DISTANCE LEARNING AND WOMEN MARINALIZATION: THE GENDER ORIENTED PERSPECTIVE (G.O.P)

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the barriers ahead of women in their various endeavours in life, especially with education, they still constitute an invaluable and tangible resource for overall nation and international development.

The paper will discuss the potentialities and the known barriers confronting the modern day leadership of women in open learning across Africa. This paper will discuss the preponderance of men and how this can be abated with adoption of gender oriented perspectives. (G.O.P).

The second part will explores the substantial differences between women and men, using data collected in some African countries to juxtapose the achievements recorded by some notable women leaders, and how their experiences helped them to overcome the challenges and rigors in distance learning.

The concluding aspects examine a cursory analysis of the transformational styles. African women educationists and leaders are adopting in public life, signing off with contemporary perceptions of marginalization in societies, and how these provide opportunities.

PERSPECTIVES

It is indeed a fact, that the issues arising from challenges of women marginalization in distance and open learning have probably assumed a critical status and is most frequently been talked about not only in international, but also at national and regional conferences and platforms. Hence, tongues have continued to wag worldwide as more people express concern about the welfare of women vis- a- vis that of men.

The initial premise attractions were the increasingly technologized teaching and learning environment of higher education. This raised concerns and argument as to whether fresh pedagogical understandings are needed to inform thinking about instructional design, if distance learning is to yield any meaningful and sustainable results to support women, especially in developing countries of Africa

Inspite of these barriers ahead of women, they still constitute invaluable and tangible resources significant in open and distance learning (ODL) and for overall national and international development.

This paper examines the varying penalties and identified barriers confronting the modern day leadership of women in open learning across Africa and discusses the preponderance on men and how this can be abated by the adoption of gender- oriented perspective (G.O.P)

This paper essentially focuses on the substantial differences between women and men, juxtaposing with research data, achievements recorded by some notable women leaders; their experiences and how they manage the rigours in open learning to adopt transformational styles in public life.

The paper rounded- off with a cursory analysis of contemporary perceptions of marginalization in African societies and how it provides opportunities for women.

INTRODUCTION

It is known fact, that there are ample evidences from research that in pre –colonial times, the public and domestic domain in African societies were not as rigidly delineated as they had become in the nation states of industrialized western world. There was considerable overlapping between domestic and public spheres in the traditional societies. The capitalist system, which African countries acquired in the colonial era seriously, affected the status of women in the society because; women were seriously disadvantaged from entering the changing new labour market.

In the pre –industrial societies, women had influence, power and authority. Status was not a vertical male female divide. The emphasis translate from Victorian societies that the women's place was only in the kitchen reduced the influence of women and therefore her status in public affairs.

Since then the quest for gender equality in open learning has consistently attracted attention and provoked debates of vigorous academic discourses. Over the past 15 to 20 years for instance, the quest has been catapulted to incredible heights and has assumed an overwhelming dimension, and in fact, promoted to a recognized academic exercise.

This might not be unconnected to the fact that women, the victims of the skewed gender structure in the world system have reached a critical threshold and are challenging rigorously technological and religious beliefs, traditional myths, reactionary sexist notions, anthropological theories that defines humanity in terms of men's experience. Such views have not only structured our societies to be male – dominated, male – centred, thereby treating women as appendages of men and not as separate, autonomous human beings that are anointed to co – exist with men, according to a code of conduct that treats both as equals.

While it becomes more imperative to use communication technologies to increase learners' access, the question "access to what?" should be addressed in all of its complexity especially as it relates to women. A disparate terrain of new literature about teaching and learning, technology and corporeality has brought fresh perspectives to bear on the nature and prospects of pedagogical work from women.

Even then, such literatures are rarely brought together; researches around these ambits only work across aspects of learning theory, critical theory and post- structuralism to explore the question "access to what?" In so doing, important questions, again are raised about the embodied nature of teaching and learning and the potential of both 'embodied' and 'disembodied' teaching, to produce counter marginalization. My argument is that all decisions about the appropriateness of particular pedagogical practice must engage with such question considering the women angle

Thus, this paper projects to analyse the inherent marginalization of women; to empowering them to compete better and enhance their place and roles in society. Although, it's obvious fact, that this is indeed an enormous task, considering the question of, how to balance the narratives about marginalization. One may be tempted to ask, why must the methods traditionally used to marginalize women include male- centred interpretations of culture and religion? What best practice can we use to reduce or eradicate 'zoning out' of strong and intelligent female members of the society? And lots more.

