Women Empowerment through Open and Distance Learning In Zimbabwe

Tavonga Njaya
Faculty of Commerce and Law, Zimbabwe Open University

Abstract: *The primary aim of the study was to uncover demographic and socio-economic details and reasons for opting for open and distance learning. Although the focus was on women learners, the study adopted a gender approach in assessing access to university education through open and distance learning in order to study both men and women. This helped to interrogate, articulate and analyse the gender construction of distance education learners and delivery of open and distance learning at the Zimbabwe Open University. Women constitute a substantial proportion of those marginalised by conventional systems of learning at university level. The problems of access to tertiary education are mostly restrictive socio-economic factors. Data collection techniques included interviews, focus groups and document reviews. Using the elicitation approach, forty-five learners and seven graduates were selected on the basis of representativeness in terms of academic level and discipline. Data were analysed using statistical tests and descriptive or thematic analysis. The study revealed that a significant number of respondents were working married women with children who found open and distance learning framework more compatible with their multiple tasks; household chores, education, wage work, family, relatives and community at large. The findings showed that open and distance learning helped women to circumvent constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic barriers thereby significantly contributing to their empowerment. A majority of women took a break to attend to their multiple duties either during or after undergraduate studies.*

Keywords: *empowerment; gender approach; household; learner; open access; women.*

I.   Introduction

The concept of open university revolutionised contemporary educational history with the launch of the Open University (United Kingdom) in 1969 (Satyanarayana and Meduri, 2013). Today, open university has become an invaluable component of national educational policies, programmes and practices in both developed and developing countries. In Zimbabwe, the idea of an open university was conceived in the early 1980s after the government realised that the University of Zimbabwe, the sole university at that time, was failing to cope with the rising demand for university education (Kurasha, *nd*). The government established two commissions, namely, the Williams Commission (1981) and the Zimbabwe Open University Feasibility Study (1986) to investigate the development of university distance education. Both commissions recommended that there was need for university distance education in order to upgrade skills and "to provide a continuing education facility for the adult population" (Kurasha, *nd;* Pfukwa and Matipano, 2006). Based on these recommendations, the Centre for Distance Education under the Faculty of Education at the University of Zimbabwe was formed in 1993 with the primary mandate to upgrade the qualifications of school teachers who had certificates and diplomas (Kurasha, *nd*).The Centre for Distance Education became the University College of Distance Education in 1997 (Pfukwa and Matipano, 2006) and was renamed Zimbabwe Open University on 1 March 1999 through an Act of Parliament, Chapter 25:20. ZOU is accredited by the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education. The Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education is the sole accreditation body that enforces uniform standards and sets admission capacity of every university in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the sole open university in Zimbabwe. However, the provision of distance education in Zimbabwe predates the attainment of political independence in 1980. During that period, black Zimbabweans used correspondence courses offered by private colleges such as the Central African Correspondence College, Rapid Results College, Transworld Tutorial College, International Correspondence School, Wolsely College and British Tutorial College as well as the University of South Africa (Zindi and Aucoin, 1993).

ZOU offers a range of qualifications and courses including degrees, diplomas to postgraduate diplomas and certificates. Students can earn bachelor's, master's or doctoral degrees in the fields of arts, media, natural sciences, humanities and social sciences. All the degree programmes are available worldwide directly from ZOU. In Zimbabwe, the academic programmes are offered through ten regional centres that are located in provincial capitals. ZOU's creation of regional and district centres enabled it to expand its scope, enhance appeal and improve service delivery to individual learners, communities and neighbouring countries.

In view of the uniqueness of distance education in providing access to formal education for women, this study sought to discuss barriers that inhibited women's advancement in tertiary education and impact of distance education on women advancement and empowerment using ZOU as a case study. In doing this, the following section presents literature review on the concept of distance education and how it empowers women.

1.1 Review of Related Literature
Education is a fundamental right from which all individuals should benefit equally without discrimination-on sex, religion, ethnicity, political affiliation or creed. However, data on literacy levels for the whole world show that there is significant difference between men and women (Demiray and Dundar, 2013). According to UNESCO, regional literacy rates are significantly lower for women than for men particularly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Janaki (2006) observes that governments explore the possibility of using distance education as a means to provide education at a large scale because conventional educational methods are becoming increasingly expensive. The rising cost of conventional education further excludes marginalised groups including women, who because of their productive and reproductive roles cannot cope with campus-based learning. According to Maliki, Belawati and Baggaley (2005), while distance education has the potential of impacting all levels of education, tertiary education is the level at which the maximum benefits could be achieved in terms of economic impact. As an institution, open university is a powerful instrument for equalising higher educational opportunities and levelling educational imbalances (Plummer, 2000; Satyanarayana and Meduri, 2013).

