

The Role of Distance Education in Gender Equality and in Empowering Women- A Case Study of the Institute of Distance Education

Walter Sukati, Institute of Distance Education, University of Swaziland

Abstract

The third Millennium Development Goal: 'Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women,' calls for the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005 and at all levels of education by 2015. In the light of this goal, this paper recognises that University education in Swaziland is facing unprecedented challenges, which are especially related to low funding and in turn translated into inaccessibility of higher education to the majority of Swazi men and women, low quality educational programmes and marginalization. Distance education is now offered as an alternative to conventional university education to address these concerns.

This paper focuses on the Millennium Development Goal on gender parity and gender equality in education as the Human Development Report for 1995 declares that 'If human development is not engendered, it is endangered.' The paper sets out to critically examine the university distance education reform in relation to the complex and multidimensional concept of gender. The Institute of Distance Education at the University of Swaziland will be used as a case study to make an analysis of whether or not the introduction of Distance Education at the University has increased access to university education to both men and particularly women. Gender patterns will be assessed to draw conclusions and make recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

All countries have pledged to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005. This was agreed upon at the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, a year when a significant majority of the 104 million children not in primary school were girls and almost two-thirds of the 860 million non-literate people were women (UNESCO:2004).

In this paper, we discuss gender, education and development as part of the global educational agenda. We will give a theoretical context in an attempt to carry out a gender analysis at the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) in particular and at the University of Swaziland (UNISWA) in general. Further, we will discuss the role of distance education with a particular focus on its impact to the education of commonly excluded groups including women.

SWAZILAND – EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Swaziland is one of the small resource constrained countries in Africa. It covers an area of 17,364 square kilometers with a population of approximately 1.1 million. Literacy in Swaziland is about 75%. The present formal system of education in Swaziland is divided into four main sub-sectors. These are pre-primary, primary, junior and senior secondary, and post-secondary. The broad aim of the system is contained in the belief that, 'A nation's greatest asset is its human resources. Human development is therefore the great aim of education,' (NEC, 1975). The education system has been influenced by global education trends.

The two major financial contributors to the education system at the primary level are families and the government. Government only pays teachers' salaries and subsidizes

school fees in government schools, and also, to a lesser extent, in aided schools. Private schools are entirely privately financed. According to Akinkugbe and Kunene (2001) in government schools, government subsidizes the fees by about 47 percent while all families equally contribute about 53 percent. The figures at the secondary level are almost similar, in that while families contribute about 52 percent, government contributes 47 percent. Government contribution at university education level is however much larger than what families contribute (ibid). A result of the prevailing situation is that many children, who are poor, are excluded from basic education in Swaziland and are therefore automatically excluded from the tertiary education level too.

Furthermore, at present a gender policy is still under development at the Ministry of Education. The approach to education 'has been more or less gender neutral, that is, in terms of access, (Obanya, 2004). Notable key gendered educational interventions have not been government driven. For example, science, mathematics and technology clinics have been arranged for girls with the assistance of the Forum for African Women Educationists in Swaziland (FAWESWA). The main goal has been to include more girls alongside boys in science, maths and technology.

There is an apparent gender balance at primary and secondary education levels (Obanya, 2004). Table 1 demonstrates this.

Table 1: Secondary school enrolments in Swaziland (1997-2000)

Year	Boys	Girls	Total	Girls (%)
1997	29020	11758	58197	50.13
1998	30228	30602	60630	50.31
1999	30741	30825	61566	50.07
2000	30003	30252	60253	50.20

Source: Obanya (2004: 30)

The table seems to indicate an apparent gender balance in the education system in Swaziland. Behind the façade, is the reality that girls in Swaziland are still subject to the negative influences on girls' education at work in other countries of Africa. For example, Obanya (2004) highlights that in 1999, the proportion of girls dropped from 50.07% at the first year of secondary school, to 46.22% in the fifth year. This can be attributed to the escalating number of unwanted teenage pregnancies and the high incidence of HIV and AIDS.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND GENDER TRANSFORMATION

The global education agenda has raised awareness for the support of gender parity and gender equality in education as the Human Development report for 1995 declares that 'If human development is not engendered, it is endangered'. Development goals now focus on gender equality and women empowerment. Goal number three of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), is to promote gender equality and women empowerment. The fourth target of this goal is to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005 and at all levels of education by 2015, (UNESCO Global Monitoring Report, 2005). Therefore, the shift in the international education goals beyond gender parity to gender equality has had a positive influence in promoting a meaningful education agenda towards the education of females in relation to males.

