

# **Bridging The Gender Gap Through The use of Open Distance Learning (ODL) .**

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## **Abstract**

Gender equity in education has been an issue of concern both in Kenya and internationally. Although tremendous success has been made in attaining Education For All (EFA) in Sub Saharan Africa and Kenya in particular, gender disparities in access, retention, transition and performance still exist. Girls in particular have continued to record poor retention and transition rates as well as poor performance in examinations. Despite Kenya being among the Sub-Saharan countries that have recorded reduced gender gaps in Primary and secondary education, the aforementioned disparities still exist. This could be attributed to the fact that a lot of attention has been given to access to education. However, one of the major challenges faced in Kenya in regard to access to education is the few number of schools available especially in rural setups where girls and boys walk long distances to access education. This has affected girls more than boys with most parents preferring to keep their girls at home. Moreover, even of utmost concern is the few number of teachers available in Kenyan schools with the current student-teacher ratio standing at 45:1. This paper therefore advocates for the use of ODL to ensure equity in education especially where schools and teachers are few. The writer is cognizant of the fact that access to internet services and computer gadgets may be a challenge in Sub Saharan Africa and in Kenya in particular, due to the economic status of the countries and advocates for the use of cheaper technology such as mobile phones and where applicable intranet services may be used.

(KEY WORDS: Gender, open distance learning, equity)

## BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

ODL refers to the use of telecommunication to provide or enhance learning .It is also the use of the internet, teleconferencing and related means to achieve an extended classroom or learning experience. The United States distance learning association defines it as the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated instruction and information encompassing all technologies and all forms of learning at a distance. The commonwealth of learning isolates particular features that characterize ODL. These include the separation of teacher and learner in time and or space, presence of an agency of accreditation, use of media such as print, radio, television video and audio cassettes and other types of distance learning, presence of learner and tutor interaction and the possibility of face to face meetings for tutorials. The open distance methods of learning include correspondence education, home study, independent study; technology mediated education, flexible education and distributed education (Pityana, 2009).

ODL has increasingly gained popularity as a mode of learning across the globe. This is due to the rising demand for education, the need for continuous professional development and the overstretched residential facilities in learning institutions. ODL in Africa came in 1946 with the establishment of the University of South Africa (UNISA) as the first open and distance learning institution in Africa that was providing correspondence education (Wikipedia 2011). Thereafter, most countries adopted the use of ODL after realizing its usefulness in addressing the demands for education.

In Kenya, distance learning is being promoted so as to meet the Millenium Development goals as well as the vision 2030 (MOEST, 2008). Government initiatives to institute a policy framework to guide the use of ODL in Kenya has been realized through the Act of Parliament in 1966 which saw the establishment of the Board of Adult Education. This was then followed by a number of commissions with the latest being the sessional paper no 1 of 2005 which recommended the establishment of an open university. Moreover, the government introduced the ICT policy in the year 2006 as a way of ensuring the use of ICT to spur development. ICT is perceived to be an important factor in ODL implementation especially e-learning as a vital mode in ODL implementation. The government is also aware of the importance of ICT in ensuring sustainable economic development, imparting knowledge and skill, promoting quality education as well as in ensuring access to education especially in e-learning and distance education. To demonstrate the important role that ICT plays in addressing equity issues in education Kiilu (2012) observes the following

ICT plays a role in addressing access and equity issues in that it is a powerful tool which has the potential to transform the educational opportunities and life chances of many students including those excluded by their special circumstances and special educational needs thereby reducing discriminatory communication patterns based on physical and social cues such as gender, race, socio-economic patterns and physical features.(p.143).

E-learning is an important mode of learning that ensures the success of ODL. The initial initiative to introduce e-learning in schools in Kenya was introduced by NEPAD whose main aim was to promote equity, access and quality in provision of education in both primary and secondary schools. However, lack of adequate ICT facilities in schools have limited the implementation of ODL. Other available ICT facilities such as the mobile phone, the radio and video devices have not been fully utilized in teaching and learning. These devices can be very instrumental in sharing knowledge especially where the computers and internet are limited. For example a training programme for training teachers and school leaders along the Kenyan Coast designed by the Aga Khan University has successfully utilized the use of mobile phones to interact with teachers even in the most remote parts. This in essence implies that through the use of such technologies knowledge sharing is possible. Indeed if flexible learning approaches advocated for by Commonwealth of Learning are adopted then these devices can help to overcome the challenges.

Despite the benefits of ODL, research (Juma, 2003;Pityana, 2009) shows that ODL remains a challenge in Kenyan learning institutions and especially the lower levels of learning . The reasons for this situation are the lack of qualified personnel to design programmes for ODL, lack of or reliable internet facilities, ICT infrastructural challenges, lack of proper policies on ODL, underutilization of ICT to facilitate learning and belief that face to face interactions provide the best forms of learning (ibid). As a relatively

new concept in Kenya, ODL has not been fully exploited due to lack of a clear policy framework to guide its implementation. Indeed studies (Maritim, 2009 & Nyerere, Grevinir & Mse, 2012) show that most ODL programmes are run in an ad hoc manner with no clear policy guidelines. Despite these challenges, the benefits of ODL cannot be underestimated.

