

Bridging the Gender Gap in Education through Open and Distance Learning: The Case of Doctorate Students in some Cameroonian Universities

BY

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Abstract

This study focuses on societal and cultural factors that cause gender inequality at the doctorate level in some Cameroonian universities, and how the use of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) can help address the gender inequalities. Specifically, the study seeks to find out how the marital status of women, tradition, and participation in decision-making can influence gender inequality at the doctorate level. In Cameroon research results reveal that gender inequality is high in higher education notably at the doctorate level. The study hypothesizes in the main that there is a significant relationship between socio-cultural factors and gender inequality at the doctorate level in some Cameroonian universities, and that ODL will help address the gender inequality. The population for the study consisted of female doctorate students from three private and public universities in Cameroon. The sample of selected respondents consisted of 63 female doctorate students chosen from the universities at random. Quantitative data was collected through questionnaires, while qualitative data was collected from focus group discussions. Secondary data was collected from documents and scientific studies carried out in this domain. Quantitative data was analyzed using the Chi-square (X^2) statistical analysis. Qualitative data was analyzed by describing the data and interpretation of meanings of the information supplied by the participants involving lessons learnt. The findings revealed that gender inequality exists at the doctorate level in some Cameroonian universities, and that ODL will help to bridge the gender gap. We recommend amongst others that women should be sensitized on the importance of ODL to them. The government should help fight gender blind policies, and all forms of socio-cultural practices that impede women's progress at the university.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equity is one of the goals of the United Nations Millennium Project to end world poverty by 2015. The project claims that every single goal is directly related to women's rights and societies where women are not afforded equal rights as men can never achieve development in a sustainable manner (United Nations Millennium Campaign, 2008). Thus, promoting gender equality is seen as an encouragement to greater economic prosperity. In the 1997 Human Development Report, the UNDP asserted that the starting point for eradicating poverty is to empower men and women and to ensure their participation in decisions that affect their lives. An important strategy for empowering women is to promote their access to education. Education is the basic tool that should be given to women in order to fulfil their roles as full members of the society (Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, 1985). According to Kwapong (2008), education is so critical that access should be created for women by all means. By its nature of overcoming time and space and meeting the learning styles of women who play triple roles in society, open and distance learning (ODL) is a sure way of making education accessible to women no matter their location, status and situation.

Although gender inequities manifest across a broad spectrum of societal organizations, for our purpose the unit of discussion will be universities. While we acknowledge that gender is not analogous to women, women are at the forefront of all gender debates because of the unequal treatment they have been subjected to over the years (Mathabe, 2009). We will give heightened focus to the socio-cultural factors that affect gender inequality in universities, notably at the doctorate level. This paper also advocates for the extensive use of ODL for promotion of education of women at the doctorate level, because as Kwapong (2008) says, statistics of distance learning institutions indicate a higher percentage of female enrolments as compared to men.

The Problem

Despite the potential benefits of female education, it is widely documented that there is a substantial gap in male and female education—"the educational gender gap" (Todaro 1997). There is

persistent gender imbalance in education in favour of males (Okojie, 2001). A number of social and institutional barriers remain, which impair girls' performance in school, and combine to prevent young women from reaching university in equal numbers to young men (Huggins & Randell, 2007). In Africa in general, and Cameroon in particular, despite substantial strides towards promoting gender equality and empowering women in some areas, women still face enormous constraints. The UN Millennium Development Goal Report (2006) noted a failure in gender parity in the attainment of educational objectives as highlighted by the MDG3 objective which states the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women (Department for International Development, 2007). It seems unlikely, given the progress made for Cameroon to attain most of the MDG3 objectives before the deadline set for the full implementation of all the MDGs in view of halving poverty by 2015 (MDG progress report, 2002; 2003).

The traditional African society displays a stereotype setting in which the man is seen as the head of the family, the decision maker, and the one who earns a living for the family, while the woman is placed in the disadvantaged position. Women are left with the responsibility over domestic duties, coupled with their role as mothers. In this situation, they are deprived of the time to study; hence their performance in school is affected negatively.