Achieving gender equality in education implies equality of opportunities for males in relation to females, equality in the learning process, equality of outcomes as well as equality of external results after leaving education, (UNESCO, 2004). It is therefore more of a challenge to achieve gender equality. Stromquist, (1996) identifies many challenges pertaining to gender, education and development. These are: concentration of women in typically feminine fields and over-representation of men in fields perceived as masculine, such as science and technology; economics and finances which reflects influence of multiple societal and cultural forces.

Similarly, Leach, (1988:50) points out that there is generally 'under representation of women in highly skilled and professional employment, in politics and until recently, in the design of development policy and strategy.' Therefore by controlling the access of the female students to some forms of knowledge, this may just as successfully exclude them from the mainstream of economic, social and political life as no education at all, (Fagerlind and Saha, 1992). The key issues which emerge from the literature are multi leveled and have many dimensions. The issues converge into a gender analysis framework.

The framework is adapted from the Social Relations Approach proposed by Naila Kabeer (Leach, 2003), which is multi-levelled and multi-dimensional. The approach identifies key institutions, namely the family and community; the market and the state, each of which pursues a dominant ideology on gender relations. 'The approach shows how features of one institution link to, reinforce, and influence those of the others, and how inequalities of gender, class, ethnicity, etc., interact and reinforce each other,' (Leach, 2003:100).

At the first level, there is female and male students' access to university education; retention and achievement in such education. At the next level, there is the immediate local context of the family and community, which influences the students' gender values and beliefs systems. Then there is also the labour market with gendered patterns, which has an impact on the education choices of the students. The last level is the state, which represents the gendered structure of society. This approach is adapted and will be applied in the gender analysis of the distance university setting at the IDE later in the next section.

Some authors question the role of distance education in promoting gender equality and empowerment. Distance education tends to be regarded as the second best choice to conventional education and is undervalued. Jenkins (2002) explains that distance education remains on the periphery in most countries and is underdeveloped, hence its low status. Similarly, Stromquist (1996:2) is skeptical of the view that women's education may be increased through their participation in distance education. She queries whether women, who are already devalued in society, will benefit from having a devalued education through distance education and Open University. 'By invoking such courses, there is accommodation to low prestige occupations that will perpetuate women's subordinate statuses,' (p.2). To some extent, distance education has not been as successful in Africa as it could have been, hence the justification of the concern about the implication of distance learning to the commonly excluded groups, comprising mainly of women and the rural poor.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AT UNISWA

The University of Swaziland (UNISWA), the only University in the country, is solely dependent on Government for funding. In view of inherent constraints in admissions to the full-time courses on campus, the University of Swaziland established the Institute of Distance Education in 1994. The aim of the IDE is to offer higher education programmes, through the distance education mode, for the benefit of all those who had been deprived of the opportunity, for one reason or the other, to enter the mainstream education, especially those in employment, and also women and adults who wish to upgrade their education in various fields and thus its motto is "Taking the University education and professional programmes to the people rather than the people coming to the University".

Hence, the Institute of Distance Education explicitly offers university education to those who qualify for admission but who are unable to gain entrance because of lack of space and facilities, (Magagula, 2003: 4; Saint, 1999: 14). Even though the distance education route is not the first choice for such students, there is an apparent high enrolment of both male and female students at the IDE as will be shown in the Tables below.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND THE GENDER GOALS

1. Issue of Access

Reaching gender parity implies that the same proportion of boys and girls – relative to their respective age groups – enter the education. It is measured by the ratio between the female and male values for any given indicator, with parity equal to one (UNESCO, 2004:5). Generally there is a prevalence of males in all fields of education at the tertiary level all over the world. In Swaziland however, the trend is different as shown in Table 1 below

Table-2: Student enrolment at UNISWA from 1997-98 to 2005-06.

Year	Enrolment	Male %	Female %
1997-08	3204	1626 (51)	1578 (49)
1999-00	3003	1557 (51)	1446 (49)
2001-02	3143	1578 (50)	1565 (50)
2003-04	3518	1738 (49)	1780 (51)
2005-06	3677	1898 (52)	1779 (48)

Source: University of Swaziland Records

Table 2 reveals that the number of female students enrolled at UNISWA has been, on the average, equal to that of males at about 50 percent. From this therefore one could conclude that equal access to university education between the sexes exist at UNISWA.

In the IDE, as Table 3 below shows, it appears that more females are catered for than males.

Table-3: Student enrolment at IDE from 1997-98 to 2005-06.

