

# *The Gender Dimension of Open and Distance Learning*

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*The Fourth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open and Distance Learning (PCF4)*

*Ocho Rios, Jamaica  
2 November 2006*

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## **Introduction**

The Fourth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open and Distance Learning is an important opportunity for all of us engaged in Open and Distant Learning to reaffirm our commitment to the provision of education for all and to gauge the level of our contribution to fighting poverty and thus release the brakes to the development processes in our societies.

We should start by acknowledging the fact that provision of education has taken centre stage in the development processes of our countries.

It is gratifying to note that, across the board, there is increased seriousness in tackling the challenges to education provision in areas of enrolment, retention, quality, financing and management of education systems.

It is, indeed fascinating to watch the great enthusiasm displayed by our governments and education providers in reporting the advances they have made in increasing enrolments or improving quality in their various efforts to meet the Millennium Development and Education for All goals.

In some areas, there is indeed, cause for celebration. The Millennium Development Goals report of 2006, tells us, for example, that between 1990 and 2004 net enrolment ratio in primary education in the developing region, has risen from 79 to 86 and in Sub Sahara Africa from 53 to 64.

Of course, we can still say that, since education is a basic human right for every person, governments should not show too much enthusiasm for such small increases in enrolment ratios and that celebrations should be pegged at 100% achievement.

However, in the true spirit of educational psychology, we should always acknowledge small gains while

we continue to hammer the point that education is indeed, a human right and there is no resting until every citizen has accessed it.

## Open And Distance Learning And Achievement Of Development Goals

As ODL advocates and practitioners, we celebrate the fact that by ratifying the MDGs or the EFA Declarations, our governments have had no option but to address the challenges to the provision of education to all our people. We further celebrate, that, in a way, the desperation to achieve the MD and EFA goals has speeded up governments' recognition of the potential ODL presents in expanding opportunities for access to education at all levels.

Compared to ten years back, there is today, broader acceptance by governments of the power of ODL in providing learning opportunities to large numbers of people and thus contributing significantly to the ongoing global efforts to meet the Millennium Development and Education for All goals. This explains the increased attention to ODL in national education policies and plans.

Regardless of how ODL came to the development agenda, this forum must acknowledge, with appreciation, the growth, during the last decade, of ODL as a legitimate and formidable media for education provision to young people and adults across the world.

There is a lot of evidence to that fact in the various presentations in this forum.

Since this forum is full of experts in ODL, there is no need to belabour the point about the successes of ODL, which we believe are common knowledge to us all.

It is necessary, however, to point out that the legitimacy of ODL in the development agenda will be measured by the contribution it makes towards easing the challenges faced in the global efforts to eliminate poverty and build a world of peace, dignity and prosperity.

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It is not sufficient to simply acknowledge the potential of ODL in education provision. An analysis must be undertaken on the extent to which ODL is contributing towards any positive development to the welfare of our people.

We know, for example, that even though today net enrolment ratios in primary education have increased to 86% in the developing regions, there are many countries which fall far short of this regional average. EFA reports show, that in some countries, including for example, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mali and Niger, less than 50% of primary school age children are enrolled in school. Similar situations prevail in other parts of the developing world.

It is also true that even in countries where great leaps in gross enrolment to grade one have been recorded, such as Uganda and Malawi, large numbers of children drop out of school before grade three. And it goes without saying that the world seems at a loss on how to reduce the embarrassingly large numbers of adult illiterates (some 800 million), which seem to be worsened the many young adults who continue to drop out of school before attaining sufficient levels of literacy.

Even though the percentage of people living in extreme poverty in the developing world region decreased from 28% in 1990 to 19% in 2002, there is indication that poverty is either intensifying or remaining constant in some regions. In Sub Sahara Africa, for example, 140 million people live in extreme poverty.

There is a clear link between poverty and people's inability to access education. The influx of children to school once the governments introduce free primary education is proof to this fact. In Malawi, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, for example, enrolment at grade one more than doubled with the introduction of free primary education.

