

Empowering Female Prisoners in Africa: The open and distance learning option

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ABSTRACT

Education for all is one of the criteria through which the developmental goals achievable in each of the countries of the World could be assessed and evaluated. Attainments of education in all ramifications empowers, but the disparity in the rate of gender educational attainments and achievements leaves much to be desired when ratios of male and female gender educational attainment is considered. Like in other prisons in Africa, Nigerian prisons do not offer educational opportunities to the prison inmates beyond primary and post-primary level at most. Most of the instructional contents are not designed to prepare these women for life after prison. This allows for a perpetual gap in human development and growth of the inmates when competency and ability to function effectively within the society, after serving out their terms and by extension are on their own is considered. Distance education has inherent benefits that enable institutions to train a widely dispersed, diverse and unreached group.

This paper therefore discusses how the ODL system of education can offer access to education-Vocational, Liberal Arts or Sciences – of the female inmates in order to get them empowered purposively for positive future living in all endeavours of human existence. This will help reduce and finally remove the effects which lack of skills in particular and education in general would have while they are trying to get integrated to the society. All necessary infrastructures that would assist the accessibility are considered.

Introduction

The position of women from time immemorial in the structure of societies in Africa has never been considered on the same pedestal as that of men. They have actually been regarded as a second-fiddle to men. It is on this basis that women have been categorized world over as a disadvantaged group. Society itself has consistently, if not for the recent development; that is, the awareness campaign on the issue of girl child education, pursued the socialization of women into accepting the notion of disadvantaged group. Education as confirmed by several studies is the most potent instrument for the emancipation of any group of people. It is also a known fact that the mental freedom that surpasses all other freedoms can only be guaranteed by an effective education system. This view was rightly reiterated by Okeke (1995) when she observed that education is a sure pathway to liberation of mind and improvement of the socio-economic status of people. Achievements of human beings and their contributions to the development process due to their acquired knowledge and initiative through trainings and education are evident all over the world. If women who are free and possess capacity and resources to get education, be self-reliant and developed are regarded as disadvantaged group, what opportunities are there for women who are inmates in the prison yards where education attainable are limited due to incarcerations. This position in all ramifications does not have considerations for life outside the prison after jail terms have been served. It does not allow for human development and growth of competency and ability which would be required by the inmates to function effectively within the society if they are to be helped to avoid the situation that could bring them back to the prisons when they are found wanting by the necessity to satisfy the needs of the survival instincts since the society does not have in place any social programme or policy as buffer that could get prison inmates settled and fitted into the society after they are released. Investigation and interviews conducted in Nigeria prisons showed that rehabilitations that are put in place are not for every inmates. It is only the convicted inmates that attend to rehabilitation programmes while those who are awaiting trials that may last for a long number of years to be concluded are not entitled. This rehabilitation does not even include schooling. What they do in most cases is to give inmates moral teaching. It is only those inmates who are about to serve out their terms that can seek for admission to higher education. Those who seek for higher education before becoming inmates can not go for schooling. Such action is considered a security risk by the prison establishment. School attendance by any inmate can only be granted through amnesty at any point in time. It is for the need to prepare the women inmates for worthwhile integration into the society such that they would not be found wanting that the distance education mode is being considered as an option for

empowering women prisoners.

The Place of Education in Women Prisoners Empowerment

Unarguably, illiteracy is the major issue at the centre of women empowerment in Africa. The majority of the womenfolk and a large number of girls till date are still grappling with the problem of basic reading and writing skills. The gross enrolment rate (GER 2001) indicated that 71% out-of-school children are girls. The statistics of illiterate women puts by the Human Development Report of 2002 published by the United Nations Development Programme was 57 % as against 43% for males. As seemingly insignificant the difference in the figure is, it would be difficult to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In Nigeria; the most populous Country in Africa, girls and women comprise about 49.69 percent of the total population. Incidentally, about 61% of the total female population is reported to be illiterate as against 37.7% of the male population. In Togo, over 60% of the total female population is illiterate; also in Gabon and Tanzania, 48% of the women are illiterate. Illiteracy level among the womenfolk in African countries is on the same pedestrian level.

Education is the total sum of experiences that a person acquires in partaking in everyday activities and how these experiences have served to make individual a better person. It is regarded as a sine qua non to any meaningful process of development. It is the only social leveler that can pierce through any social barrier that has been in existence through all other structures of the society. The only effective way to contribute to the empowerment of women in prison is to open and widen the access to education. Creating access to quality formal education at any level for women prisoners would give them a sense of belongingness and that of individuality more so when the education allow for choices and alternatives that could make them to take to trade or/and get them integrated into the larger society anytime they are out of incarcerations. Education generally, is a requisite for survival especially when it is highly relevant to the needs and environment of the learners. Definitely, the impact of whichever kind of education acquired by a woman prisoner would enhance her self-confidence and self worth, reshape her thinking and be more realistic with life. This is corroborated by Olakulehin and Ojo (2006) when they observed that it is incontrovertible to state that the family of an educated women tends to appear healthier than that of an un-educated woman.

