Women Education in Nigeria: Barriers and Distance Learning Strategies as Panacea

Dr. Abiola Lateef Olori
Department of Science and Technology Education
Olabisi Onabanjo University,Ago-Iwoye Ogun State,Nigeria

Dr. Olurinola Oluwakemi Dessy
Department of Science and Technology Education
Olabisi Onabanjo University,Ago-Iwoye Ogun State,Nigeria

Abstract
Education is an instrument for the liberation of mind. In Nigeria, there are millions of women who do not have access to formal tertiary education and this is becoming worrisome to education stakeholders. The study investigates the significance of women access to University Education in Nigeria. Two null hypotheses guided the study. The study adopted a survey research design. The participants consisted of a sample size of 250 Distance Education Students of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). A 20 items self - designed instrument titled: "Flexibility and Accessibility to Technology Questionnaire"(FATQ) was developed, validated and yielded a reliability coefficient value of 0.78. The data collected was subjected to t-test statistical analysis. The result of hypothesis one showed that the flexibility of distance education will promote women access to education. The result of the finding in hypothesis two revealed that access to technologies will   influence women enrolment in the programme. The study recommends that government should make concerted effort to bridge the gap between educational opportunities for both male and female, which can be achieved by spending more on provision of information technology infrastructures and to support distance education deliverance in Nigeria. Internet facilities should be provided in the rural areas so that women that are working in the rural area can enrol for continuing education programmes. Counselling services should be established for married women who need guidance on how to combine marriage with education.
Keywords: Distance learning; Technologies; Women; Flexibility; Access

Background to the Study

Education is the most essential instrument for the emancipation of any group of people. Mental freedom which precedes all other forms of freedom can only be guaranteed by sound and robust educational system. Education is a sure pathway to the liberation of the mind and the improvement of socio – economic status of people (UNESCO, 2002). Education has been found to be useful as a liberating force and change agent, especially in a developing country like Nigeria. Women access to education is considered as an effective strategy for empowerment within the functional framework of lifelong learning (Olori, 2010). Women access to education empowerment will serve as a window towards challenging oppression which compels million of people not to play a part in their society or in any way deny them their human rights Okeke (1995).

Women have been doing all this work since times of our great – grand mothers, without even having the chance to express openly their view about issues that affects them and unfortunately this is influenced by their level of education. Today, with policy promotion and self – management in rural communities, many things have changed. Regina Ju-chun chu (2016) opined that there are new structures intended to make women an integral part of management and development. Some dynamic women are taking the initiative to create their own structure and manage project themselves. Women access to education is an attempt to give quality, sound and good education to our young girls and adult women in our country in order for them to imbibe the norm, skills and values of our society.

Recently in Nigeria, the Federal Ministry of Education in conjunction with UNICEF established a Strategy for the Acceleration of Girls Education in Nigeria (SAGEN). It is hoped that SAGEN will lead to a further expansion in the access of girl's education and ultimately the emancipation of women in Nigeria. According to Olori (2010), education is the sum total of experiences that a person acquires in partaking in everyday activities and how these experiences have served to make the individual a better person. Many social commentators hold the view that education is a sine qua non to any meaningful development process. The impact of the level of educational attainment in any society and the corresponding level of development in terms of the science and technology is a measure of this phenomenon. Omoniyi and Olurinola (2015) asserted that development in the society is anchored primarily to education progress because no nation can rise above the level of education of the citizens. In a similar vein, Ajayi (2017) described education as a cornerstone of economic and social development. According to them, the future of the world and of individual nations hinges, more than ever before on the capacity of individuals and countries to acquire, adopt and advance knowledge.

