

Women Improvise “Learning Technologies” to Access Learning for Development: Increase Access and Success in Higher Education and Manage Family Roles

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INTRODUCTION

My paper explains a double achievement accomplished by Tanzanian women searching for “enabling learning environment” by improvising “learning technologies” that would combat women learning difficulties. The paper highlights the social cultural factors that limit women education development, then explains the improvised “learning technologies” undertaken and suggests the way forward. Burge and Haughey (2001) and Haughey & Phillips (2000) explaining the use of “learning technologies” noted that “learning technologies” encompass not only the use of tools such as audio, print, video, and computer applications, but also their wider concept involving their creative and informed applications and social effects, while Thompson (1983, p. 106) says that, unless women think much more deeply about themselves, make sense of their experiences and expectations in reference to their own needs and interests, and considers strategies of redefining the relationship with men in ways which will change the distribution of power and oppression to one of equality and respect, learning new roles will continue to be a poor substitute for the practice of freedom and liberation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Mhehe (2002) research on “Women’s Enrolment and Participation Issues at the Open University of Tanzania” (OUT) indicate that women education barriers originate from social cultural factors. A Women Focus Group (WFG) comprehended that only women can tell better the strategies to enable women study effectively. The standpoint was reached when the WFG noted that despite Tanzania declaration (1961) to develop its people through education the participation ratio of women was less than that of men. In 1996 President Mkapa inaugurating extra OUT offices at TIRDO urged women to invest their intellects in Open Distance Learning (ODL) for it is their only hope for attaining higher education. From this perspective, the WFG knowing that education is “key” to people’s livelihood dedicated efforts to help Tanzanian women through enhanced higher education access. They formed a women students’ Non Governmental Organization (NGO), named it the “Open University of Tanzania Women Students Organization” (OUTWSO) to help unite and coordinate women countrywide towards this realization.

The study was conducted between 1997 and 2000 for 18 months in 17 of the 25 regions of Tanzania. A research question, “what barriers keep women from enrolling for higher education with the Open University of Tanzania (OUT)” was used. I interviewed and discussed with over 280 people (OUT women students and their close women friends and relatives not studying, OUT personnel, achieving women educationists). I also collected and analyzed several OUT documents, organized on separate days one day 32 WFG from those who spoke well in the 17 regions and 21 OUT Regional Directors’ Focus Group (ORDFG) in Dar-Es-Salaam. The findings indicate two types of barriers limit women education development. Barriers associated with activities or non-activities of the OUT, and barriers related to the social-cultural context in which women students live (poor education and social background, cultural expectations for girls and women, women only issues, lack of support for girls’ education, lack of role models for girls in society, and control of women lives). I highlight the social cultural context and explain the improvised “learning technologies.”

SOCIAL CULTURAL FACTORS

The social-cultural context of women’s lives constraints women’s schooling. Tanzanians are strongly grounded in tribal cultures, particularly on the basis of sex-roles, property ownership, and aspects of life values that count as necessary for men and women to be accepted as normal persons in their communities.

Poor Education and Social Background

The research findings indicate that many girls/women doing university studies are underachieving due to poor socialization since childhood. Traditions prohibit many women from mixing in public to preserve their virginity and femininity (shy, tender, soft, none-argumentative) that is highly respected in marriage as this helps men to easily control women in marriage and society. Girls educated in girls' only secondary schools usually experience poorer teaching than boys in boys' only secondary schools because most female teachers are less qualified compared to males, and schools have poorer teaching facilities especially for science subjects. Added to this, are the traditions binding most girls to help their mothers with family chores (as training) which limit time for doing school work as boys get. So, in order to equalize women and men academic competence women must be supported by re-socialization into the public sphere and update their academic performance and aspirations through community education support services.

Cultural Expectations for Girls and Women

The ORDFG explained that many women do not enroll with university education because they are not aware, sensitized, or encouraged to know their basic rights in education. They believe more in "traditional views" that university education fits men more for women major role is to get married, bear and care for children, husband, family members and property. They see that if they are married and enroll with university studies it will contradict expected married roles in society and create conflict with spouses because, being married and studying at the same time will overburden women for they already have many tasks to do in the family. They feel university education destroys women's traditional value of being wives, mothers and home makers.