Year	Enrolment	Male %	Female %
1997-08	224	115 (51)	109 (49)
1999-00	546	232 (42)	314 (58)
2001-02	1055	438 (42)	617 (58)
2003-04	1447	623 (43)	824 (57)
2005-06	1943	837 (43)	1,106 (57)

Source: University of Swaziland Records

Table 3 shows that most students over 57% of them in IDE are females. The IDE statistics therefore show, how the Institute has opened up opportunities for women to access university education and thus promoting gender parity and gender equality in education.

2. Issue of Gender Representation Across Programmes

Another issue on gender parity and equality is whether the female students are equally represented in all programmes or not. Table 4 below shows the representation of females on all the programmes offered by UNISWA for academic year 2004-05 and 2005-06.

Table-4: Student Enrolment in the University of Swaziland Faculty wise and Gender wise in 2005/06.

Faculty	Male	Female	Total
Agriculture	444	317	761
	(58)	(42)	(100)
Education	159	177	336
	(47)	(53)	(100)
Humanities	237	337	574
	(41)	(59)	(100)

Science	253	337	574
	(67)	(33)	(100)
Social Science	347	315	662
	(52)	(48)	(100)
Commerce	312	285	597
	(52)	(48)	(100)
Health Sciences	121	196	317
	(38)	(62)	(100)
Post-Graduate Studies	25	25	50
	(50)	(50)	(100)
I.D.E	837	1,106	1,943
	(43)	(57)	(100)
Total	2,735	2,885	5,620
	(49)	(59)	(100)

Source: University of Swaziland Records.

From the above Table, it is clear that certain programmes like Education, Humanities and Health Sciences (Nursing mostly) have a very high proportion of females than males. Programmes like Science and Agriculture tend to have a very high proportion of males. Thus, one can conclude that despite the equal representation of males and females at UNISWA, as seen in Table 1, the females tend to be under-represented in the hard Sciences and in Agriculture.

Table 5 below shows the representation of females in all the programmes offered in IDE for the academic years 2004-05 and 2005-06.

Table-5: Student Enrolment in IDE – Programme wise and Gender wise 2005/06

Programme	Male	Female	Total
Certificate in French	2	6	8
	(25)	(75)	(100)
Diploma in Commerce	222	187	409
	(54)	(46)	(100)
Diploma in Law	340	401	741
	(46)	(54)	(100)
Bachelor of Arts	225	449	674
	(33)	(67)	(100)
Bachelor of Education	21	30	51
	(41)	(59)	(100)
Bachelor of Commerce	27	33	60
	(45)	(55)	(100)
Total	837	1,106	1,943
	(43)	(57)	(100)

Source: University of Swaziland Records.

The table again reveals certain programmes that have a high proportion of females like Certificate in French (languages) 75 percent B.A. Humanities degree 67 percent, and B.Ed 59 percent. It is only in the Diploma in Commerce where there is a high proportion of males than females, i.e., 54% Vs 46%. Again here it is apparent that IDE is doing a good job in providing educational opportunities for females in all the academic areas and thus making a big contribution towards gender parity and gender equality.

3. Issue of Academic Performance and Gender

To get a good measure of gender parity and equality, it is necessary that the academic achievement of both sexes be considered as some institutions can provide the access and the female representation on all the programmes but have the females perform poorly and eventually be eliminated from the programmes. On this aspect, only IDE data was available for the B.A. Humanities programme for the academic years 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001. The results are as follows.

Table-6: Academic performance in the B.A. Humanities degree by gender

YEAR	SUBJECT	MEAN (MALE)	MEAN (FEMALES)	PROBABILITY
1997/98	African Languages & Literature	49.64	53.88	0.052*
	English Language & Literature	53.36	57.03	0.149
	History	61.19	62.38	0.693
	Theology & Religious Studies	60.45	59.63	0.72
	Overall Performance	54.18	57.15	0.062*
1998/99	African Languages & Literature	50.5	55.33	0.196
	English Language & Literature	61.05	60.33	0.149
	History	57.91	60.53	0.178
	Theology & Religious Studies	62.43	60.04	0.212
	Overall Performance	59.19	59.29	0.951
1999/00	African Languages & Literature	53.5	54.75	0.836
	English Language & Literature	57.11	57.5	0.918
	History	59.75	61.65	0.356
	Theology & Religious Studies	63.43	56.9	0.014*
	Overall Performance	59	56.98	0.432
2000/01	African Languages & Literature	53.5	57.93	0.47
	English Language & Literature	59.56	59.47	0.963
	History	62	62.44	0.821
	Theology & Religious Studies	64.5	62.35	0.394
	Overall Performance	61	61.54	0.681

Source: Compiled and calculated from IDE Records.

