Producing Gender-Sensitive Materials for Open and Distance Learning

KNOWLEDGE SERIES

knowledge series

A TOPICAL, START-UP GUIDE TO DISTANCE EDUCATION PRACTICE AND DELIVERY

Sensitivity to someone's gender is crucial in learning

INTRODUCTION

Sensitivity to someone's gender is crucial, not only in life but also in learning. In developing countries where the opportunities for face-to-face education are often limited, open and distance learning (ODL) can provide basic education, skills training and lifelong learning. Appropriate ODL materials are especially important for women who live in countries where they are seen principally as homemakers and carers of children, and where their social and cultural norms make attending face-to-face classes difficult. ODL can provide such women, their partners and their children with the key to the world of learning. Producers of ODL materials must ensure that this key works for both sexes.

To produce successful ODL resources, you must make assumptions about learners' background knowledge, experience and skills, that paints a picture of the learners you are targeting. When that picture is either predominantly male or female, problems occur that can result in barriers to access and participation by one sex or the other. Women's and men's learning styles can be different. They can respond differently and with different degrees of success to the various ODL modes of delivery. They can bring to the learning task different life experiences, expectations, skill bases and time available for study.

For example, a 2001 publication of case studies compiled by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) found that in India, distance education (DE) is the preferred option for women. DE is cost-effective in India as a learner pays only a third of the total fees of a conventional institution. As no classroom attendance is required, there is no need for the woman learner to dislocate herself; because of the degree of flexibility in course completion, the learner can adjust her study timetable within her schedule of household responsibilities.

To encourage participation by both sexes, learning materials must take into consideration barriers that might exclude either. This guide will bring these barriers to your attention and suggest some strategies that encourage successful participation by both sexes.

Although in this guide many generalisations have been drawn, the authors do not assume all women in the developing world are in the same circumstances, and are aware that many are highly educated, successful in their professions, and far from disadvantaged.
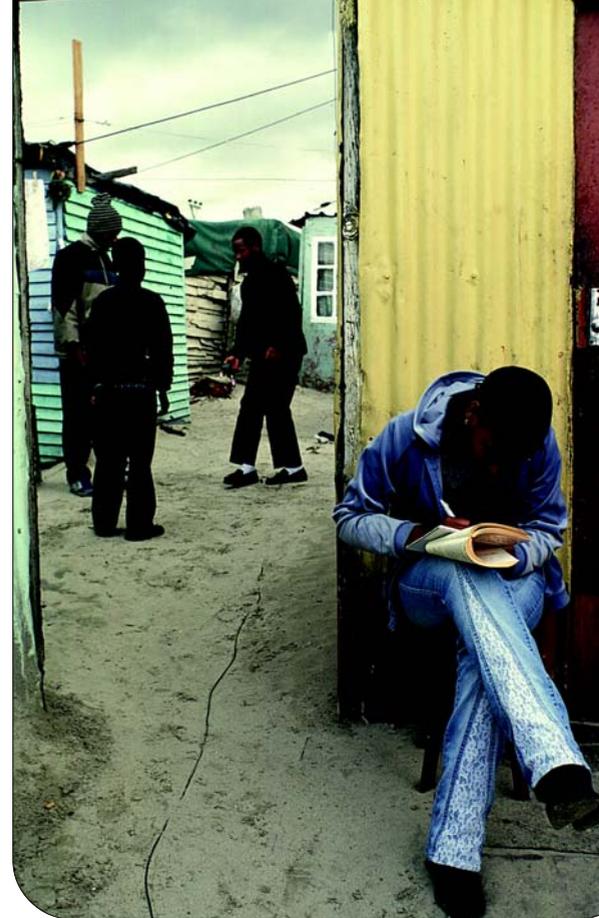
TERMINOLOGY

Gender: The different social and cultural roles, expectations and constraints placed upon men and women because of their sex. *Sex* identifies the biological difference between men and women whereas *gender* identifies the social relations between men and women.

Gender-sensitive: Sensitivity to the different needs and experiences of male and female users. In an ODL context, it means producing courses or learning materials in a way that meets the needs of all learners.

Gender-neutral: Appropriate for both males and females.

Gender disaggregated information: Data that is collected separately on men and women. Helpful for comparing how girls and women are faring compared with boys and men; gives insights that can otherwise be hidden if the data is lumped together. A related term is *gender-sensitive indicator*, which has the special function of pointing out gender-related changes in society over time.