Despite all the advantages of female education, and despite all the efforts at closing the gender gap in education by international bodies, gender inequality still persists in education, notably higher education. This is a cause for concern. This study will therefore find out the socio-cultural factors that affect gender inequality at the doctorate level in some Cameroonian universities. It will also advocate for the extensive use of open and distance learning for the promotion of education of women at the doctorate level.

Research Questions

1. To what extent can marital status of women influence gender inequality at the doctorate level in Cameroonian universities?
2. How will tradition affect gender inequality at the doctorate level in Cameroonian universities?
3. How will participation in decision-making affect gender inequality in higher education in Cameroon?
4. How will the use of open and distance learning bridge the gender inequality at the doctorate level?

Objectives

1. To find out how marital status of women can influence gender inequality at the doctorate level in some Cameroonian universities.
2. To also find out how tradition will affect gender inequality at the doctorate level in Cameroonian universities?
3. To find out how participation in decision-making will affect gender inequality at the doctorate level in some Cameroonian universities.
4. To find out how the use of open and distance learning bridge the gender inequality at the doctorate level?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theory of Structural Functionalism

The theory of structural functionalism was developed by an American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1995), who served on the faculty of Harvard University from 1927 to 1973. Parsons (1959) functional analysis of the American family in the 1950s emphasized the division of labour between husband and wife which he saw necessary for family stability. He portrays the husband as the family representative to the world of work and the wife as providing emotional support to the family unit, preparing the husband each evening for his daily battles in the big world and training their children for eventually assuming similar duties. In turn, the husbands' job provides the income needed to keep family members alive and both husband and wife received encouragement for their efforts from the religious and political systems.

Parsons compared a strictly traditional view of gender roles to a more liberal view. Model A describes total separation of male and female roles, while Model B describes the complete dissolution between gender roles. Model A brings out total role segregation, where high professional qualification is important only for the man. Education and professional advancement is deemed unimportant for women because of their gender roles. And this is the issue being addressed in this research work which aims to bring out the socio-cultural factors affecting gender inequality in higher education.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the objectives of this study the sample survey design was used. The target population consisted of female doctorate students from Cameroonian universities. Meanwhile the sampled population consisted of 77 female doctorate students from three universities in Cameroon which are the University of Yaoundé 1, the University of Buea, and the Catholic University of Central Africa. The age range was between 21 and 55.

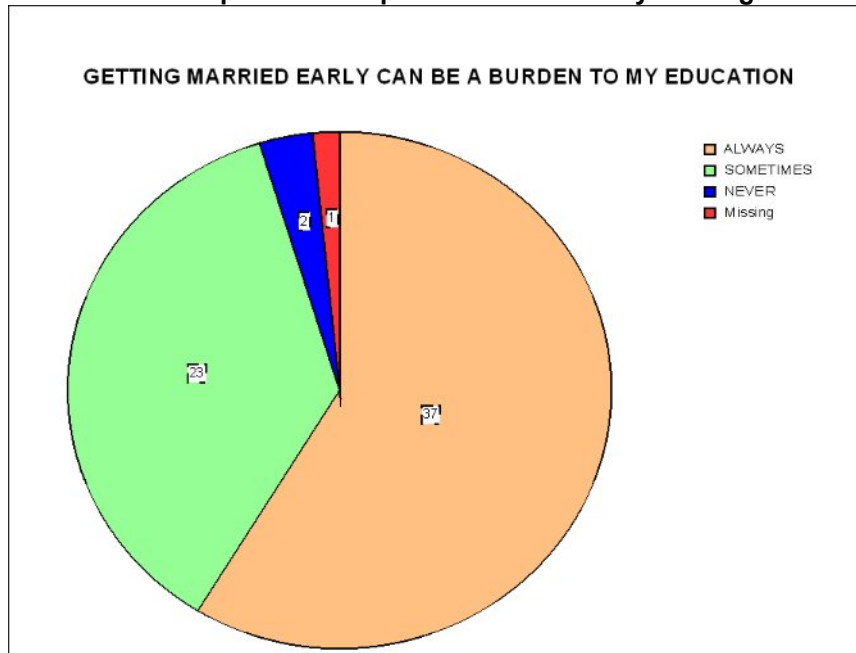
Following the table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), as cited by Amin (2005), determining the sample size for research activities, out of the 77 respondents who make up the population of this study, the sample population was made up of 63 female students at the doctorate level in the selected universities. The respondents were female students because they constitute the disadvantaged group and stand a better place to provide honest and sincere answers. We sampled 26 respondents from the University of Buea (41.3%); 31 respondents from the University of Yaounde 1, (49.2%); and 6 respondents from the Catholic University, 9.5%).