Women Empowered by Distance Education

There are many groups of women who have been denied access to formal education because of one reason or the other. Example includes women who because of obedience and adherence to Islamic religion practice of purdah. These set of women were able to get educated through open and distance learning because the mode allowed them to learn at a 'safe distance' from their instructor without going against the injunction of their religion practice. They were able to study, turn assignments in and write examinations after adequate arrangement have been made. Through this, these set of women have been trained, exposed to knowledge and are ready to contribute their own quota to nation building.

Another group is those women who are full time housewives. Many never had access to formal education or gave up schooling at early stages of their lives. Women in this group according to Olakulehin and Ojo (2006) are usually not enthusiastic about formal education because their husbands indicate that they have to sit at home and take care of home and the children. These women find it difficult to leave home and go to conventional schools. But in spite of all, through the open and distance learning, these women become learned and empowered because the mode of education allowed them to sit at home as housewives and study for a programme of their choice without jeopardizing their marriages. An educational attainment through this way has helped women to get empowered and be able to contribute to the development of their locality. This is confirmed by a study carried out by Onyishi (2004) on non-formal distance education as a women empowerment strategy in Nigeria. According to the study, in the area where the study was carried out -Nsukka; Southeastern Nigeria - most of the women were illiterates. Due to an empowerment programme which addresses vocational skills development as well as basic literacy which was arranged for the community, the participants were enabled to function effectively in different vocational skills learnt by each of the participants. The study revealed that the programme provides literacy education as well as vocational skills development to the women and thereby empowered them and enables them to live a more comfortable live.

Other groups include the working women. These are women who find themselves in marriage after a college degree. They intend to further their studies but the rigours of grappling with marital life and child rearing has become impediments to their ambition; as a child is being admitted to the primary school, one of the elder ones is entering the prepubescent years. This is also coupled with the fact that they are not really recognised in the society nor earn good honorarium for their labour while the husband's family and her biological family are not relent in their demands. Demands of a typical working woman in Africa are multifarious. But with open and distance learning, these set of women have been able to achieve their educational goals. Jellema and Hernandez (2002), summarised the experiences of working women when discussing the issue of working women who have benefited from empowerment drive through non-formal distance education in Cuba. These women were empowered through a mentoring programme known as SOFIA mentoring programme. Training and skills development are provided for women who are already educated, but have not been able to further their education due to the demands of family and other social obligations. The focus of the training was to make the participants functional. Treated topics include issues relating to management and entrepreneurship with organized interactive sessions based on the topics of discuss handled by qualified trainers. This allowed for mentoring and exchange of experiences anchor on both theory and practical with a view to integrating the experiences of the participants. Beside the training sessions, excursions were organized to the companies of the women entrepreneurs. This non-formal distance training allowed for pursuance of qualitative education that improved the sense of participants and their self esteem.

There are many other women groups that have immensely benefited from open and distance mode of educational system.

Open and Distance Education as option for Women Prisoner Empowerment

Prison populations are growing in many parts of the world. This population growth, vary considerably between different regions of the world, and between different parts of the same Continent. However, more than three-fifths of countries (62.5%) have rates below 150 per 100,000. In Africa the median rate for western and central African Countries is 50 whereas it is 362 for South African Countries. Above all, as there are male prisoners so there are female prisoners.

The basic impediment in the attempt to get prison inmates educated lies in the limitation in the access to educational opportunities which revolve round the inability of these inmates and their tutors to be in a face-to-face contact. This is also applicable to the (supposed) learners who are free of incarcerations but are disadvantaged like the prison inmates for example, women in purdah. As indicated by UNESCO (2002), there are about 880 million illiterate adults the world over who have been deprived of access to education because they are required to be present in the four walls of a conventional classroom before they can gain access to quality education. But going by the reality of time, the futility of this face to face arrangement becomes clearer to some discerning educational planners as the knowledge based society of the twenty first century demands continuously more effective methods of knowledge dissemination. It is also obvious that the limitations in both human and financial resources have incapacitated the traditional approach of classroom teaching especially in countries like Nigeria where the population of her people grows in geometric progression. This observation and realities have made imperative for alternative approach to education a necessity hence the need for Open and distance learning system that could cater for all and sundry; the disadvantaged people be it women prisoners or women in purdah.