Education has been viewed traditionally as a social leveller, it is the only instrument designed for piercing the structures of the society. The only effective way to meaningfully contribute to the emancipation of women in Nigerian society is to widen access of women and girls to quality education (Olori, 2008). It is essential to provide for women and girls quality education in order to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger which is the sustainable development goal two (SDG2). There is needed to take the issue of women empowerment seriously. It is quite easy to canvass for small credits loans for a few women, negotiate political appointments for some others just to pass legislation in very elegant language against women discriminations in all spheres of national life, but it is far easier and ultimately more cost effective to educate women (Omoniyi,2005). Creating access to quality formal education gives women a sense of belonging and their individuality will then be projected beside their husbands.

According to the UNFPA (1994), when women needs are considered they will gradually become more visible and recognised in the main stream of activities both at home and in the society at large. Given the fact that education enhances a person's sense of self worth, women will become more assertive of their roles in social activities and take initiatives for themselves rather than wait for the decisions to be made for them (Olori,2010). It can also be viewed that their income-earning potential and development will rise with the new education status. Another crucial advantage of women education is the role it plays in achieving the SDGs such as reducing child maternal, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS and promote gender equality. It is not understatement to state that the family of an educated woman tends to appear healthier than that of her non-educated counterpart.

Barriers to Women Education in Nigeria
The issue of women education has been viewed differently in social relations and economic phenomena. This has formed a barrier even when democratic movements have sought to extend the basis for participation of women. It will be fallacious to assume that the problems of Nigeria women have been totally solved through the various emancipation initiatives (Beijing conference 1975, 1985, 1995).The international decades of women strategy for the acceleration of girls education though the collaborative efforts of the various government and non-government organisation has argued for the provision of distance education system for the working mothers who do not have access to formal university education. Certain inequalities and stereotyped segregations which have been established over the ages and reinforced through the male dominated structures still persist in spite of the various instrument of the United Nations and the concerted effort of the federal government and a number of NGOs agitating for women discriminations.

Without gainsaying, illiteracy remains at the centre of women empowerment problem in Nigeria. Majority of the women folk and a large number of girls in this country are still grappling with the problem of basic reading and writing skills (UNESCO, 2002). According to FME/UNESCO (2003), the gross enrolment rate indicates that 71 percent of out of school children are girls. They added that the literacy rate for males is 59 percent but only 41 percent for females. The human development report 2002 published by the United Nation development programme puts the statistics of illiterate women at 57 percent as against male's 43 percent.

As insignificant as this difference may appear, it is completely unacceptable, if the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) must be achieved. In Nigeria, girls and women comprises about 49.69 percent of the total population. Incidentally, 61 percent of the total female population are reported to be illiterates as against 37.7 percent illiterate male's population (Regina Ju-chun chu, 2016). Women are discriminated against in access to education for social and economic reasons. For instance, the Islamic practice of purdah prevents many women from benefiting from school instruction or participating in economic activities which are likely to elevate their positions. When a whole group of females are denied access to education on the basis of gender difference, this is a social harm of the 21st century.

There is palpably a deluge of problems besetting the Nigerian women, but all of them arise from illiteracy (Olori, 2008; Olori and Aina, 2015). This suggests therefore that a large part of the empowerment process is associated with education of the women themselves. The root of the problem is the degree of importance woman themselves have attached to education. Many of them believe that the life of a successful woman revolves around her children, her husband and domestic chores. The lack of personal ambition prevents her from thinking about pursuing other education goals, which may have great influence in her life. In the case of the working women in the cities, there had been demands of works and family as well as the huge costs associated with pursuing higher studies in conventional school or university.

Distance Learning Strategies for Women Education
Kehinde (2010) describes distance learning as the range of teaching/learning strategy used by correspondence department of conventional colleges or universities and distance training unit of corporate providers. It is the education of those who choose not to attend formal classroom as a result of their work schedule. The major features of distance education are: the separation of the teacher and the learner; the use of technical–print media that brings the teacher and learner together; provision of two way communication; and possibility of a meeting

point for socialisation and didactic purposes. The term subsumes a number of existing terms. The above explanation raised the following aspects as integral part of open and flexible learning which working women can benefit:

1. Correspondence study.
2. Home study.
3. Independent study.
4. External study.

Studies have shown that the limitation in the access of many women to education opportunities is due chiefly to the inability of the learner and the instructor to be in face-to-face (F2F) contact. There are above 880 million illiterate adults in the world (UNESCO-UIS, 2015) that have been deprived access to education because they are required to be present in the four walls of a conventional classroom before they can gain access to quality education. Each day, the futility of those arrangements becomes clearer to most educational planner as the unfolding fact shows that the knowledge based society of the twenty of the 21st century demand more effective means of disseminating information and knowledge.

