

Women's Empowerment and Distance Education

Khitam Azaiza, Guest Editor

INTRODUCTION

Distance education has been seen as a potential solution to help women achieve their educational goals. The majority of distance learners are adult women (Hunter, 2007). For many women, balancing a job, family, community, and education can be a major challenge (Furst-Bowe, 2002) when society sees women as homemakers, mothers, housewives, and child minders (Kwapong, 2007). In the Middle East, taking time away from husbands and children is a major issue for wives and mothers (Omar, 2005). In Pakistan, women in rural areas are often

unable to attend formal schools because of the inflexibility of the formal system (Haque & Batool, 1999). In Africa (e.g., Nigeria), illiteracy remains at the center of women's empowerment problems. Thus the innovation of distance education is a solution to overcome educational barriers.

Simonson, Smaldino, Alright, and Zvacek (2009) defined distance education as institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated and where interactive telecommunication systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors. Simonson et al. explained that changes in society, politics, economics, and technologies have a major influence on the status of distance education. However, learners in rural areas perceive distance education as a hope and an opportunity to achieve their goals. Lorenzetti (2007) defined the world of distance education as a means to observe how online learning can help students manage geographic distance and time to pursue an education. For many students, including Palestinians, distance education aims to release the pressure on the traditional institutions and to make higher education available to employed students who cannot attend face-to-face classes in any society (Salah, 1992).

EFFECT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION ON WOMEN

Ojo and Olakulein (2006) and A. Khan (n.d.) noted that education is the sum of knowledge and experience that makes an



individual a better person. The impact of educational attainment level in any society is a true value of the distance education phenomenon. In addition, education opens the opportunities and choices for women to work and to become more self-confident. Ojo and Olakulein (2006) stated,

Given the fact that education enhances a person's sense of self-worth, confidence and also creates an awareness of capacity, 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. It can also be surmised that their income earning potential and development will rise with the new educational status. (p. 151)

According to Gokool-Ramdoe (2005), education enables women to discover, explore, and develop different aspects in their society. Furthermore, Bukhsh (2007) explained that education is the key factor in empowering women to take their rightful place in society. Education gives status and confidence in decision making. Studies showed that women with low educational levels were affected by limited career opportunities, and women who pursued higher education had higher confidence and gained more career opportunities (Haque & Batool, 1999; Kwapong, 2007).

Khan, Shazli, Khan, and Sait (n.d.) and Ibrahim, Rwegasira, and Taher (2007) explained that most Arab and developing countries' governments cannot afford to establish higher education institutions that meet the citizens' needs. Distance education has succeeded in solving that dilemma and provided the chance of pursuing higher education at a reasonable cost (Ibrahim et al., 2007). According to Khan et al. and Ibrahim et al., distance education is growing rapidly. According to Kamal and Sultana (n.d.), the distance open learning system is a solution for economic issues; it is a cost-effective and flexible way of edu-

cating people. The use of open and distance education is no longer a matter of choice; it is the only option for some countries due to their social, cultural, economic, and mobility issues (A. Khan, n.d.).

Distance education has been seen as a potential solution to help women achieve their educational goals. In addition, the need for innovative learning methods is obvious because of its flexibility (Gokool-Ramdoe, 2005; Hammad, Sarie, & Al-Ayyoub, 2004; Kwapong, 2007). Distance open learning provides a way for women to have education because it is very difficult for them to attend traditional classes due to domestic duties (Kamal & Sultana, n.d.). Women's access to education has improved their status within the family and expanded their economic roles (Gokool-Ramdoe, 2005). Although distance education affords greater flexibility to women achieving their academic goals, it also enforces a third shift on them by adding extra work to their lives that are already filled with job and domestic roles (Kramarae, 2001). In Bangladesh, it is hard for females to attain an on-campus education after marriage or childbirth. Because females usually get married at an early age, they cannot leave their family and attend school (Kamal & Sultana, n.d.). In Saudi Arabia, distance education became a solution for housewives to obtain an education (Khan et al., n.d.).

Studies found that distance education is suitable for Mauritian women learners; nevertheless, Mauritian women are facing technology challenges (Gokool-Ramdoe, 2005). In Pakistan, women have more opportunities through distance education than traditional education (Bukhsh, 2007). Open and distance education has been used to educate most Nigerians, including women, at low cost to reduce the unemployment rate and poverty in rural areas (Jegade, 2002; Ojo & Olakulein, 2006a).

Furst-Bowe (2002) stated that women face challenges balancing their job, family, community, and school. Thus, women

who pursue education at a distance are better able to manage their other duties. Although distance education is hard for students, it is a valuable alternative, and women can achieve their education at low cost and study at their convenience (Wooller & Warner, 2001). According to Kwapong (2007), numerous educational studies reported that women's participation in distance education was high as compared to traditional modes, and most women who attended distance education institutions were married, had dependents, and were working. Furthermore, a wide variety of evidence from different countries supports the conclusion that open and distance education has the potential to provide equal opportunities in higher and continuing education. However, geographical location and isolation have been identified as limiting the educational opportunities for women (Kwapong, 2007).