The Commonwealth of Learning distinguish open and distance learning as a learner-centred type of education, open learning with a wide range of choices for learners, open access without restricted formal entry requirements and entrance examinations, flexible learning, distributed learning and falls along the continuum of time and place. Plummer (2000) concurs and describes distance education as learning that takes place outside schools, colleges and university campuses. In distance education, the students are separated from the lecturers through physical distance (Janaki, 2006) and communication is through basic print media, radio, television and latest technologies such as the internet, WhatsApp and Skype.

As a mode of study, distance education is particularly suited to women because of their role as housewives and mothers as it provides flexible time management possibilities while preventing classroom attendance (Kwapong, 2007). A number of studies have shown that women find it difficult to embark on further studies especially at their adult stage when they have begun building families (Evans, 1995; Compora, 2003; Przymus, 2004). In a study undertaken at Athabasca University (Canada), Reuss (1994) cited in Kwapong (2007) observed that distance education attracted women students coming for second chance. The study revealed that 67 percent of Athabasca University's students were women, the majority of whom may have had some post-secondary college education but may not have had the opportunity to complete their university studies. Qureshi, Moton and Antosz (2002) found out that distance education format attracted more married participants than on-campus format.

If ZOU was established to tackle the country's university educational problems including access, equity and education for all, how has the university empowered marginalised groups such as women? What can be done to improve women's access to distance university education in Zimbabwe? These were the overarching questions addressed in the study.

Women empowerment is a global issue and is widely used in the literature usually without being defined. In this paper, empowerment refers to a process which enhances the ability of disadvantaged ("powerless") individuals or groups to challenge and change (in their favour) existing power relationships that place them in subordinate economic, social and political positions (Agarwal, 1994:39). On the other hand, access is defined as:
* greater participation in higher education of good quality;
* the extension of participation to include currently under-represented groups; and
* a recognition that participation extends beyond entry to successful completion (Woodrow, 1996:7 cited in Osborne, 2003).

1.2 Statement of the Problem: Zimbabwe Open University is striving to increase access to education through open and distance learning to groups marginalised by conventional university education system. Among the marginalised are different groups of women who face access problems due to various restrictive factors. How then has ZOU empowered women in the face of a myriad of these access problems?

1.3 Research Objectives: The primary aim of the study was to uncover demographic and socio-economic details and reasons for opting for distance university education instead of conventional education and in the process demonstrate how ZOU had empowered women in Zimbabwe. The specific objectives of the research were:

1. To identify barriers impeding women's advancement in university education.
2. To identify reasons why women choose distance university education instead of conventional university education.
3. To assess the impact of distance university education on women.
4. To make suggestions and/or recommendations for increased women participation in distance university education for their empowerment.

1.4 Research Questions
1. What are the barriers impeding women's advancement in university education?
2. Why do women opt for distance university education instead of conventional education?
3. What is the impact of distance education on women?
4. What recommendations can be made for increased women participation in distance education?

1.5 Research Methodology and Design
The study used mixed method research (Bryman, 2006) where the qualitative approach predominated the quantitative approach. The population of the study included all current students and graduates from ZOU. Data collection techniques included interviews, focus groups and document reviews. A short questionnaire with most open-ended questions was prepared and administered to 45 current learners and seven successful learners of undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The participants were selected on the basis of representativeness in terms of academic level and discipline. Current students were divided into subpopulations called strata according to sex: 12 males and 33 females. The sample for graduates was distributed as follows; two males and five females. The rationale was that distance education learners are not a homogenous group and hence a more representative sample could be obtained through the stratified sampling technique. In addition, stratified sampling allowed for intentional oversampling which permitted greater statistical precision (Boslaugh, 2007). Female learners were oversampled for the simple reason to project the voice of women and their empowerment through their articulation of their needs, rights and capabilities. Simple random sampling was then used to select respondents from the stratum for current learners. Respondents in the stratum for successful learners were selected through snowball sampling. Statistical tests and descriptive analysis were used to analyse the data.