The flexibility nature of distance education is that it is mediated by electronic or printed technologies. This might be seen in such policies as open admissions, freedom of selection of what, when and where to learn. Distance education organizations have shown a strong bias towards supporting the freedom of individual learners to exercise choice over one or more of the main processes of their learning (Omoniyi, 2005). Typically, this involves helping learners take responsibility for aspects such as what they learn, how they learn, where they learn, how quickly they learn, who to turn to for help and whether, when and where to have their learning assessed. The openness of distance education is also seen in relatively flexible organizational structures, delivery and communication patterns, and the use of various technologies in support of learning. It is important to note that the flexibility approach of distance learning will provide opportunity for working women who cannot attend a conventional classroom.

It is obvious that due to limitation in human and financial resources, the traditional conventional approach of teaching in a typical classroom can no longer satisfy the snowballing population of a country like Nigeria which has estimated population of 140 million people and an average annual population growth rate of 2.3% (UNESCO, 2014). Clearly, realistic alternative is long overdue and this is what has necessitated the introduction of the open and flexible model otherwise referred to as Distance Education. Nigeria women undoubtedly fall within this category and this system of education affords them the opportunity to pursue the gift of knowledge without contradicting any societal dictates.

First to be considered are the class of women who are full time house wives, many of whom have never had access to formal education or had to give up school at early stages of their lives. Women in this group are not usually enthusiastic about formal education because their husbands had indicated that they are to sit at home and take care of the home and children. Such women are usually unable to leave their spouse and children to travel away to a conventional university system. The challenge posed by this social system is far reaching, in the sense that the woman cannot venture out of the home to a formal school system where she can pursue the much craved training, skills development and education(Omoniyi, Olori and Adesanya, 2010). Moreover, women in this category will definitely be grateful for the flexibility approach offered by distance education since it allows them to sit at home and study for a programme without jeopardising their marriages or abandon their children.

Secondly, the group of women whose position is only slightly different from the previous group are those women who have been denied access to formal training provided by school and colleges because of their obedience to the Islamic practice of purdah. These women can still have access to qualitative education through the open and distance learning approach that allows them to pursue their education at a safe distance from the instructors. Students in distance education system with its flexibility can study on their own, turn in assignment and write examinations after adequate arrangement have been made (Omoniyi,Adesanya and Olori, 2010). A woman in purdah can be trained and given the opportunity to contribute her own quota to national development without disobeying any of the injunctions of her religion. Open and flexible education is an alternative that affords this group of women access to quality study materials on any field of their choice without any of the barriers associated with the conventional education system and her religion dedication.

Thirdly, the group which has for long been suffering in silence are the working women. The plight of the working women has been that of an unrecognised and unremunerated labour. In Nigeria, working women tend to live unfulfilled lives, having their dreams aborted prematurely. After college degree, a working woman finds herself in marriage and the demand of child birth makes her postpone going back to school a little longer. By the time her last child will be out of primary school, she finds out that the first is grappling with the challenges of pubescent years. As the years roll by, she finds that it is becoming increasingly difficult to actualise the dream of going back to school. In Nigeria today, society prefers that only the husband pursue further education improvement while the fund available should be spent in taking care of the children (Jegede, 2003,). This of course is never to the best advantage of the working women since she has to continue to suffer in silence. The

distance learning mode of education is the sure answer to the prayers of many working women in Nigeria who could not abandon their families and their work to pursue better educational qualification which will enhance their career progression (UNIC, 2000).