It is also sad to note that in 2006, there are 12 million children, in Sub Sahara Africa alone, orphaned by HIV/AIDS, whose chances for enrolment or retention in any type of education are highly at risk.

Another sad fact is the spread of armed conflict to more and more countries, leading to massive displacements of populations, and total destruction of education systems and infrastructure, forcing millions of children and adults out of schools and other education institutions.

As education policy makers and practitioners we know that there are a host of other factors that seriously impinge on the ability of our countries to provide education to everybody. Even where basic education is free, many children are still out of school. Child labour, distance from school, un-conducive learning environment, mismanagement of education systems are but a few examples.

We are also aware that without dealing with these challenges, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for our countries to attain the Education for All or the Millennium Development goals and with that fail to raise the level of development of our people.

### **So where is ODL positioned in relation to these challenges?**

These are serious issues that call for critical attention and continued analysis and action. Again, it is my belief that as ODL practitioners, you have extensively dealt with these issues, both at the theoretical and practical level.

### **For the purposes of this address, it is my wish to spend the remaining time focusing on the gender dimension of the issues raised and its implications for ODL.**

Having been in this field for a long time, I know that about some ten years ago, once someone started talking about gender, some form of restlessness descended on the audience. But I am glad to say that I have lived long enough to witness a revolution in this area, brought about by the realization that gender inequality cannot be part of the equation of development. As such the majority of us today do not shy away from gender.

On the other hand though, I do hope that by the time I am through with this address, some level of restlessness will indeed visit this audience today, but for a different reason, that is, the urge for ODL to pay more serious attention to attainment of gender equality.

## Gender And Development

Just as we celebrate the advances made in the recognition of ODL, there is cause to be proud of the huge advances made in acknowledging gender equality as a legitimate prerequisite for development and the tremendous work that has gone into exposing the gender-based hindrances to the welfare of our societies.

In a relentless search for ways of ensuring that both men and women have equal opportunities to and equal returns from the development processes, as well as equal protection of the human rights of both sexes, vigorous analysis of the gender dimension of development has been undertaken. Many theories have been advanced and models on how to integrate gender in the development processes developed. Approaches have moved from that of Women in Development to Gender and Development and to the Women Empowerment framework, among others.

In the process, many gender - based hindrances to development have been identified. Major among them include; the deeply entrenched patriarchal economic and social structures that have for centuries relegated the women to an inferior and disadvantaged position to men.

In most societies, women have no right to ownership of the means of production nor the returns there - from, legal and governance structures deny women many rights, cultural values and attitudes and socialization processes condition the society to believe and enforce the superiority of man over woman.

It became clear early on that gender equality in development cannot be realized without the elimination of these structural forms of gender inequalities that permeate all spheres of life.

In attempt to do so, numerous steps have been taken, at all levels, to fight these various forms of gender inequality.

Globally, the United Nation has been at the forefront in asserting gender equality as a basic human right. This is manifested in the various UN conventions and declarations to which governments have had the obligation to ratify. These include, among others;;

- The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1981
- Nairobi Forward -Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, 1985
- The Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, 1995
- The Millennium Development Goals, New York 2000
- And numerous other regional and national commitments to gender.

Numerous global, regional, sub regional and national fora have also been organized as a means to constantly keep gender on the development agenda.

At the national level, governments action has included creation of ministries in charge of gender issues, legal reforms to provide equal rights to both men and women, elimination of gender discriminatory laws especially those relating to ownership of property, inheritance and marriage, setting up of gender desks in sector ministries, provision of equal access to education for both boys and girls and reducing the gender gap in governance structures especially through the promotion of women into senior decision making positions.

All these conventions and declarations have helped to consistently put the limelight on gender in relation to development.

Besides the UN and government -led efforts, we need to pay special tribute to the critical role played by the civil society and gender activists in this area. Indeed, the gender transformation witnessed today would not have come to being without the relentless commitment to the cause by the civil society.