### **ROLE OF ODL IN EDUCATION**

The use of ODL in learning has tremendously increased due to a number of reasons. As mentioned earlier, ODL provides a cheap and accessible method of learning (Maritim, 2009). Thus it provides an alternative to the more expensive traditional face to face learning modes. Moreover, ODL provides a flexible learning mode that gives the learners an opportunity to choose the time and place convenient for them to learn. This flexibility has enabled people who traditionally were constrained by time to acquire education. For instance ODL has widened opportunities for women by making education accessible to them within the comfort of their homes (Nyerere, Grevenir & Mse (2012).

The traditional learning classroom modes of learning have also been criticized for allowing minimal participation by learners (Thakrar & Zinn 2009). However ODL allows learners to take responsibility for their own learning by ensuring their active involvement (Maritim, 2009). This is important in developing critical thinking skills and enhancing better understanding of concepts (Solveberg & Rismark, 2012) through interactive discussions with the facilitators as well as their peers. As mentioned earlier, the introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) and free tuition for secondary schools in Kenya saw the teacher student ratio rise to 45:1(MOEST, 2005). In some regions, a single teacher teaches upto one hundred students. This has limited teacher-student interactions as well as reduced the frequency of feedback given to learners. A case in point is where a student attends classes for a whole term and work done in class is never marked. This disadvantages the learner because he/she is denied access to feedback which is paramount to learning. ODL programmes can be designed to provide learners with answers to questions or even an opportunity for the learners to critique one another hence provide a source of feedback (Kiilu 2012). ODL also provides learners with an opportunity to direct and take charge of their learning without depending on instructors to do so (Maritim, 2009). This helps to address the issue of shortage of teachers as well as ensure quality learning.

Lack of enough teaching personnel in schools, the reduced government allocations to institutions of higher learning and the increasing demands for education has also necessitated the use of ODL in learning (Juma, 2003). It is therefore evident that if properly implemented, ODL plays a vital role in addressing the challenges faced by institutions of learning today

Although critiques of E-learning, argue that is an expensive undertaking, the benefits far much outweigh the shortcomings. Moreover, ICT experts suggest that the cost of ICT can be reduced by expanding the bandwidth to reduce internet costs hence making it even cheaper (Banks, 2008). Moreover, currently the use of mobile phones has provided a solution to people in areas where they cannot access the internet. Indeed mobile phone internet access is far much cheaper as compared to the computer internet access (Solveberg,& Rismark, (2012) & Banks, (2008). Mobile learning devices also provide social learning through communication and text reminders (Alexander 2004). Actually face to face learning can also be expensive if the actual costing of the number of hours a teacher interacts with learners is calculated. For example a study conducted in Korea showed that e learning is cheaper than face to face learning (Thakrar & Zinn, 2009)

### **GENDER INEQUALITIES IN EDUCATION**

Gender inequalities have remained an issue of concern both globally and in Kenya. These inequalities are manifested in the opportunities given to men and women in schooling, leadership and employment (Colcough, Samarai, Rose & Tembon, 2003, Amunga et al.2010). These inequalities have been more pronounced in education especially in terms of access to education with many girls unable to access education due to traditional attitudes about girls' and women's abilities, the opportunity cost of sending girls to school as well as the expected returns for educating sons and daughters (ibid).

Although a lot of progress has been made in Kenya in ensuring access to education for boys and girls, a lot of disparities interns of access, performance and transition also exist. Notably, girls in rural set

ups in some regions have been unable to access education due to economic, geographical and socio-cultural factors (Bifwoli,2009, Amunga et al 2010). Girls have continually been marginalized when it comes to education with most parents preferring to take boys to school especially when resources are limited (Righa, 2012; Mirembe and Davies 2001). In some cases girls are married off to provide money to educate the boys (ibid). In some communities, girls have been denied the opportunity to interact with boys due to cultural belief that they may become pregnant in the process (Bendera 1999; Bifwoli, 2009 & Halai, 2011).

Studies (Aikman,Unterhalter & Challender, 2005; Baker&Wiseman,2005 Mlama, Marema, Murage, Wagah, & Washika , (2005) on gender issues also show that the curriculum in education in a way favours the boys more than the girls. Girls in some situations have been denied the freedom the subjects they would wish to study on the pretext that the subjects are poorly performed by girls ( Mwingi 2008;Amunga, Musasio & Maiyo, 2010). Girls seem to be favored by more interactive methods of learning (Mlama, et al. (2005) which unfortunately lack in most of our curriculum. These authors attribute girls' poor performance to the gender irresponsive methods of learning. Moreover, parents believe that taking girls to school exposes them to risks of pregnancy and hence prefer to keep them at home instead. This is especially where girls have to walk long distances to school. (ibid)

Generally studies (Amunga et al., 2010; Bendera 1999& Righa 2011) show that girls drop out of school more than boys due out to teenage pregnancies, gender violence, gender insensitive curriculum and lack of sanitary facilities in schools that make it difficult for girls to cope with the challenges of puberty. Righa (2011) and Unterhalter (2010) observe that where sanitary facilities in schools are wanting, girls prefer to stay at home during menstruation. Moreover, many girls remain at home to look at their siblings as well as to perform household chores. This denies them an opportunity to engage in learning.