Gender analysis: A way of looking at the impact of development on women and men. It requires separating data by sex, and understanding how work is divided, valued and rewarded. It asks how a particular activity, decision or plan will affect men differently from women.

Tokenism: Occurs when a real solution is avoided by a superficial gesture intended to impress and distract from the real issues, for example, including only one woman on a board of directors.

Gender stereotyping: Occurs when you apply commonly accepted characteristics and attributes to either gender—for example, assuming men are unemotional, athletic and strong, while women are emotional, non-athletic and weak.

Affirmative action: The deliberate bias and action to increase representation from under-represented groups. This often applies in the area of gender, when one sex is not equally represented.

Gender mainstreaming: The process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action—including legislation, policies or programmes—in all areas and at all levels.

DIFFERING PROBLEMS

Gender bias or discrimination is not easy to generalise about. The ways that various societies—both developed and developing—teach their children to become men and women varies from country to country and over time. In a way, it comes down to deciding if the circumstances you are working in require a gender-neutral approach or an approach that is affirmative towards girls and women (and in a few countries, affirmative towards boys and men).

On one hand, Kenya worries about having too many male teachers. Mary Muito of the Forum for African Women Educationalists, Kenya Chapter (FAWE-Kenya), noted in a 2004 seminar on gender equity that apart from schools located in urban centres, the majority of the teachers in rural primary schools are men, and therefore girls lack female role models.

On the other hand, Australia is concerned about its low numbers of male teachers in schools and lack of male role models. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported in its *Schools, Australia* 2002 publication that "between 1992 and 2002, the proportion of male school teachers (in full time equivalent measure) declined from 25.8 per cent to 20.9 per cent in primary schools and from 49.4 per cent to 44.9 per cent in secondary schools." The problem is compounding as fewer than one in five teachers in training in 2004 are male.

Mejai Avoseh noted in a 1999 case study that women's adult education in Namibia "… revolves around literacy training linked with some information on income-generating, health and family planning, civic responsibility and similar issues. This limits adult education to the same old status quo agenda. This is a 'closed' agenda that puts women under oppression. It continuously reinforces women's traditional domestic reproductive, and community helper role."

WOMEN LEARNERS

Globally it's safe to say that women's lives, pay and conditions continue to be generally poorer than men's. Even in developed countries with a long history of affirmative action, women generally lag behind men in terms of economic security, retirement incomes, representation in leadership positions and equal pay for equal work. Some of the most important current challenges are:

- The growing need for gender-sensitive and relevant learning materials at the primary and secondary school levels as more girls move into education systems.
- The need to enhance the literacy levels of many women before they can access education and lifelong learning opportunities.
- Women's relatively low levels of computer literacy that prevent them from accessing the Internet and online courses.

One of the United Nations' (UN) Millennium Development Goals is to "eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015." Given that in 22 countries of Africa and nine countries of Asia, the enrolment ratios for girls is less than 80 per cent that of boys, ODL materials will be needed if this goal is to be realised—if not for students, then certainly for teachers, who will need ODL resources to overcome the teaching and learning materials gap.

A fundamental barrier to participation in education is poor literacy. Female literacy levels throughout the developing world lag significantly behind males. UN statistics show that nearly two thirds of the illiterate people in the world are women. Learners need literacy skills to access ODL opportunities, where the learning is delivered by printed text or by computer. Even in cases of audio-visual education delivery, most courses that lead to qualification require a written form of assessment.

Computer-mediated learning, online courses and email tutorial support are today's face of distance learning. The UN suggests that sex-disaggregated information should be collected on the use of information and communications technologies (ICT), so that sensible training decisions can be made. Internationally, statistics show that women trail significantly in computer literacy.

Cultural or societal values may prevent women accessing technology; for example, they may not be able to travel to a "cybercafé" or it may be located in an inappropriate venue for women and girls. Women and girls may also be unable to afford access to information technology. Most important of all, women are less likely to have the fundamental skills needed to benefit from the use of ICT. Nancy Hafkin, retired director of Knowledge Working Inc., notes that women are less likely to know the international languages that dominate the Internet and are less likely to have the computer skills required for computer-mediated learning.