ARTICLES IN THIS SECTION

The articles in this section present different aspects of women's distance education in the Middle East including cultural difference in distance education between Arab and American distance learners, evaluating e-learning in Jordanian institutions, and the needs of distance learning at the Palestinian institutions.

Gail Weatherly from the University of Texas Health Science Center at Tyler wrote an article entitled "Seen But Not Heard: Women in Online Learning Are a Source of Knowledge, If Asked." Her article offers evidence that online women learners can be valuable resources for those wishing to research the field of online learning. Perhaps those women are considered to shape and improve the field for future online learners.

Eli Collins-Brown, from Methodist College of Nursing, and Gail Weatherly, from the University of Texas Health Science Center at Tyler, wrote an article entitled

"Core4Women: Where Women Share and Discover Online Learning." Their article presents the foundation of a new online community that unites women seeking information about online learning and women who have knowledge of online education. This community is called the Collaborative Online Resource Environment for Women (Core4Women).

Gillian McKnight-Tutein and A. Sasha Thackaberry, from Cuyahoga Community College, wrote an article entitled "Having It All: The Hybrid Solution for the Best of Both Worlds in Women's Postsecondary Education." Their article presents four models of hybrid course structures for investigation, adoption, and research to determine implications for gender. Furthermore, recommendations are presented to increase women learners' accomplishment in a hybrid learning environment.

Rebekah K. Nix, from The University of Texas at Dallas, wrote an article entitled "The International Forum for Women in E-Learning: Leading by Example, Learning With Experience." Her article addresses the foundation of the International Forum for Women in E-Learning community that was initiated by Darcy Hardy. International Forum for Women in E-Learning is women conference that is related to the United States Distance Learning Association.

Rochelle Franklin, from Franklin Educational Solutions, Inc., wrote an article entitled "Using Web 2.0 Tools to Balance Work, Life, and Term Papers." Her article addresses tools and technology as educational solutions to assist women to balance their life as mothers, wives, employees, students, et cetera.

CONCLUSION

Distance education has been seen as a potential solution to overcome women's educational barriers. Distance education has a tremendous impact on women's achievement and empowerment. Articles

in this section are examples of what women can accomplish in distance education environments.

REFERENCES

- Bukhsh, Q. (2007). Empowerment of women through distance education in Pakistan. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 8(4), 135-151.
- Furst-Bowe, J. (2002). *Identifying the needs of adult women in distance learning programs*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED468454)
- Gokool-Ramdoe, S. (2005). The online learning environment: Creating a space for Mauritian women learners. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 6(3), 1-15. Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/264/430>
- Hammad, S., Sarie, T., & Al-Ayyoub, A. (2004). A regional integrated virtual learning environment: The AOU's experience. *Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics, and Informatics*, 2(1), 10-14.
- Haq, R., & Batool, S. N. (1999). *Climbing the ladder: A case study of the women's secondary education programme of Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Bureau of Education.
- Hunter, L. (2007). *Role integration of adult women online learners* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Pennsylvania State University, State College.
- Ibrahim, M., Rwegasira, K., & Taher, A. (2007). Institutional factors affecting students' intentions to withdraw from distance learning programs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: The case of the Arab Open University. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 10(1). Retrieved from <http://www.westga.edu/%7Edistance/ojdl/spring10/ibrahim101.htm>
- Jegade, O. (2002). *An integrated ICT-support for ODL in Nigeria: The vision, the mission and the journey so far*. Retrieved from <http://www.portal.unesco.org/es/files/2828/1023182434jegede.pdf/jegede.pdf>
- Kamal, M., & Sultana, S. (n.d.). *Barriers to development in open learning and distance education: Bangladesh*. Retrieved from <http://www.col.org/pcf2/papers%5Ckamal.pdf>
- Khan, A. (n.d.). *Distance education for development*. Retrieved from <http://www.ignou.ac.in/icde2005/Keynote/AW%20Khan.pdf>
- Khan, S., Shazli, S., Khan, J., & Sait, S. (n.d.). *Distance education and its prospects in Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved from <http://www.ece.ubc.ca/~junaidk/papers/pap8.pdf>
- Kramarae, C. (2001). *The third shift: Women learning online*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
- Kwapong, O. (2007). Widening access to tertiary education for women in Ghana through distance education. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 8(4), 65-79.
- Lorenzetti, J. (2007). How to provide distance education in a challenging environment. *Distance Education Report*, 17(11), 3-7.
- Ojo, O. D., & Olakulein, F. K. (2006). Distance education as a women empowerment strategy in Africa. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 7, 271-280.
- Omar, A. (2005). *The potential of distance and open learning in Kuwait: A case study of the Arab Open University-Kuwait branch* (Master's thesis). Available from ProQuest Digital Dissertations and Theses database. (Document ID No. 974467471)
- Salah, M. (1992). *Role of the open universities in the developing world. Al-Quds Open University. A case study*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED363237)
- Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, S. (2009). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundations of distance education* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Wooler, J., & Warner, L. (2001). *An innovative flexible program for rural women*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED470624)