It is gratifying to note that, as a result of all these efforts, today, many governments know for sure that inter-grating the gender dimension in development processes **is not an option neither is it politically correct to omit gender in their development policies and plans for all sectors.**

I have taken the liberty to spend some time to give this background, just in case there are people in this audience who may be harbouring the idea that gender can be treated as optional in the provision of ODL. It is important for all of us engaged in any development effort to realize that gender is not option and that all serious minded people are engaged in the processes of mainstreaming gender in all aspects of development.

If we were to allow the omission of gender in our ODL undertakings, we shall be running the risk of being left on the wayside by the mainstream development processes, which will seriously question our claim that ODL is an important part to the development of human kind.

At this juncture, I wish to take note that gender gaps in education in some regions, are tipped against the boys and men. This is particularly true in the Caribbean region and indeed in pockets of countries in other regions as well. Pastoral communities or those engaged in fishing, small scale mining communities, for example also tend to have more boys out of school, though for different reasons.

I do therefore anticipate the legitimate question which has of recent become pertinent; **What about the boys?**

This is a matter which is receiving increasing attention. There is, indeed, urgent need to analyze the forces at play in causing this type of gender disparities.

It is misleading, however, to assume, as is often is the case, that the same analysis used for gender inequality against girls and women can be automatically used to argue a case for the gender inequality against boys and men.

We also need to be careful not to equate boys or men' underachievement in education with the structural socio-economic marginalization of women. But of course, this is not to say that the gender equality in favour of boys and men is not important. Indeed, gender is about the equal relations and rights for both men and women.

For the purposes of this presentation, and for the simple fact that I have not myself sufficiently engaged in studying the structural socio-economic forces leading to gender disparities against men, my analysis in this address is limited to factors of gender inequalities leading to the marginalization of girls and women.

I however, take this opportunity to call upon all of us who are concerned about gender discrimination against boys and men to translate our concerns into more studies and to provide more rigorous analysis to the discourse on this matter to guide action to address the disparities.

## Gender Equality In Education

### **How has the education sector fared in the struggles for gender equality ?**

The education sector, in general, has witnessed numerous efforts to attain gender equality, backed by the realization that education is the key to development.

It has been proved, for example, that the education of women significantly enhances the health, education and economic welfare of the family. The Millennium Development Goals report of 2006 states, for example, that survival rates of children of mothers with at least a secondary education are twice as high as those for children with less educated mothers. The under - five mortality rate for children with mothers with secondary education stands at 82 per 1,000 live births as compared to 157 for children with uneducated mothers.

Such evidence, coupled with the broad acceptance that education is a basic human right, accounts for the inclusion of specific gender goals in the EFA and the Millennium Development Goals namely;

**"Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality" ( EFA goal no 2 )**

**"Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality"( EFA goal no 5 MDG no 3 )** Let me remind us here that unfortunately, we have already missed this target.

**" Achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults"( EFA goal no 4. )**

The past fifteen years have witnessed many interventions at policy and implementation levels towards meeting these gender equality goals in the education sector.

The following are some examples;

**At policy level**, interventions have included the following:

- Policy analysis of education policies and plans for gender responsiveness.
- Sustained advocacy to raise the awareness of education policy makers and planners on the importance of gender equality in education.
- Development of gender mainstreaming and gender auditing tool.
- Mainstreaming gender in education policies and plans.
- Establishment of policies specific to addressing gender-based constraints to participation in education. Examples of such policies include;

- Formulation nation education gender policies;
- Institution of free and compulsory basic education;
- Provision of scholarships to needy girls;
- Affirmative admission policies to reduce the gender gap;
- Institution of re entry to school after delivery for schoolgirls who get pregnant;
- Legal provisions against such practices as early marriage and sexual harassment to curb non-enrolment and ensure retention of girls in school.