II.   Presentation Of Research Findings
The questionnaire was structured to find out: the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of learners; what informed the students' decision to choose to study at a distance; identify barriers to university education; examine the impact of distance education on women advancement and empowerment and possible recommendations on improving access and making ODL more women friendly. One unique thing about the study was that although the focus was on women learners, the study adopted a gender approach in assessing access to university education through open and distance learning in order to study both men and women. This was because education is one avenue through which perspectives on gender are institutionalised. Obtaining the views of male and female students helped to interrogate, articulate and analyse the gender construction of distance education learners, barriers to access, impact of ODL and mainstream gender in the programming of distance education.

Out of the 52 respondents, 73.1 percent were females with the following traits:
- 47.4 percent were married and 65.8 percent of them had children
- 34.2 percent were aged below 30
- 89.5 percent were working.

The demographic distribution of the respondents shows that an increasing number, 32.7 percent of younger students (less than 30 years old) viewed open and distance learning as an alternative to campus-based university learning. Career progression was the most common motivation cited by both current students and graduates. Probably, future research should focus on increasing numbers of new students aged 30 and under in order to understand their motivations and peculiar needs. This would assist the University to come up with appropriate support systems and well targeted relationship marketing strategies if it were to tap into this market segment.

ZOU has the same entry requirements for male and female students. Overall, female students lagged behind male learners in terms of enrolment due in part to some barriers listed below. Figure 2.1 shows student enrolment by sex during the period 2005-2013.
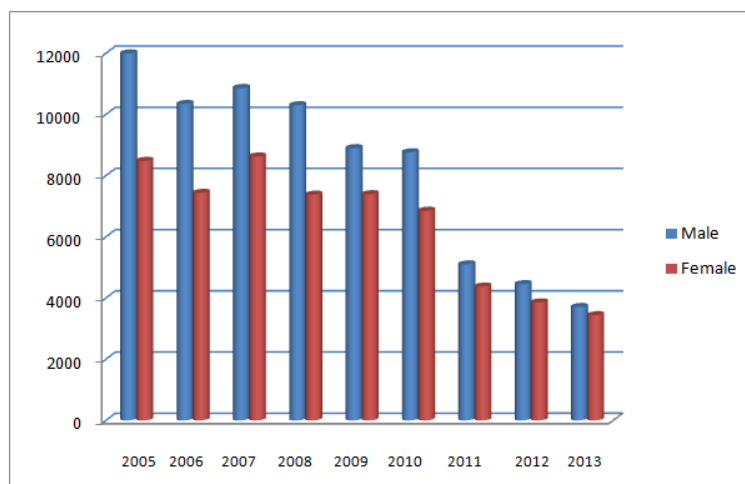
Figure 2.1: Student enrolment by sex, 2005-2013.

Source: ZOU, 2014

The graph shows that female students were fewer than male learners during the period 2005 to 2013. The difference between male and female enrolment was "more" pronounced during 2005 through to 2010. However, the gender education gap narrowed significantly from 2011 to 2013. Underrepresentation of women was more pronounced in the three faculties of Commerce and Law, Arts and Education and Science and Technology, but the pattern was completely reversed for the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. In this faculty, the enrolment of female students actually surpassed that of males. In the Faculty of Science and Technology, women were underrepresented in science and mathematics courses. Although science by its nature is difficult and challenging, compared to their male counterparts, this places women at a disadvantage. Kwapong (2007) recommends gender awareness and promoting gender consciousness in all levels of distance education programming. This would require exploring alternatives of making distance education more women friendly through an assessment of women's learning styles.

2.1 Barriers to university education for women

The following were identified by respondents as the major reasons why women lag behind men in university education in Zimbabwe:

- household commitments and responsibilities
- lack of financial resources and poverty
- illiteracy and lack of formal primary and secondary education
- lack of empowerment
- cultural and religious restrictions that prohibit the girl child not to go to school
- low self esteem, that is women have an inferiority complex
- preference of male children over females
- more educated (and financially-independent) women threaten men's dominant status
- fears and misconceptions that educated women do not conform to African traditions
- lack of appreciation of the value of university education
- early marriages and social inhibitions against women pursuing education after marriage
- married women "live" in the comfort of their husbands' income and do not see value of university education
- some husbands are jealous of women advancement and thus deny their wives university education
- societal perception that the sole occupation of a woman is to bear children, look after the husband and children and undertake domestic work

Given its flexibility and mode of delivery, the above barriers to access to higher education make distance education an ultimate choice for women. It was in recognition of the challenges that limit access to tertiary education and the inability of conventional universities' to admit more students in an alternative mode that the government established ZOU as a key measure to widen access to higher education.