WOMEN, GENDER INEQUALITY AND MARGINALIZATION

It seem trite to state, men constitute the first and underlying cause of gender (and perhaps every other form of) inequality. But it is a fact that people do not consciously make decisions, which put them in disadvantaged situations. The male, seemingly advantaged with a physical build that shows brawn and therefore, more physical strength than the women, has played a dominant role in the family, society and in his relationship with female.

But, at what point did women begin to think that superior physical capability of the male also meant superior intellectual powers or superior intelligence? Did it follow from the male physical ability to fend and protect in times of danger, as well as female physical slowness and clumsiness during pregnancy? Was the physical dominance of the male then extended and translated into all areas of domination with regard to decision making in matters – social, cultural, economic and intellectual?

While all this questions are not for us to answer here, the fact remains that it has become the prevailing custom in many societies that the male, gradually but determinedly acquired and retired decision within the family and other institutions of the society. Making decisions in such private and public matters definitely translates into holding and retaining the power to control most affairs. And little surprise, such decision of cause, would always be more beneficial to the male!

It would be useful at this point to examine those infringements that negatively affect women's access, rights and succinctly promotes marginalization in learning as it is. Most African societies are part and parcel of the world patriarchal structure which values men than women. In most communities, women are treated as properties. They are to be bought by their male counterparts through the payment of what is known as the "bride- price". The amount of price varies from one culture to the other. In almost all however, no matter how small the amount is, it is a significant determinant of who owns who.

In most African societies, there is a growing discriminatory employment practice that are based on sex and which favours the male. That is why a male teacher or secretary is more likely to find employment faster than a female teacher or secretary. Often in her quest for employment, maternity leave, child bearing and child caring needs are cited in discriminating against the women. And this has serious adverse effects on their access and opportunities to learning and education.

Many institutions in Africa today, still make decision on welfare practices and education based on needs of the young male. Profiles of many institutions also show a preponderance of unskilled (or at most, semi- skilled) female staff and a gross under-population of female academics, or executives in decision making positions.

Equally frustrating, women encounter this unprecedented unequal opportunities in accessing funds or scholarships when young males and females need to seek support especially to finance education in distance learning situations, which is becoming popular in under-developed and developing nations of Africa. On one hand, most economic activities in which women are engaged are non-monetized. On the other, there are still lack of access to financial resources due to insufficient understanding and lack of information on the ways and means of obtaining scholarship and supports.

One obstructing fact is that, no matter how educated, women do not belong to the Boys/Men's clubs. In the so-called "Boys/Men's clubs" social groupings, that are exclusively male, information is freely given and decisions reached. Such decisions agreed on exclude women. They indirectly encourage male chauvinism by giving undue economic, political and sometimes educational advantage to men.

Segregation is another means for denying women any participation in endeavours, even in Education! Equality of opportunity is a natural follow- up to empowerment. It means that women should have equal rights and entitlements like men to human, socio- economic, cultural and educational issues. Women experience exclusions from participating in most cases, because the work (or academic activities in this case) is considered by men to be too physically/ mentally strenuous or demanding (of time and concentration). Not having access to higher educational or other levels can be traced to male domination of positions in decision making bodies of schools, industry, etc. Being excluded from high-income positions and authority automatically short-change and amputates women's potential wherewithal to function contributively and positively to the course of education and open learning in our societies. It is no wonder that women are generally poorer. Hence, the statement that poverty has a woman's face --- a more pungent reason why the girl- child education advocacies and campaigns has attracted (in the global reckoning) a commanding appeal for underdeveloped and developing countries of Africa.

Key point is the anchor to marginalization and infringement of women's right and lower status stems from the fact that women have less access to education and learning than men.