**At the practical level** examples of interventions include:

- Sustained advocacy to raise awareness of education practitioners, parents and the community at large on the importance of sending girls to school and supporting their retention.
- Increasing places for schooling through construction of more schools.
- Provision of boarding facilities for girls to address distances from school and domestic chores constraints to learning.
- Review of curriculum, teaching and learning materials for gender responsiveness.
- Training teachers into gender responsive pedagogy.
- Empowerment of girls with skills to overcome gender challenges and empowerment of boys to respect and practice gender equality.
- Transformation of school environments to become gender responsive academically, physically and socially. This includes provision of sanitary facilities such as separate toilets for boys and girls, water and sanitary wear.
- Making school management systems gender responsive and equipping them with skills with which to handle such issues as sexual harassment, bullying and other forms of gender discrimination.
- Promoting equal participation of both boys and girls in Science, maths and Technology subjects.

All these efforts, have resulted in significant achievements in reducing the gender gaps in access, retention and achievement as well as raising the gender awareness of education providers.

What we need to recognize at this forum, therefore, is that there is already serious engagement in the area of gender equality in education and that significant advances have been made to move the gender agenda from a mere topic for debate to concrete policy provisions interventions and practical interventions on the ground.

ODL practitioners could therefore, learn and benefit from the gains of these undertakings in whatever action we may take towards achieving gender equality in ODL.

That said, it is a fact that various forms of socially constructed gender inequities and inequalities continue to foster gender gaps in education. For example, in many parts of the developing world, cultural practices, values and attitudes such as early marriage and domestic labour continue to impact negatively on enrolment, retention and achievement of the girl child.

Retention of girls in school is further complicated by teenage pregnancies, lack of gender responsiveness in the teaching and learning processes, the school physical, social and academic environment, as well as in the attitudes of the teachers and the school community as a whole.

Similarly, performance and achievement are affected by such factors as negative attitudes of teachers towards the ability of the girls to perform well especially in Mathematics, Science and Technology subjects and cultural conditioning that erodes the girls' own self confidence in their ability for academic achievement.

School management systems are still unable to effectively eliminate sexual harassment.

In the case of HIV/AIDS infection of parents, girls continue to miss classes to care for the sick or drop out completely to fend for their siblings after the parents die. UNAIDS statistics also tell us that the HIV infection for girls of the 15 to 24 age group is about five times higher than boys of the same age.

Poverty, coupled with attitudes that do not put value on educating the girl child, continue to lead to massive non enrolment or withdrawal of girls from school.

## Gender Equality In ODL

All these challenges within the convention class room -based education systems lead to a large pool of girls and women who either, have not had the opportunity to access education or have had to drop out before attaining the required levels of education or girls and women whose academic performance has been negatively affected leading to their inability to advance to higher levels.

### **Where then, is the implication of this gender scenario to ODL?**

The implication of this situation to ODL is that ODL should move beyond simply advocating itself as a unique opportunity to provide education to large numbers, which of course it does. There is no denying the fact that ODL broadens opportunities for more women to access education, as a first or second chance. ODL should see itself as having the additional and bound duty to address the gender imbalances, inequities and inequalities which the overall education sector is struggling with or is even unable to handle.

It is important for ODL practitioners to realize that our legitimacy in the world will be acquired through basing our work on the philosophy that education is a human right and that our programmes cannot be flagged around as success stories unless there is clear evidence of gender equality.



Since innovation underpins ODL provision, we should also see an opportunity for ODL to provide a formula for gender equality in education provision where the classroom - based education and other modes of education provision have not succeeded.

We acknowledge that, in addition to offering first or second chance for education, ODL offers convenient modes of learning, particularly for women with young families, who find it difficult to enroll in classroom - based education institutions away from home. We should not forget the point that sometimes both men and women are attracted to ODL because it offers more innovative and exciting teaching and learning processes compared to the traditional classroom chalk and talk methodologies.

In addition, we acknowledge that, debate is already ongoing in ODL circles, drawing our attention to the need to address gender concerns in ODL as manifested, among other things, by the number of presentations on gender at this forum, which have included promising examples of expanding gender equality in ODL.