Table 6 shows the mean scores for both females and males for each subject from 1998 to 2001. It appears that most of the mean scores for the males and females are similar except for the following.

1. The 1997-98 mean difference between the sexes appears significantly different in African Languages with the probability of 0.052. This means that the difference between the performance of males and the females is significant and that the females performed better than the males.

2. The 1990-00 mean difference between the sexes appears significantly different in Theology and Religious Studies with the probability of 0.014. This means that the difference between the performance of males and females is significant and that the males performed better than the females on this subject.
3. The 1997-98 overall performance between the sexes appeared significantly different with the probability of 0.062. This means that the difference between the overall performance of the males and females is significant and that the females performed better than the males overall.

CONCLUSION

On the issue of access to university education, the above data has revealed that the IDE has provided more access than the conventional full-time face-to-face UNISWA programmes. It means that the distance education system is more convenient for women, especially housewives and those who are employed.

This finding supports that the distance education plays a crucial role in achieving the gender parity and increasing literacy rate in general and among women in particular. Thus, to increase life choices among women distance education is a suitable alternative. However, using the gender lens to interpret the above tables we can advance the argument that the content of educational programmes for both male and female students also matters. For example, the programmes offered at the IDE are more concentrated on the "softer subjects" mainly humanities and education. The learners who, for one reason or another, could not be enrolled in the conventional system now pursue their higher studies through distance education mode. The IDE does not offer any programme in critical fields like the sciences. This down plays the positive strides made in the wider conventional university. Hence, gender stereotyping in the choice of careers and areas of study are restricted at the IDE while they are more pronounced in the conventional face-to-face university. Therefore, there is a need on the part of IDE to introduce the market oriented or job oriented programmes which offer sufficient means of empowerment to help the students in their careers.

Coming to academic performance, our analysis has revealed that the female students who enroll in IDE, perform as well as their male counterparts, if not better, as seen in academic year 1997-98. This means that the IDE increased access for females to university education, enables the females to enroll in a variety of programmes, while at the same time they performed as well as the males in their studies.

Based on the findings of this study therefore, it would appear that the IDE is playing a critical role in gender parity, equality and in empowering women. This contributes immensely to Swaziland's achievement of goal number three of the MDG's that of promoting gender equality and women empowerment.

References

Akinkgube, O. and Kunene, V. (2001) Education Financing and Budgetary Reforms in Africa: The Swaziland Case Study, Paris: ADEA & CODESIRA

Fagerlind, I. and Saha, L. (1992) Education and national Development, 2nd edition. Butterworth: Heinemann

FAWESWA (2000), Needs Assessment Report on Teenage Young Mothers Forum for African Women Educationalists – Swaziland.

Jenkins, J (2002) 'Some Trends in Distance Education in Africa: An Examination of the Past and Future Role of Distance Education as a Tool for National Development, 'Distance Education 10(1)
http://www1.worldbank.org/disted/Policy/National/diff_02.html (Retrieved on 2 December, 2004)

Leach, F. (1988) 'Gender on the aid agenda: men, women and educational opportunity' in Drake, P. and Owen, P. (eds.) Gender and Management- Issues in Education, Staffordshire: Trentham

Leach, F. (2003) Practising Gender Analysis in Education. Oxfam : London

Magagula, C.M. (2003) 'Distance Education: Is it a solution for University Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, www2.ncsu.edu/aern/cisedu.pdf

Obanya, P (2004) Promoting basic education for women and girls. UNESCO: Paris

Saint, W. (1999) University Distance Education and Technology in Sub-Saharan Africa, Washington DC: World Bank

Stromquist, N. (1996) 'The World Bank's University Education Report and its Implications for Women' http://infoeagle.bc.edu/bc_org (Retrieved on 22 November, 2004

Swaziland Government (1975), Report of the National Education Commission 1975, Ministry of Education, Mbabane.

UNESCO Common Country Assessment Report (1997)- Swaziland Government, Paris.

UNESCO Global Monitoring Report, (2004) Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality, Paris.

UNESCO Global Monitoring Report, (2005) Education for All: The Quality Imperative, Paris.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP:1995), Human Development Report: Gender and Human Development,

World Bank (2000) University Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise, Washington DC: World Bank

[Back to Papers](#)