The Open and Distance Learning system radiates the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by a tutor who is removed in time and space from the learner, and that it focuses on greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, be it access, elements of structure or curriculum. It is therefore very clear that attainment of mass education whose objectives and goals includes empowerment of women prisoners can only be achieve through distance learning. This is in tandem with the observation of Jegede (2003) when he remarked that 'all nations of the world desirous of a cost effective, convenient, conducive, efficient and comprehensive way to educate all its citizens have embraced open and distance learning'. For access to be created for the prison inmates, study centres tagged 'Special Centre' should be located within the prison yard with provision of all necessary facilities for facilitation while Facilitators are appointed for the courses to be offered by the students (Female Prisoners). This centre through an appointed Coordinator or Manager liaises with headquarter to officially function like every other regular

study centres.

Open and Distance learning mode of education is an avenue for all nations to effectively disseminate educational benefits to all its citizens economically and more effectively, especially those who are unreached or who were denied access on the basis of one social consideration or the other. Women prisoners throughout the African countries belong to this class and this mode of education would afford them the opportunity to pursue knowledge without contravening any laws of the land. It will prepare them for their eventual integration back into the society after serving out their terms in the prison. It will also remove the issue of recidivism among women prisoners since the acquired education would have made them to be better persons who are knowledgeable, skilled and qualify to seek for job and live a good life.

In the developed world, several states, most notably California and Vermont, have made distance education a key component to proposed initiatives to improve the availability and quality of potential prison-based education programs. This is because distance education provides the ability to reach large populations at multiple sites during a specific time while reducing the staff required to offer instruction. Additionally, the utilization of two-way interactive videoconferencing provides prison inmates the opportunity to receive guided instruction without instructors having to travel to the prisons in order to teach.

Although much has not been done in relation to prison inmates getting educated be it higher education or otherwise in Africa but several related studies had taken place in the developed world. Some studies have identified the factors that are important for successful university education for prison inmates. Ommerborn and Schuemer (1996) observed that availability of some services and facilities is germane to getting prisoners educated. These include, provision of study centre and the need for special study periods, relieving students partially or totally from work duties, and provision of access to communication and study materials such as dictionary and writing tools, allowance for students to partake in face to face activities; that is facilitation classes activities and also an opportunity to form a study group with course mates who might be in a neighbouring cell or outside the prison and means of reducing encumbrances that could encountered during examinations. Without mincing words, these mentioned services and facilities are characteristics of a veritable distance education institutions and it is a pointer to the fact that distance education mode would best serve the lacuna that exist in providing an avenue through which prisoners can get empowered through education in Africa.

Instances of Programmes of Study that have helped Women to get Empowered

As in other countries of Africa, many programmes have been put together one time or the other to assist women to be empowered. In Nigeria, women education programme was first launched in 1986 (Ohiri-Aniche, 2000). Lots of other programmes have come onboard after this initiative. There was Mass Literacy programme, Family Support Programme, Better Life for Rural Women and many other developmental programmes developed by the Non-governmental Organisations. Through these programmes, training was provided for women in different areas such as soap making, garri (Cassava flakes) processing, pomade making, oral dehydration therapy (ORT), and numerous lifelong skills that are put together in order to make women to be more self-reliant and at the same time promote their sense of self-worth.

In the academic sphere, teacher education programme which unarguably is the first field that witness extensive use of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Nigeria was promoted by The National Teachers' Institute (NTI) Kaduna, in 1976 by the Federal Government of Nigeria to produce qualified teachers that would meet the needs of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) which then was established basically to take care of the primary education of the young ones. The enrolment statistics for the programmes of the NTI reveals that women have benefited tremendously from the ODL system in the area of teacher training at both Grade II (for those that teaches in primary schools) and National Certificate of Education (NCE)[for those that teaches in secondary schools] levels.

Conclusion

Conclusively, as it becomes apparent that distance education is the most appropriate panacea to fill a vacuum created by non provision of education for prison inmates, established distance learning institutions and those that are to come on stream should be made to offer a variety of viable education options to prisoners who want to turn their lives around, integrate themselves into society, and greatly increase their livelihoods of never returning to a life behind bars. These institutions should be ready to offer different major programmes that would lead to the award of certificates in different categories of levels; be it certificate (proficiency inclusive), undergraduate, and masters because prison inmates are made up of people with different levels of educational attainments.

This mode of education would enable the women inmates to have access to functional training and education which would empower them, make them to be self reliant and prepare them for the demand of the social system and also reduce recidivism.

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