2.2 Advantages of open and distance education over conventional university learning

The following were identified as the advantages of distance university education over traditional university learning:

- open learning model fits studying around other commitments (family, relatives, community, household chores and work)
- distance university education allows women to learn as they work especially in the face of rising tuition fees
- more flexible to study through ODL since one can learn at own pace and time
- increases access of all individuals to formal (and non-formal) education in a manner convenient to their circumstances
- entry qualifications are usually low making university education more accessible to people who previously were denied entry
- women do not spend much time away from home
- caters for continuous educational development of professionals (such as, teachers, self-employed businessmen and businesswomen, accountants, politicians and engineers)
- allows students to network with people from different professions
- content is delivered in user-friendly and self-learning materials (printed or electronic modules)
- more group-work where students can exchange ideas
- ODL model provides a conducive learning environment to adult learners (andragogical approach)

2.3 Gender dynamics and choice of university education

Answering why some women would opt for ODL instead of traditional university education involves developing causal explanations between gender, choice of university education (campus-based or distance education), occupation and finally income. Gender dynamics bring about a conundrum into the analysis of the causal chain. As a result, the causal explanation of gender-education-occupation is quite complex and involves a number of interrelated chains. This was the approach adopted in this study. Figure 2.2 shows that gender affects the choice of training and type of university education which in turn affects occupational options which are also linked to job promotion opportunities which in turn would affect the income level.
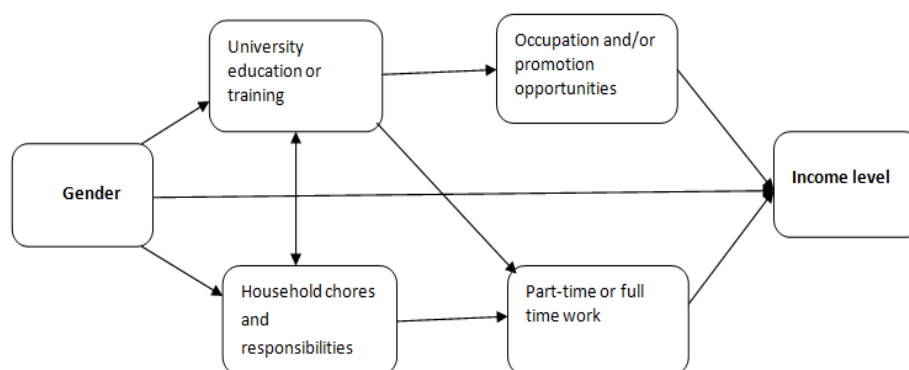

Figure 2.2: Causal links between gender and income.

Source: Author, 2014

The above causal chain should be taken into account in the design, programming and delivery of distance education in order to carter for women's peculiar learning styles. Unfortunately ODL universities often treat their learners as a homogenous group and thus fail to incorporate women's peculiar needs in the design of programmes and delivery of learning. This has placed women learners at a disadvantage not only in terms of learning but their overall performance in their studies.

2.4 Impact of distance university education on women

The following were responses of learners and graduates on the impact of distance university education on women;

- earning a degree improved women's social esteem
- provided earlier drop-outs and disadvantaged with a second chance to further their education
- provided a flexible alternative for people who are prevented from attending conventional or residential university due to personal or work commitments
- women do not have to stay on campus for studies to earn degrees
- ODL model's flexibility allowed women to study at their own pace and time
- enabled women to mix education with other commitments especially household tasks, family and work
- enhanced the means and methods of empowering women

- enabled women to earn higher incomes
- women became more educated and financially independent
- women gained more respect in the family and community at large
- women gained more confidence in dealing with family members and community at large
- made women more employable and enhanced their promotional opportunities
- increased women's career opportunities
- enlightened women on legal literacy, women's rights and entitlements

2.5 Case Studies

The following case studies in Box 2.1 are meant to highlight how ODL has changed lives and empowered some women in Zimbabwe. These specific case studies bring out the lived experiences of learners and thus provide the important voice of someone empowered by distance education. By going through these case studies, potential women distance education learners would be able to manage their fears and reservations on how to cope with studies without regular lectures at mature age and after a long gap. In addition, women distance education learners have to cope with demanding household chores and family and community demands.