Women Only Issues

Achieving woman artist explained that women have too many "women only" issues embedded in women multi-roles, culture, and traditions. For instance, society subtly encourages forcing young girls into early marriage, and men deliberately plan to get cheap women for production, re-production, and care for them and their families. Men believe caring of offspring is the role of women alone. The WFG noted that women roles are repetitive, tedious, time consuming and unpaid. They occupy mind, time and energy every time throughout the year limiting women academic concentration and aspiration, financial power and status in society. But men have specific tasks such as employed jobs or business that earn them big money, social status, political and financial power in the family and society, and allow them time and energy to concentrate and focus on academic work; think, plan, and focus their aspiration; socialize, have recreation and relaxation which refresh and motivate studying and retention. The WFG also observed that, husbands like to see beautiful wife/wives giving birth and caring for their children and property in the families. This way, all housework in the family have become traditionally "a woman's responsibility only," and most women accept this condition while most men demand their wives to assume the role upon marriage for they believe this is what they married them for and traditions and religion approves. This way women education is limited by traditions that determine ideal life for men and women in the family and society and reject anything different.

One OUT female administrator said women oppression originates from lack of information and support on alternative choices. She said that some NGO's, relatives, government, and religious institutions are willing and capable of helping women achieve their university education, but the culture, traditions and religious beliefs are barriers. An achieving woman educationist presumed that the government controls men and leaves men to control women since the government do not put laws that protect the culture and traditions from oppressing women while they favoring men in their families and society. In this perspective the WFG observed from Thomson (1983) that:

unless women think much deeply about themselves, make sense of their experiences and expectations in reference to their own needs and interests, and consider strategies of redefining the relationship with men in ways which will change the distribution of power and oppression to one of equality and respect, learning new roles will continue to be a poor substitute for the practice of freedom and liberation. (p. 106)

Lack of Support for Girls' Education

One achieving woman educationist from FAWE explained that from childhood there are multiple, complex constraints, from different sources that limit women education. Parents, particularly fathers who have final say do not support daughters the same way as sons for they think after marriage daughters' education benefits husbands. Therefore, girls' education stop at any level and their other possible alternative is getting married as traditions consider ideal achievement.

Adolescence socialization done by illiterate elderly female relatives is another limitation where vicious circles of ignorant young females in society are created when they teach them that: early marriage is more important than higher education, men are more intelligent therefore should not be questioned, and women should not be heard in public or mix with men who are not their relatives. Girls believing in such notions lose self-esteem, confidence and capabilities do not get developed. As such, many mothers are not ideal models for daughters as fathers are for sons. In this perspective, OUTWSO realized in 2003 that a "Women Community Education Support Service Center Circle" is necessary so that willing achieving women may find ways to help less achieving women. An OUT founding female lecturer explained that women can study using any technology that men use, but first, they need technology that helps them finish quickly their family chores to get time and energy for studying. She noted that the government exacerbates women education limitations when opening more day educational (secondary, post-secondary) institutions. So, Tanzania today has big category of girls and women who do not aim high in education regardless of good education policies and governance.

Lack of Role Models for Girls in Society

OUT Regional Directors' Focus Group noted that many women have low status in families, communities, and places of work, this creates limitations related to uncooperative husbands, employers, and communities in general; while achieving woman educationist explained that, since culturally status of women in families and communities is low daughters fail to emulate them the way sons can emulate their fathers. So, most girls grow up lacking spirit and vision for competence and success in anything, therefore they need to be sensitized (empowered), guided, counseled, encouraged and supported to achieve their education and other development. This way achieving women must sacrifice extra willingness to help them.

Control of Women Lives

The research findings indicate that women are controlled from birth to death, do not have home or own property. Their mothers demand they help in family chores while their fathers or husbands have final say for all aspects of their lives. Society and the government in general, also control women when they attend school are expected to cope with male sexual harassments of all kinds in the streets, buses, school, at work and religious institutions. Practically no law in Tanzania controls effectively men from publicly sexual harassing women. If a girl gets pregnant outside wedlock she is treated an outcast by everybody (family, community, society) and the government demands she gets expelled from school. Expulsion from school normally leaves young girls prey of public prostitution as they try to cope with life there after, and for today's sexual health conditions, she immediately ends up contracting HIV/AIDS, spread it and die often with her child. It is this perspective the W F G was concerned "how can women voice out their education problems?" This necessitated the WFG initiating OUTWSO to help unite and coordinate willing women countrywide to find ways to mitigate the social cultural barriers. OUTWSO has initiated the WOCESSCC to provide ways of mitigating the social cultural factors as one OUT female lecturer told me that, women can study well using any "technology" men use, but first women need "technology" which can help them finish quickly (manage) their family chores to get the time and energy to study. (Mhehe, 2002), since one OUT woman student said that when she tries to study after completing her family chores her brain and whole body gets tired, her eyes closes and cannot remember what she read. (Mhehe, 2002)