Even though the study is qualitative, data was collected quantitatively. Closed – ended questions were used for easy analysis of the information. To ensure validity and reliability, the central elements of the research were depicted in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was also pre-tested to ensure a good understanding of the level of comprehension of the respondents. Qualitative data was collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) with the respondents.

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Being a qualitative research, the SPSS program was deemed appropriate since the researcher had to illustrate, present and describe data using the different techniques of this program. The results were presented and discussed using tables, pie charts and percentages to show the characteristics of the sample. The statistical technique used to verify the hypothesis was the chi-square (χ^2) test of independent because of the nature of the data and because the study is a relational one.

PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Figure 1: Presentation of the opinion of respondents about early marriage and education



Source: Fieldwork 2011

From figure 1 above we realize that 58.7 % of the population was of the opinion that getting married early is a burden to their education always. 36.5% said it will be a burden to their education sometimes. 3% of the population said that getting married early will never be a burden to their education.

Table 1: Distribution of the population according to their opinion on child rearing and child bearing

Child bearing and child rearing are very engaging tasks

Response		Frequency	Percent
Valid	ALWAYS	58	92,1
	SOMETIMES	4	6,3
	NEVER	1	1,6
	Total	63	100,0

From table 1, 92% of the population was of the opinion that child bearing and child rearing are very engaging tasks always. 6% of the respondents were of the opinion that child rearing and child bearing were engaging tasks sometimes making a total of 98%. 2% of the sample population said it was never a very engaging task.

Table 2: Distribution of population according to their opinion on household chores

Household chores are time consuming

Response		Frequency	Percent
Valid	ALWAYS	45	71,4
	SOMETIMES	15	23,8
	NEVER	1	1,6
	Total	61	96,8
Missing	System	2	3,2
Total		63	100,0

Looking at table 2, we realize that 71.4 % of the population was of the opinion that household chores are time consuming always. 23.8 % say household chores are time consuming sometimes. Meanwhile 1.6% of the population was of the opinion that household chores are not time consuming.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents according to their opinion on looking after the needs of their husbands

Looking after needs of my husband is very tedious

Response		Frequency	Percent
Valid	ALWAYS	47	74,6
	SOMETIMES	8	12,7
	NEVER	1	1,6
	Total	56	88,9
Missing	System	7	11,1
Total		63	100,0

Table 3 above shows that 74.6 % of the sample population was of the opinion that looking after the needs of their husband is always very tedious. 12.7 % were of the opinion that looking after the needs of their husbands is very tedious sometimes. Meanwhile 1.6% of the population is of the opinion that it is not tedious.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents according to their opinions on cultural practices and women's right to education

Cultural practices in my village reduce women's right
to education

Response		Frequency	Percent
Valid	SOMETIMES	59	93,7
	NEVER	4	6,3
	Total	63	100,0

Looking at table 4, we realize that 93.7% of the sample population was of the opinion that cultural practices in their villages reduce women's right to education sometimes. 6.3% were of the opinion that cultural practices never reduce women's right to education.

Table 5: Distribution of population according to opinions of those who take final decisions concerning their homes in times of conflict

In case of conflict, my husband has the last say.