Student access to Learning materials and technologies are essential components in all distance learning systems (Shittu and Gambari, 2014). Comprehensive, well designed materials may stimulate self-directed learning and thus influence the quality of the system as a whole. Communication between teachers and learners is a necessary component in distance education, as in all other forms of education. Access to Communication technologies distributes messages in text, still and moving images, and sound. Knowledge-generating messages may be communicated to large numbers of learners, either synchronously or asynchronously, pushed by broadcasting or accessed on demand through audio/video players or internet (Olori, 2007). As these devices change, so the quality and nature of the messages will change. For instance, internet technologies will make it possible on the one hand for larger numbers of people to share a common learning experience, in real time, or on the other, to enable an individual learner to have a unique personal interaction with a teacher or with another learner, no matter where located (Olori,Adesanya and Adu,2014).

Also, in distance education, there may be use of Multimedia technologies which encompass text, audio, video, and computer-based materials, and usually some face-to-face learner support delivered to both individuals and groups. Shittu and Gambari (2014) posited that educational television and radio systems use various delivery technologies- terrestrial, satellite, and cable television and radio to deliver live or recorded lectures to both individual home-based learners and groups of learners in remote classrooms where some face-to-face support might be provided.

There may be use of correspondence systems based around a study guide in printed text and often accompanied by audio and video components such as records and slides, interaction in the correspondence method is by letters and other written or printed documents sent through postal systems (UNESCO, 2001).It must be noted that if working women have access to these technologies, they will be encourage to enrol for distance education.

Statement of the problem

The observations in the past were that women were not given the same education opportunity with their male counterparts. Women are discriminated against in access to education for social and economic reasons. For instance, in Nigeria the Islamic practice of purdah has continued to deny women from participating in economic activities which will likely elevate their positions. The most egregious segregation is probably the prevention of girls to go to school in some communities which has led to the greatest social harm of the 21st century. This study therefore seeks to investigate the influence of flexibility and accessibility to technologies on women enrolment in distance education.

Hypotheses

(i) There is no significance difference in gender perception on   the influence of distance learning flexibility on women enrolment

(ii) There is no significance difference in gender perception on the influence of distance learning technologies access on women enrolment

Methodology

The study employed a survey research design. The population of the study consisted of   all National Open University Students in Nigeria. The participants for the study consisted of a sample size of 250 students. Simple random sampling technique was used to select five (5), out of the nine (9) study centres in south-western   part of Nigeria. In each of the selected study centre, fifty (50) students were randomly selected. The instrument used for data collection was self-designed four point likert scale 20 item questionnaires titled:"flexibility and Accessibility to Technology Questionnaire"(FATQ). The intensity of the responses and scores for positive items were as follows: Strongly Agreed=4; Agreed=3; Disagreed=2 and Strongly Disagreed=1.

The instrument was given to experts for content and face validity and the result was 80 percent in agreement with experts' opinion. The instrument was trial-tested on twenty students who were not part of the main study, and using split-half method   this yielded reliability co-efficient of 0.78, meaning that the instrument was valid, internally consistent and reliable for the study. The researcher with the help of research assistants visited the selected NOUN study centres in Southwest, part of Nigeria. Permission was taken from the centre coordinators before administering the instruments. The questionnaires were administered to the respondents with the assistance of research assistants. The data collected was analysed with *t*-test statistical analysis.