Sometimes gender-based cultural attitudes, and not the immediate gender identification of technology use, prevent young girls and women from accessing and using ICT. Hafkin describes how in Uganda, girls did not get equal access to the limited number of computers in schools because of the socio-cultural norm that "girls do not run." The boys ran, got to the computers first, and refused to give them up to girls. The earlier curfew hours for girls at boarding schools further constrained their access.

WHAT ABOUT THE MEN?

The Canadian International Development Agency found that "just as there are cultural norms and expectations about women's roles, there are also cultural norms and expectations of men as leaders, husbands, sons and lovers that shape their behaviour and opportunities."

Women conduct the majority of gender research initiatives and are usually the ones to take ensuing action. Women dominate gender units in development organisations and agencies whilst men are often excluded. Excluding men from gender-related development activity is, on the whole, counterproductive not only for them but also for women. So too in ODL materials, where swinging the pendulum too far in the direction of affirmative action for women and disregarding men as potential learners is also counterproductive—for example, by universally replacing *he/his* with *she/her*, or by having only female images and examples in texts.

PRODUCING GENDER-SENSITIVE LEARNING MATERIALS

The aim should be to engage the learner and to make learning easier and more effective. To do this we need clear communication of thoughts, ideas, feelings and instructions. We should avoid, if possible, anything that interferes with getting our message across to our readers, viewers or listeners. If some of our learners feel left out, either consciously or subconsciously, because of the way the learning materials come across, it is defeating our purpose and interfering with learners' understanding of the messages we are trying to convey.

Watch for:

- The working assumption that the course is for one sex only.
- A curriculum process that does not include input from both men and women.
- Language that constantly uses male and/or female only references.
- Graphics and illustrations in which women or men are not present, are present as tokens only or are shown in traditional roles only.

- Assumptions that men and women have the same life experiences and hence the same background experience on which to build new learning.
- Delivery modes that assume skills that learners may not have, such as computer skills, high-level language skills or prior experience.
- Delivery modes that assume learners have ready access to ICT such as computers, television or radio.
- Tutors untrained to support inexperienced learners.
- Assessment strategies that are competitive rather than collaborative, hence perhaps at odds with women's preferred learning styles.

INSTRUCTIONAL WRITING

No matter what delivery mode (printed materials, radio programmes, audio cassettes, computer software, video, videoconferencing, television, online learning programs) is used, writing is usually the basic task in producing learning materials (for example, text for print-based study guides and workbooks; scripts for radio, audio tape or online courses; and learning software). The same mechanics of gender-neutral writing apply to them all.

BEWARE OF PRONOUNS

Writing can become tedious if nouns are constantly repeated: *John took John's son to John's mother's house.* Pronouns are useful to deal with this problem: *John took his son to his mother's house.* However, some languages, including English, have established a custom of using the masculine form of pronouns (*he, him, his*) to stand for both males and females. The female learner, particularly those new to distance learning, may feel excluded when learning appears to be directed exclusively at male learners. A common myth exists that all you have to do is put *she* after every *he*, and the problem of writing in a gender-sensitive way is fixed. Unfortunately, combinations such as *he and she*, *he/she*, *s/he* and *his or her* tend to get in the way of writing flow and should be avoided where possible.

A couple of alternative solutions are:

- **Speaking directly to the learner:** Use *you, your* or *yours*. This gives the learning materials a direct and immediate teacher-to-learner feel. It works for most languages.
  POOR: *This course has been developed in modular format so that the learner can study those modules relevant to his needs.*
  BETTER: *This course has been developed in modular format so that you can study those modules relevant to your needs.*
- **Eliminating the pronoun:** This often leads to a more concise sentence.
  POOR: *The applicant must place his signature on the dotted line.*
  BETTER: *Please sign on the dotted line.*
- **Using the plural:** This helps the distance learner feel less isolated and can sometimes make sentences more concise. However, this technique doesn't work for languages like French, where the plural form still shows gender (*elles*, *ils*) and can pose problems in legal texts where the responsibility of the individual is being emphasised.
  POOR: *If a supervisor dresses well, he presents a positive image to his subordinates.*

BETTER: *If supervisors dress well, they present a positive image to their subordinates.*

Keep in mind that there are times when it is necessary to use either masculine or feminine pronouns to convey the meaning you want.