It was as a result of these inequalities that global trends such as the world declaration on Education for All (1990), the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), the Dakar framework for Action (2000) were adopted to prioritize education for women and girls. Later, the Millennium Development Goals were developed with goal two and three explicitly addressing gender equality. Goal two specifically aims at ensuring that by 2015 all boys and girls of school going age will be in a position to complete a full course of primary schooling. This closely relates with goal three which aims at eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and at all levels by 2015. Indeed if Kenya is to achieve gender equality by 2015, then all forms of inequalities experienced in schools have to be adequately addressed. Moreover, women's contribution to development cannot be underscored. For a country like Kenya whose majority of the population comprises of women, the need to equip women with skills and knowledge to enable them contribute to development is key to achieving significant development.

Although statistics indicate that girls access to education has greatly improved over the years, girls still continue to face challenges when it comes to acquiring quality education (Amunga et al, 2009; World bank 2008 & Unterhalter, et al.2010).

## **ROLE OF ODL IN ENSURING EQUITY**

Women interaction with men is limited in some cultures where women are only allowed to have face to face interactions with close members of the family (Mlama, 2005;Qureshi, Pirzado & Nasim , 2007 & Chege & Sifuna, 2006). In such a case, ODL provides an opportunity for women to interact with men in space. (Kiilu, 2012)This is especially so where the use of telephone, radio, television and internet allow men and women interactions without being in the same space.

Moreover, digital tools used in ODL provide opportunities for collaboration, engagement and interaction hence facilitating better understanding of content by learners. Studies (Mlama et al., 2005; Tembon, 2008) indicate that girls are favored by interactive methods of learning which encourage them to participate fully in learning. This will ensure that the persistent disparities in performance are addressed.

In traditional face to face classrooms, teachers have been known to perpetuate gender inequalities by employing teaching methodologies that do not give boys and girls an equal opportunity to participate (Aikman, Unterhalter, & Challender, 2005 ; Tembon, 2008 & Anditi, 2012).The use of ODL in this case will provide learners with an equal opportunity to participate and interact with one in space without either of them being limited. The use of gender responsive interactive learning methods such as

open forum discussions, video-conferencing and short text messaging provided by ODL will to a greater extent promote equity in learning as well as promote their performance.

Studies (Righa, 2011; Mirembe and Davis, 2005) also indicate that girls perform poorly in examinations due to frequent absenteeism. The high rates of absenteeism amongst girls has been caused by fear to interact with other students during menstruation, early pregnancies, performance of household chores in the absence of parents and school environments that are not gender friendly (ibid). Indeed the problem of gender irresponsive learning environment is addressed in ODL where interaction with the physical learning environment is limited. Moreover, the flexible nature of ODL provides girls with an opportunity to learn from any place and time. This implies that although they may be unable to attend formal classroom learning, these girls may still acquire knowledge at home.

Girls have been marginalized especially where financial constraints are experienced with most parents preferring to take boys to schools while girls are left at home to do house hold chores (Kariuki 2007; Elimu Yetu Coalition, 2005 & Bifwoli2009). ODL provides an accessible means of acquiring knowledge that is relatively affordable. This is unlike the formal schooling where students may be required to pay extra costs of tuition, and boarding facilities.

### **WAY FORWARD**

ODL can provide an effective means of addressing the gender inequalities that face girls in our educational system. This will, ensure that both girls and boys contribute positively to national development.

A number of issues need to be addressed to ensure that Kenya and other countries benefit from ODL. These include proper ODL policy institutionalization and regulation to guide the successful implementation of ODL programmes.

The use of cheaper technology mediated modes of communication such as the mobile phones, cassettes and videos (m-learning) among teachers and instructors will also promote better learning and hence improve the quality and benefits of ODL.

Gender issues are prevalent in lower levels of learning such as secondary schools and primary schools. Currently in Kenya, the use of ODL is being implemented at college and university levels. This paper therefore advocates for the extension of ODL to help address some of these issues discussed in this paper.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper has provided a background of ODL in Kenya as well as the role that ODL plays in education in general. The current equity issues and the role that ODL plays in addressing these issues have also been discussed. This paper advocates for the extension of ODL programmes to lower levels of learning to ensure the realization of its benefits because as discussed earlier gender issues are more prominent at these levels.

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