In the area of Distance and open learning for instance:

> Women of Nigeria have noticed with utter dismay the almost complete deterioration of (their) gender- oriented values, borne out of more than three decades of continued male dominated and oriented misrule. Empowerment became more pivotal to enabling women act without restraint and gives them the capacity to take responsibility for ideas, plans and actions that would have remain hidden and inaccessible.

> In mapping out the path to a sustainable rebirth, the systematic entrenchment process must stop. (Emphasis mine)

> The methods traditionally used to exclude women from actively participating in shaping the course of open and distant education include male – centred interpretations of culture, teaching curriculum, technology, religion and sharp practices such as "zoning out" of female candidates or prospects; and failure to establish facilities and incentives that can serve as focal point for the comprehensive development of projects to actively support women's participation.

Although, conscious of the necessity to induce sustainable change, a number of civil society organizations, partner agencies and funders have been running advocacy programmes, training and researching on affirmative action for teachers in school; women leaders in political parties and other leadership positions.

The profile of these efforts has focused on identifying, analyzing and developing strategies of combating the various modes of marginalization women encounter, most especially in their participation and contribution to pedagogical learning's and educational efforts. Notably amongst these modes of marginalization includes:

- Labelling as strategy of exclusion and deprivation

- Discrepancies in enforcing equality between women and men in employment

- Lack of or inadequate support to promote voluntary vocational skills development.

- Unresolved conflicts of wage discrepancies.

- Lack of protection of working women during pregnancy/' after- birth.

- Unequal access to major/sensitive information and educational activities

- Gender inequalities in the management of Distance learning programmes.

- Stereotyping and lack of respect for the human rights of women.

- Low level of parental education.

- Under- representation of women in higher education.

- Incidence of Early Marriages and Teenage Pregnancy.

IDENTIFIED TECHNIQUES FOR ELIMINATING WOMEN MARGINALIZATION

IN DISTANCE LEARNING

The study further identified a repertoire of techniques that can be used to reduce or eliminate the tendencies of marginalization and improve on the experiences and opportunities of women in open and distance learning (ODL).

1. Educating and equipping woman to contribute their useful quota to the society and eliminating all forms of illiteracy. (Azikwe, 1992)
2. Institutionalizing greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other element of structure.
3. Promoting cost-effective, convenient, conducive, efficient and comprehensive unstraddling of many facet of the social system. (Jegede, 2003)
4. Encouraging leniency in obedience to the Islamic practice of purdah.
5. Halting the radical approach to instructional processes of the girl-child.
6. Doctoring bias-free socialization to sensitize women about family planning issues, HIV/AIDS issues, issues relating to peace and governance with their societies, primary health, maternal and infant mortality as well as environmentally sustainable practices.
7. Processed skills acquisition and capacity building to enable women develop self-awareness and self-esteem.

On a general note, inspite of the emergence of these, and numerous other techniques, it is clear that a major Educational (cum Socio-Cultural, Economic and Political) transition is occurring in Africa. It is a transition from grass to grace.

PART TWO

There is a considerable evidence from South Africa, Ghana, Egypt, Nigeria and some other African countries that have significantly increased the participation of woman in Educational and leadership roles, that the quality of their educational and political systems have improved. Transparency and accountability standards have gone up while the use of thuggery in politics has declined unlike before. The believe is, that the more woman in Education management and political activities the higher the quality of education and democracy will become.

The profiles of two African women discussed below chronicles a concrete transition of personalities to a high-level of doggedness, leadership traits, Will to serve, exposure to unbiased access, commitment to growth and a passion for genuine development for their people and countries.

HAJIYI FATIMA BALLA ABUBAKAR

Fati Abubakar was a Nigerian woman born of Fulani mother and a Kiba father in Adamawa State, where she lived most of her childhood. Mrs. Abubakar was brought up in a social environment that was defined by the religion, Islam, and the Fulani Culture. Grown under strict Islamic teachings, which involved daily Islamic teachings, she derives her strong personality and senses of purpose mainly from her father, who was the famous Mr. Balla, a nationalist, who struggled along with other able Nigerians during the pre-independence period.