**It is true, however, that most ODL programmes cannot claim any significant levels of gender equality.**

It is necessary, therefore, for this forum to **interrogate further** the position of ODL in relation to gender equality and pose a few questions that could challenge or reinvigorate ongoing efforts to attain gender equality in access, retention and achievement in the ODL sector.

**One question is, has the ODL sector sufficiently interrogated, articulated and analyzed the gender construction in which ODL is delivered?**

Gender interrogation should not stop at simply knowing how many learners are participating in ODL programmes, but include an exposition of the gender face of the population of learners.

Our questions must include the need to know how many of the learners are male and how many are female? How many learners are dropping out? How many men? How many women?

What are the forces leading to the drop out of male learners and that of female learners?

What are the gender factors relating to the accessibility of the media we employ in ODL delivery? Do women and men have equal access to ICT for example?

Of the learners who are enrolling or who are completing their education cycle, what is their class, regional, religious gender face?

Where do the male and female graduates go? Is ODL empowering women to improve their disadvantaged employability?

It is most likely that such an interrogation will reveal that the same gender -based forces, mentioned earlier as affecting progress in attaining gender equality in the overall education sector also impede gender equality in the provision of ODL. Let us look at some examples:

- **Early marriage-** Many school girls are still withdrawn from school and forced into early marriage. What chance does a fourteen year old girl who has dropped out of school because of forced marriage have to engage in any form of ODL?

- **Unfavourable division of labour at the household level** - Excessive domestic chores have been identified as a factor negatively affecting attendance and performance at school. Does this factor impact on ODL as well? Has any research been undertaken to expose how or whether ODL learners deal with excessive domestic chores and avoid the likely negative impact on their studies? Given the opportunity, would women maybe perform better in a campus based learning environment than at home where there is continuous demand on their time from household chores, family, relatives and the community at large? Do women go for ODL because it is a better option or rather because it is the only option available to them? Is the ODL environment positive to the learning needs of both men and women?
- **Lack of gender responsive teaching and learning materials** - To what extent is ODL curriculum, teaching and learning materials gender responsive?
- **Lack of gender disaggregated data**- is there any gender disaggregated data on ODL programmes?
- **Negative attitudes towards women and their ability to learn**- How does ODL deal with parents, teachers and community members who do not put value on educating girls and women and who may therefore prevent them from participating in ODL programmes just as they refuse to put them in the conventional school?
- **Poverty** - In most cases women do not own property or control family resources. In such cases, how do women afford the cost of ODL. It is argued, though with some controversy, that ODL is in most cases more affordable than classroom - based learning. However, for women who normally do not control family resources, has any study been conducted to determine to what extent poverty impacts negatively on ODL, especially for women?
- **The impact of HIV/AIDS** - As mentioned earlier, there are millions of HIV/AIDS orphans. It is also known that girls are more likely than boys to miss classes to care for sick parents or drop out of school altogether to take care of their siblings on the death of parents. So even if ODL was to offer a second chance to education for these orphans, how does the girl child orphan, already saddled with the responsibility to care for her siblings, effectively participate in any ODL programmes?
- **The impact of armed conflict** - In conditions of armed conflict, massive populations are normally displaced and education structures entirely disrupted. Both ODL and other forms of education provision are equally negatively affected. Both men and women are adversely affected by armed conflict. But we are aware of the fact that girls and women suffer additional inhumanities in times of war, in particular rape and being forced to become wives of soldiers. Many young girls come out of war with children resulting from rape and are normally seriously traumatized. Provision of education in post conflict situation, therefore includes dealing with teenage mothers who are also psychologically challenged.

Unless all these factors are thoroughly analyzed and steps taken to institute gender responsive ODL policies and programmes, it will take a long time for the provision of ODL to attain gender equality and pride itself of making significant contribution to development.

Another question is why do ODL practitioners allow our governments to come up with gender policies, plans and programmes that only target conventional school based education provision?