Box 2.1: Case studies on the experiences of ODL students and graduates

> **Jane** completed her Bachelor of Commerce in Banking and Finance with ZOU in 2012. She turned down a place at a conventional university in favour of being able to combine work and study. "I was able to study at my own pace while holding down a full time job and gaining valuable experience as a bank teller. Currently, I do not have student debt. I am more employable than someone from a conventional university who have struggled or are still struggling to find a job. I was promoted to a Branch Manager towards the end of 2013 because of the ZOU degree"
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> **Tecla** joined ZOU as a general hand in 2001. She completed her Bachelor of Management in Human Resources with ZOU in 2008. Tecla was promoted to a records clerk in the following year. "I graduated with an MBA from ZOU in 2010 and was promoted to a Faculty Administrator in 2011. I am now a part-time tutor for ZOU and one other university in Harare. I have published four research articles in refereed journals."
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> **Susan** is a journalist who is studying for a Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies with ZOU. "I could not enrol at a conventional university because my employer could not allow me an extended study leave even for block release. Distance education is flexible and allowed me to study around other commitments such as family and work".
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> **John** runs a glass shop in the high density suburb of Highfield, in Harare. I enrolled for the Bachelor of Commerce in Marketing Management Honours in 2013 because I wanted to improve my business management skills. What I have learnt so far has changed the way I manage my business. I now have a professional approach to business management."

Source: Author, 2014

III.   Conclusion And Recommendations

The first step to empower women is to enhance their literacy levels and thus uplift their potential to livelihood strategies which makes them financially independent. At the same time, higher education strengthens women's ability to challenge socio-political gender inequities which invariably inhibit their academic advancement and empowerment. Without higher education, women have limited say in the household decision making, have no recourse to household assets during crisis periods (of divorce, death of husband and abandonment) are exposed to increased vulnerabilities such as domestic violence and HIV and AIDS. The study demonstrated the potential of distance university education to lift the socio-economic barriers constraining women's access to higher education, advancement and empowerment. More specifically, the study revealed that a significant number of female respondents were working married women with children who found distance university learning framework more compatible with their multiple tasks; household chores, education, wage work, family, relatives and community at large. The findings showed that open and distance learning helped women to circumvent constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic barriers thereby significantly contributing to their empowerment. A majority of women took a break to attend to their multiple duties either during or after undergraduate studies and further research would be required in this area.

The recommendations emanating from the study on what should be done to improve access and delivery of distance university education are in three categories; recommendations specific to the Zimbabwe Open University, government of Zimbabwe and family and community at large.

Zimbabwe Open University
- establish specific centre to study the problems, aspirations and needs of women learners
- provide information, knowledge and skills for the economic independence of women learners and their families
- establish a "women council" which would be a forum for women learners to debate women's peculiar problems
- offer cash discounts to women or reduce tuition fees to make university learning more accessible

- introduce courses or degree programmes that address women issues for example, dress-making and home economics
- introduce job-oriented degree programmes in hotel and hospitality management and office management
- minimise financial barriers to study through flexible payment options and financial support packages
- reduce entry requirements for women applicants
- vigorous awareness campaigns on the advantages of distance university education
- arrange university scholarships for women learners
- provide better physical amenities at libraries and tutorial centres
- introduce a regular newsletter where women issues are discussed
- academic staff at the National Centre (headquarters of ZOU) should be more visible in the Regions
- provide a positive learning environment including regular and constructive feedback
- establish discussion rooms in regional libraries
- establish a fully-fledged on-line learning system and reduce paperwork

Government of Zimbabwe
- provide grants or loans to part-time university students in Zimbabwe
- provide free university education to women from disadvantaged families
- give incentives (in the form of priority employment) to women studying through ODL
- subsidize women's university education

Family and community at large
- encourage and support female students with their studies
- provide financial and moral support
- men should assist with household chores
- provide communal support to women distance education learners

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