Mrs. Abubakar's capacity to go against what is considered the norm is clear. Growing up in a place like Gombi where girl child education is not encourage, she was perceived, in the footstep of her father, as a deviant in relation to the societal norm on the position of the girl child. Her leadership qualities manifested at a tender age, right from her primary school days where she held the position of a "head girl".

Fati took up employment with the then Gongola State Government as information officer immediately after her service in 1997. She rose to the position of chief information officer which was equivalent to Director (i.e. the highest professional position in the ministry) at the state level. She was later appointed as the first woman Director .She set up the first newspaper in the state 'Weekly Scope' and acted as the Editor in chief while still retaining her position as a Director in the ministry. She also starts up scholarship funding for female adolescent from primary through University education which she named "Fati Balla Scholarship Fund".

Her foray into politics eventually saw her taking up the challenge as a senator representing the Adamawa central senatorial district under the Grassroots Democratic movement (GDM). Her choice to serve in the capacity was solely guided by choice and ideological commitments to contributing to the building of educational goodwill and political relationship in her state. She is one of those well-noted women who have brokered power with leaders of thought that owns their own, and she continues to enjoy traditions support from her people through and through.

CHIEF ONYEKA OWENU

Onyeka Owenu is internationally and locally acclaimed as one of Nigerian's best female musicians, Born on 31st January 1952, Onyeka grew up in an Igbo community that is known for its preference of the male child. But then, lucky as she would be, her parents were not one to give any inkling or reference to the differences in their children sexes. Onyeka feminist attitude springs forth from her education in the United States; she was a student at Wellesley College and New York School for social research. While studying her masters' degree, she was also working with United Nations office of public information as a Tour guide.

Onyeka grew up well-bred and sees herself as a social critic/activist through her songs and rightly so too. Most of her songs are reflections of her life experiences. Onyeka launched her musical career with the release of her first album in 1981. By 1989, she has grown to become a world music titan and in same year, the United States Agency for international Development (UNAIDS) presented Onyeka and King Sunny Ade with an award and certificate of appreciation for improving the lives of African families through the Artistic communication of family planning messages in the songs, "Wait for me', 'Choices' and 'One Love'.

10 years after, her grand entry into politics began with her foray as she vied for the position of President of the Performing Musicians Association of Nigeria (PMAN).

The profiles of women chronicled above demonstrates clearly, that women's immense potentialities in education and other facets of life could be translated in to realities by removing all the known barriers to participation in decision-taking and involvement in the development process. To do this implies the adoption of a gender-oriented perspective (G.O.P) to development, which recognizes and takes into consideration the adoption of women rights.

A gender-oriented perspective may combine one or more of the following strategies:

1. Developing constitutional reforms that will provide for and guarantee the application of quotas for women as a basis for community, economic, political and educational representation.

2. Reforms of educational policies and the electoral laws to allow for a system that gives more room to women.

3. Promotion of serious and co-ordinate formal and political education; information and political engagements with grass root women.

4. Developing sustainable long – term networks that can strengthen the capacity of women.

5. Developing platforms and medium that emphasizes issues, principles and popular interests rather than the use of money, violence and the usurpation of women participation.

Also a gender – oriented may become more efficient if it utilize the following mediums:

1.   Publishing comprehensive reports of the research efforts of women activities and participation in education and society's decision taking processes.

1.   Publishing case studies and individual profiles of teachers and women leaders as well as reports of advocacy efforts on promoting the participation of women in education and politics.

2.   Development of easy –to – read fact sheets and/or brochure summarizing the books that will be mass – produce for advocacy purposes.

3.   Organizing policy brief directed at the executive, the legislature and the leadership of women organizations.

4.   Production of animal calendar highlighting women's successful cases.

5.   Launching of website. Presenting all available information about gender equality and presenting profiles of world women leaders.

6.   The production of audio – visual versions for grass root/community narratives.

CONCLUSION

We could indeed, go on and on to list the many strategies and medium that can promote ODL, but it is our belief that the pathetic plights of women alluded to earlier has already dawned on us. Should that be the case, as we hope it is, then it is time for action. Change must as matter of factly change. 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 women as equal human beings in the participation and provision of education. This, ladies and gentlemen, is a basic and vital pillar for our only truly sustainable development.

Thank you.

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