The following are some examples:

- Free and compulsory basic education, mostly referring to primary schooling.
- Establishment of units to generate gender disaggregated data at primary, secondary and higher education levels.
- Provision of scholarships to the needy at primary, secondary and the higher education levels. These scholarships are in most cases given to schools although students of Public Open Universities are increasingly included as recipients.
- Introduction of policies for re - entry to school for girls who get pregnant.
- Legal sanctions against early marriage or non-enrolment of girls in school.
- Affirmative admission to increase enrolment of girls to school at primary, secondary and higher education levels.
- Sensitization of communities to support girls' education with emphasis on enrolment and retention in school.
- Provision of boarding facilities to address distances from school
- Review of school curriculum, teaching and learning materials for gender responsiveness
- Increasing the number of female teachers in rural schools to serve as models for girls.
- Construction of separate toilets for boys and girls.

### **Where are the ODL-targeted gender policies and programmes?**

This points to a need for gender awareness raising among the ODL practitioners themselves so that they can advocates for ODL gender responsive policies and programmes.

Secondly, there is need for ODL to take into serious consideration the need to develop its own core of gender expertise. This can be done through re orientation and retraining of the existing gender experts to extend their skills to ODL and to include ODL. For example, we should require of the gender desks in our ministries of education to be well trained into the gender dimension of ODL.

This does not preclude the need to train new experts, specifically targeting the gender equality requirements for ODL. In fact there is great need to develop a vibrant gender discourse for ODL so as to avoid pushing ODL to the margins of the ongoing gender equality in education undertakings. But for that to happen, gender in ODL discourse must be grounded in well researched and clearly understood development frameworks. For that reason, ODL needs to strengthen its research base and put gender equality research in ODL at the same rank as gender research in other sectors.

## Challenges

As I move towards the conclusion let me point out that ODL practitioners may wish to take cognizance of the major challenges gender in education is struggling with and which are likely to impact negatively on ODL as well.

The following are some examples:

- **Artificial treatment of gender in policy and plans documents;** Even though, as mentioned earlier great strides have been taken to mainstream gender in education policy and plans documents, there is still a tendency to treat gender artificially. There is what we refer to as the Cross cutting issues syndrome. Ideally, gender must be treated as crosscutting to all aspects of education delivery. However, a review of policy documents normally review that gender is tucked away in a neat little paragraph towards the end of the documents which states that gender is a cross cutting issue. But an analysis of the whole document reveals that gender is not crosscutting at all since it will not feature in the objectives, strategies, monitoring and evaluation or the budget provisions. But that paragraph becomes the ministry' defence that indeed, they have mainstreamed gender.

**The challenge for gender in ODL therefore is how to avoid to be confined to that little paragraph.**

**Slow and inadequate translation of policy into concrete action on the ground;** Whereas some significant gains have been recorded in mainstreaming gender, the translation of these policies and plans into concrete action on the ground has fallen far short of expectations.

**The challenge for ODL and the education sector as a whole, is how to effect action on the ground and achieve genuine gender transformation in our communities.**

- **Persistent negative cultural factors;** The persistence of deeply entrenched negative cultural values, attitudes and practices, make it extremely difficult to bring about meaningful change in gender relations in our societies. The gender construction characterized by unequal relations in all spheres of life and the mind set that fosters it abound and people of all levels, even those with significant levels of education, are often not responsive to gender equality in their day to day lives and undertakings. This therefore greatly hinders progress in achieving gender equality in education or other development processes.

**ODL, therefore, needs to join forces with others to transformation this deeply entrenched cultural gender construction which will otherwise continue to negate our efforts for progress.**

## Conclusion

We could indeed, go on and on to list the many areas that ODL needs to address, but it is our belief that the restlessness alluded to earlier has already dawned on us. Should that be the case, as we hope it is, then it is time for action. Only concrete action will make ODL be seen as a viable route to achieving what to us is a basic human right, the treatment of men and women as equal human beings in the provision of education. This, ladies and gentlemen, is a basic and vital pillar for our development, for our dignity.

I thank you all for your kind attention.

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