management, and so on.

- NOUN could collaborate and partner with NGOs and faith based organisations, local artisans for industrial training of the students.

References