Results

Hypothesis I: There is no significance difference in gender perception on   the influence of distance learning

flexibility on women enrolment

Table I: *t*-test result of the perception of male and female respondents on the influence of flexibility on women enrolment

Variables	--- N	SD	N	df	t-cal	t-tab	Sig.	Decision
Male	24.04	4.16	120					
Female	26.16	6.32	130	123	2.34	5.02	0.05	Retained

@ 0.05 Significant Level

　　Since that the value of the *t*-test calculated (t-cal) 2.34 is less than the tabulated value (t-tab) 5.02 from the table, and then we will retained the hypothesis, meaning there is no significant difference in the perception of male and female on   the influence of flexibility of distance learning on women enrolment

Hypothesis II: There is no significance difference in gender perception on the influence of distance learning technologies access on women enrolment

Table II: *t*- test result of the perception of male and female respondents on the influence of access to distance learning technologies on women enrolment

Variables	__ N	SD	N	df	t-cal	t-tab	Sig.	Decision
Male	33.15	2.43	120					
Female	43.08	4.07	130	123	1.25	3.42	0.05	Retained

@ 0.05 Significant Level

　　Since that the value of the *t*-test calculated (t-cal) 1.25 is less than the tabulated value (t-tab) 3.42 from the table, then we will retained the hypothesis, meaning that there is no significant difference in the perception of male and female on the influence of access to technologies for distance learning on women enrolment.

Discussion

In hypothesis one, the result of the finding revealed that male and female respondents agreed that the flexible learning approach of distance education will influence women to enrol in the programme. This simply means that the process of education with distance learning approach of anytime, anywhere and any place (3A's) is widely accepted and recognised in Nigeria. This is in line with Omoniyi, Olori and Adesanya (2010) submission that when learning is self-directed, learners become more active and responsible for their success. Jegede (2003) viewed that distance learning has broken the barriers of time, space and location in education. Also, majority of the respondents agreed with the statement that high level of flexibility in distance learning environment will encourage women enrolment. This may be due to the fact that many of them are now used to mobile learning.

　　The result of the finding in hypothesis two revealed that both male and female respondents accepted that access to technologies will influence women enrolment in distance education. UNESCO (2001) supported this assertion confirming that successful delivery of functional distance learning depends largely on information communication technologies. This is also supported by Olori (2008) who viewed that when students have access to ICT devices they will be motivated to learn. Also, majority agreed that owning a mobile phone will motivate women to enrol in distance learning and that regular access to e- facilities will improve women enrolment. The reason for this factor may be that they are aware of mobile learning approach.

Conclusion

Traditionally, governments have introduced distance education provision in order to increase access to learning and training opportunity; provide increased opportunities for updating, retraining and personal enrichment; improve cost-effectiveness of educational resources; support the quality and variety of existing educational structures; enhance capacity; balancing inequalities between age groups; extending geographical access to education; delivering educational campaigns and other education for large audiences; providing speedy and efficient training for key target groups; expanding the capacity for education in new and multidisciplinary subject areas; offering the combination of education with work and family life; developing multiple competencies through recurrent and continuing education; enhancing the international dimension of educational experience and improving the quality of existing educational services.

However, there seems to be no end to the advantages of the distance learning system. The foregoing shows that the scheme covers a broad spectrum of society such that everyone and anyone can benefit at lower cost. While the focus of this study is primarily to show the great potentials the distance education hold for the women folk in Nigeria, almost everyone can benefit from the programme. A lot of market women, itinerant traders, working women   as well as girls resident in the sub-rural societies could benefit from the open system.

Recommendations

In order for the Nigerian women to play active and valuable role in national development, it is being recommended that:

1. Counselling service should be established for women who need guidance on distance education
2. Government should make concerted efforts to bridge the gap for education opportunity between male and female child. This can be achieved by spending on the women university education and increase the needed equipment.
3. There should be availability of adequate information technologies for distance education so that time and distance will no longer be barriers to effective women education.
4. Government should encourage education of women through subsidised tuition fee for women on distance learning programme
5. Internet facilities should be provided in the rural areas so that working rural women would be able benefit from distance education
6. Emerging technologies should be provided so that women could have access to   the unique opportunity.
7. Government should more attention to education in the Northern parts of Nigeria, especially North - East to cater for the internally displaced women who wish to enrol for National Teachers' Institute or University Degree programme through distance learning system.

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