WOMEN IMPROVISED LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

The WOCESSCC is the improvised "learning technology" (Burge and Haughey (2001) founded in 2003 by OUTWSO in their struggle (Thomson (1983) to find effective way of helping women "access learning for development: increase access and success in higher education and manage family roles" since education is "key" to their livelihood which also improves their children and family life. It is

located in Dar-Es-Salaam, Sinza-mori, in Kinondoni district. It is purposefully located, considering easy access, dense population with many primary and secondary schools and close to the Open University of Tanzania headquarters therefore provides good catchments for different levels of women with different needs of education support. It operates to enable women benefit from each other's support as the name suggests "support service center circle," meaning "women helping one another." The services provided are such that the seniors achieving in education, financially or socially can help (sensitize, motivate, guide, counsel, support, provide extra academic tuitions) the juniors, while the juniors can help the seniors (mothers, teachers and the educationally/financially achieving) look after children (feed, wash, watch play, wash dishes, take pre-scholars to and from day care as they walk to school.

The center to-date has managed provide various services supporting education achievement [pre-school cum day care; extra academic tuitions cum space for peer-group subject discussions and studying; guidance and counseling; computer training; social services (recreational resting/relaxing space) such as public TV/telephone, grocery/café, shop, stationary, saloon, hostel].

Since WOCESSCC inception, the first three months enabled six girls in grade six score 100% in mathematics for their first time in class tests, an event that made two female teachers from their schools come to the center to inquire how the center managed. Habiba whose father helped the center as watchman also improved her mathematics grades from 30/40% to 80% for the first time. Her father thanked me for the support. He explained that despite Habiba repeating grade five she was still scoring 30/40% in mathematics. These girls are now in grade twelve and doing well. By 2005 the center help 14 working married women pass at division one and two only in their grade 12 and 14 national examinations. From 2004 to 2007 WOCESSCC supported several OUT women students by encouraging, motivating, guiding, counseling and supporting them. It helped Cecilia, Betty, Mwanila and Clara pay their full OUT fees otherwise would drop their studies. Clara graduated with upper second class last year October and planning to start her masters; Cecilia and Betty will graduate this year, while Mwanila has now managed to secure a loan from the OUT loan board for 2008. These women in turn support secondary education tuitions and the primary school girls assist the day care and cleaning to reduce center daily running costs.

Through guidance and counseling four members of the WFG graduated successfully. Jesca (OUTWSO first chair) in Law and, Irene (OUTWSO first secretary) in Biological Sciences recorded first OUT graduates with division one. Jesca has completed her masters in Britain now doing. Irene completed her masters last year at Dar-Es-Salaam University, now planning Ph.D. studies. Mwasalianda first member of OUTWSO recorded OUT upper second graduate and completed her masters at Dar-Es-Salaam University, now chief education officer.

Today the WOCESSCC is supporting over 30 pre-scholars, over 100 secondary education tuitions, hosting eight girls and a woman in difficult environment, employing eight women, three girls and one man as watchman. Efforts to open up a clinic for women and children are been made.

Challenges include, lack of transport to help expand the day care and pre-school service catchments, women not having specific time for studying and juggling studying with work and family roles. Most women usually obtain permission from husbands and/or employers, where often are given limited time. Therefore, to run the services effectively they must be offered throughout the day for all seven days, each time attending small different groups of women with different needs and problems. The personnel must be multi-skilled, usually understanding females (to role model others) willing to work for long hours and be patient with the women multiple problems that might sound trivial at first sight but are normally the major limiting factors. The center structure costs are minimal since rooms combine activities as women come in small numbers spread throughout the day.

CONCLUSION

The women education support project reveals that women understand well their education issues, strengths, weakness and limitations. So, if well involved they are capable of planning successfully what will effectively mitigate their social cultural education limitations, thus curb the vicious circle poverty and spread of HIV/AIDS epidemic in their communities. The Forum for African Women Educationists (FAWE) (1998) argues that "in planning any development project, it is necessary have equal participation of the stockholders." Therefore, involving women visions and decisions is the way forward to "walk" the

women education development support in Tanzania today to ensure that women access learning for their development, increase their access and success in higher education for their livelihood and better their children and family life as they juggle their family roles with their studies.

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