GENDER-BIASED VOCABULARY

Learning materials can give indirect messages about the status, roles and stereotyped characteristics of men and women. Some countries have paid so much attention to this problem over the past 25 years that they now face the problem of poor portrayal of boys and men rather than girls and women. In other countries, however, attention is still needed to eliminate male-biased vocabulary.

Watch out for:

- **Tagging occupations:** Expressions such as *male nurse, woman professor* or *lady detective* imply that only one gender is expected in certain professions. Leave out the gender tag unless it really serves a purpose; ask yourself if you would use it in describing that occupation for the opposite gender. For example if you use *female doctor*, would you write *male doctor*?
- **Using feminine endings on words:** It's usually unnecessary to use special forms to indicate men or women, for example, *actress, stewardess* or *waitress*. Replace these with *actor, flight attendant* or *waiter*. Note though that in some cultures and languages, giving a woman a male title is regarded as rude.
- **Use of the generic "man":** Many terms are commonly and ambiguously used to cover both men and women, such as *man in the street, man-hours* and *chairman*. Find alternatives such as *average person, working hours,* and *chair* or *chairperson*.
- **Inconsistency in names and titles:** When male and female names are linked, try to be consistent in referring to both genders. Avoid *man and wife*; and *Miss Miriam Tan, a pretty young physicist, and Dr Smith, a noted zoologist*. Instead, use *husband and wife;* and *Miriam Tan, physicist, and Joe Smith, zoologist*. When a man is addressed as *Professor Tomori*, avoid addressing a female with the same title as just *Maria Mtonga*, and use *Professor Mtonga*.
- **Patronising and demeaning expressions:** Avoid expressions such as *girls* or *little ladies* when referring to adult women.

STEREOTYPICAL LANGUAGE

Under the pressures of producing ODL learning materials quickly, writers often fall back on stereotypical portrayals of males and females. In building characters for scripts, it is important to display a wide variety of both masculine and feminine traits.

Watch out for:

- **Stereotypical adjectives:** Often, different adjectives are used to describe the same characteristic in men and women. For example, you might describe a man as *ambitious* but a woman as *aggressive*; a man as *cautious* but a woman as *timid*.
- **Stereotypical expressions:** Because we hear *act like a gentleman, gentleman's agreement* and *the feminine touch* as expressions so often, we tend to use them in writing.

GENDER

USING ELECTRONIC TOOLS TO HELP

Most scripts for learning materials are created using modern computer word processing programs such as Microsoft Word, that have a variety of tools available to help writers avoid the most common gender-biased writing traps:

- Use the search facility to locate masculine and/or feminine pronouns such as *he, him, she* or *her*, and check to see if they are needed.
- Some of the latest software versions may have options to check for gender-specific vocabulary.
- Use the computer's thesaurus to find alternatives to any sexist vocabulary you find in your writing.

GRAPHICS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Take care in selecting graphics for instructional texts, such as photographs and illustrations. Learning materials teach far more than information. The tone, the way content is developed and the selection of illustrations encourage attitudes about race, religion, sex, occupations, life expectations and self-awareness.

Women are frequently shown in traditional and mostly subservient roles, while men are often shown in authority positions or aggressive roles. In some cases, women are not even represented.

Muito presents another example from Kenya, where school learning and teaching materials are full of images and text that often portray girls and women as observers in the learning processes, whereas boys and men are shown in action. This negatively impacts upon girls' self esteem and confidence that they can be achievers in academic as well as non-academic areas.

Watch out for:

- A good mix of males and females in illustrations chosen.
- Male-only images in positions of authority, for example, male doctors with female nurses only.
- Illustrations of stereotyped women's and men's occupations, for example, housewives, nurses or mothers in caring roles.
- Tokenism, where you pay lip service to the "other" sex by including an example here and there.

NON-PRINT DELIVERY

ODL learning materials also come in many non-print delivery modes such as television, video and radio. The principles of producing gender-sensitive learning materials, nevertheless, remain the same: avoid stereotyping, tokenism and using male-only authority role models.

The guidelines for evaluation of good learning software [*Table 1*] are reproduced with the permission of Ambika Bhargava, assistant professor of education at Oakland University in the United States. If answers are not predominantly in the *Often* category, consider adapting the learning materials for further gender sensitivity.

Bhargava notes that "teachers need to become aware of the subtle nature of gender biases in existing software programs and make a conscious effort to select software that does not reflect stereotypic attitudes and images. Teachers must therefore include computer software that encourages both girls and boys to enjoy using computers and become competent in its usage."