Response		Frequency	Percent
Valid	ALWAYS	50	79,4
	SOMETIMES	4	6,3
	NEVER	3	4,8
	Total	57	90,5
Missing	System	6	9,5
	Total	63	100.0

Looking at table 5, we realize that 79.4 % of the respondents were of the opinion that in times of conflict their husbands always have the last say in taking decisions. 6.3% of the respondents said their husbands have the last say sometimes. While 4.8 % say their husband never has the last say in times of conflict of decision-making in the home.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results of the study reveal a strong relationship between marital status and gender inequality at the doctorate level. Talcott Parsons theory of functionalism supports this view in model A, which portrays the husband as the family representative to the world of work and the wife as providing emotional support to the family unit, preparing the husband each evening for his daily battles in the big world and training their children for eventually assuming similar duties. This means that married women are more preoccupied with their domestic functions and have less time to study. The men rarely assist them because society has made them to believe that they are roles for women.

Qualitative data got from focus group discussions with some of the respondents in Yaounde 1 reveal that marital status was a strong determinant of gender inequality at the doctorate level. The respondents revealed during the discussions that when they got married they found it difficult to continue with studies due to household chores. Even when they attempt to go back to school, somewhere along the line they drop because of their domestic chores.

The results also reveal a relationship between tradition and gender inequality at the doctorate level. Because of our culture women are sometimes kept in the background or in the kitchen. Culture sometimes reduces women's right to education and promote gender stereotype. Several studies support this view. Sharma (2010) in his study reveals that girls' lack of access to education emerges from expectations, attitudes and biases in communities and families. Economic costs, social traditions, and religious and cultural beliefs limit girls' educational opportunities. From focus group discussions with the respondents we gathered that most women are not encouraged to go to school because of their tradition and religion, talk less of attaining doctorate level.

The results of the study also reveal a significant relationship between participation in decision-making and gender inequality at the doctorate level. Even though from the results of the study most of the women have a say when it comes to taking decisions in their homes, the husbands have the final say when there is conflict in taking the final decision. Talcott Parson supports this view in his theory of structural functionalism in model A where he talks about total role segregation. Women's low decision

making power, particularly in developing countries, is more pronounced at household level. If women cannot take decisions it therefore means that the husbands can decide whether or not their wives should go to school. Focus group discussions with the respondents also reveal that in most of their homes, even though they participate in decision-making, their husbands usually have the final say in times of conflict.

THE ROLE OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Institutions have realized that in order to enable many people in the society to benefit from education and improve their quality of life open and distance methods are important. This is because open and distance learning is a powerful tool for achieving educational and training needs and a potent instrument in creating a learning society capable of bringing about scientific, technological, social and economic development (Haaveshe, 2006). Open and distance learning which, according to Kwapong (2008) is an educational programme that is both open and offered at a distance, is a sure way of widening access to education most especially for women who according to the results of this study are marginalised. They will be able to combine work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities, because ODL is an educational philosophy that seeks to overcome/remove all the barriers to education. In ODL, the learner has control over pace, place, time and process. Hence it is often described as learner-centred. It is open in the sense that there are no barriers to accessing the programmes. UNESCO (2002) has explained that open and distance learning refers to approaches to learning that focus on freeing learners from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities.

CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

The main objective of this study was to find out the societal and cultural factors that impede women from fully participating at the doctorate level in some Cameroonian universities. The study also aimed at advocating for the extensive use of open and distance learning for the promotion of education of women. The results of the study reveal that there is a relationship between socio-cultural factors and gender inequality at the doctorate level. From the above conclusion we had the following recommendations:

The government should remedy the gaps in existing gender policies. They should use gender expertise in designing all policies and programs and raise awareness campaigns on the importance of ODL to women.

The university authorities should encourage a gendered perspective in research proposals. A strong research culture that encourages women will be a powerful tool in building their capacities.

Self-awareness education is necessary for women to boost their self-esteem, thereby encouraging them to further their education through ODL where they have multiple roles to play.

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