TABLE 1: CHECKLIST FOR EVALUATING SOFTWARE IN TERMS OF GENDER BIAS

Characters in the Software Program	Often	Sometimes	Never	Not Applicable
FEMALE AND MALE CHARACTERS ARE EQUALLY REPRESENTED				
THE INTENSITY OF PHYSICAL ACTIONS ASSIGNED TO FEMALE IS EQUAL TO THOSE ASSIGNED TO MALE CHARACTERS				
FEMALE CHARACTERS ARE PRESENTED IN PROBLEM SOLVING AND LEADERSHIP ROLES				
THE CHARACTERS ARE NOT STEREOTYPED BY OCCUPATIONAL ROLES (FEMALE BABY- SITTERS AND MALE POLICE OFFICERS)				
THE TYPES OF EMOTIONAL STATEMENTS ATTRIBUTED TO FEMALES AND MALES ARE NOT STEREOTYPIC				
Content of the Program				
THE PROGRAM IS FREE OF SEXIST LANGUAGE				
THE EXTENT AND FREQUENCY OF AGGRESSIVE AND/OR DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOURS IS LIMITED OR NON-EXISTENT				
CONTENT AND OVERALL STYLE OF THE PROGRAM APPEAL TO BOTH GIRLS AND BOYS				
NON-HUMAN OBJECTS ARE NOT ASSUMED TO BE MALE				
THE NUMBER OF ELEMENTS OF COMPETITIVENESS VS. CO-OPERATION AMONG CHARACTERS IS BALANCED				
THE SOFTWARE PROGRAM PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROUP INTERACTIONS AT THE COMPUTER				
Rewards in the Software Program				
BOTH FEMALE AND MALE ORIENTED REWARDS FOR CORRECT ANSWERS ARE USED				
REWARDS INCLUDE BOTH WORDS AND GRAPHICS				
PROGRAM ALLOWS CHILDREN TO CHOOSE THEIR OWN TOKEN REWARD SYSTEM				

CREDIT: UNESCO

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND WHERE TO FIND HELP

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PRINT RESOURCES

Jenkins, J. 1995. *Producing Gender Sensitive Materials: A Handbook for Educators*. Vancouver: Commonwealth of Learning. www.col.org/resources/publications/#Curriculum

WEB RESOURCES

GENERAL

United Nations Millennium Development Goals (UN MDG). www.un.org/millenniumgoals

Development Gateway: Gender and Development. topics.developmentgateway.org/gender

United Nations Statistics Division, Demographic and Social Statistics: *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics.* unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indwm/wwpub.htm

NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE

The American Philosophical Association (APA): Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language. www.apa.udel.edu/apa/publications/texts/nonsexist.html

Literacy Education Online (LEO): Gender-free Writing. leo.stcloudstate.edu/style/genderbias.html

University College Cork, Ireland: Non-Sexist Language, A Guide. www.ucc.ie/ucc/equalcom/language.html

The University of Arizona, U.S., College of Agriculture and Life Sciences: Guide to non-sexist language.   ag.arizona.edu/agdiv/nonsexist.html

Villanova University, U.S.: Gender Neutral Language quiz. webster.commnet.edu/grammar/quizzes/nova/nova6.htm

GENDER-NEUTRALITY IN LANGUAGES OTHER THAN ENGLISH

Information Headquarters: Non-sexist Language. www.informationheadquarters.com/History/Non-sexist_language.shtml

Wikipedia: Non-sexist Language. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-sexist_language

GENDER MAINSTREAMING AND GENDER TRAINING

Commonwealth of Learning (COL): Gender Resources Training Collection. www.col.org/genderresources

Strategies for Advancing Girls' Education (SAGE).   sage.aed.org

United Nations Development Group (UNDG). [Registered access only.] www.undg.org

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender in Development: Gender Mainstreaming Topic Module. www.sdnp.undp.org/gender/capacity/gm_info_module.html

United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): Gender and Education Network in Asia (GENIA) Toolkit. www.unescobkk.org/gender/gender/genianetwork.htm

United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI).   www.undp.org

GENDER IN FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO): Gender and Food Security.   www.fao.org

GENDER STEREOTYPES

About.com: Gender Stereotypes. womensissues.about.com/cs/genderstereotypes