Full Length Research Article

GIRLS AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIA: THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF THE LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT

Considering the need for women empowerment in our society these days and the fact that women play different important roles in the advancement of the modern society, this paper goes to study the girls and women empowerment through open and distance learning with particular focus on the strategic roles of the library. The objectives of the study are to find out the different library and information resources and services available in support of open and distance learning; extent of utilization of these resources by the women and girl users of the library; influence of this utilization on their academic performance; problems encountered by the libraries and strategies for curbing the problems towards enhancing open and distance learning for women and girls; hence empowering them. The study adopted descriptive survey method using women and girl students of the National Open University of Nigeria as the study population. Multiple choice questionnaire was used to collect data while frequencies and mean scores were used to analyze the data presented in Tables. Results and findings of the study will be detailed in the full research paper.

INTRODUCTION

It is an established fact that every human development revolves around sound education. Majasan (1997) had asserted that "Development in any society is anchored primarily towardsEducationalProgress" which brings change in the Economic, Political, Social and Cultural domains. It starts with people, their education and their capabilities because people are the primary and ultimate focus of all development. 'Education is no longer limited to either schooling, college or the production of entrepreneurs, capable of increasing the gross national product, but rather aims at the development of human resources for a wide range of purposes' (Motilal Sharma).It is very unfortunate to observe with dismay that although women constitute about fifty percent of Nigerian's population many of them do not have access to sound education.Nigerian women just like their male counterparts are expected to take active part in national development.

Their ability to play this expected role according to Bolarin (1995) is very much in doubt when one considers their level of education. Results of studies carried out reveal that women are lagging behind their male counterparts. Therefore, for Nigerian Girls and women to perform credibly in development of any form, they must be empowered.Girls and women empowerment has become part of a popular debate worldwide especially in Africa; that was why United Nations has included gender equality and women empowerment in its development goals. Women empowerment is an essential ingredient for achieving all the development goals.It is in realization of this fact, that Ogbuogu (1990) asserts that "Women Education is a sine qua non for the social, economic and political advancement of a nation". This is in line with the saying that when you educate a woman, you have educated a nation. It is also in realization of this that Nigeria as a nation has adopted education as an instrument for social and economic transformation. This was spelt out in the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004), National policy on Education that every Nigerian child shall have right to equal educational opportunities.Also according to UNFPA (1994), education opens the opportunity and choice for women. When women are given the requisite education relevant to their needs and

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environment, they will gradually become more visible and recognized in the mainstream of activities both at home and in the society at large. The increasing cost of schooling is the major reason why many parents cannot send their children particularly girls to school. Therefore in the mist of opportunity cost, parents prefer sending their boys to school while their daughters go into domestic labour market as source of income to help their poor parents. This draws many promising young girls away from school.Today, the introduction of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has brought succor to women who were denied education when they were young.

The revised National policy on Education (2004) by the Federal Republic of Nigeria gave the following as the objectives of distance education:

- Provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied.
- Meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their work place.
- Encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula.
- Ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain in territory institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work.

The above objectives cannot be achieved without the library. The library with its media and information specialists play significant roles in fostering distance education by articulating and providing useful reading resources to support research and learning. These roles have been streamlined and harnessed through the library's use of ICT in delivering its services as the backbone of any educational institution. This paper discusses the strategic roles of the library in enhancing distance education for the empowerment of girls and Women in Nigeria.

Purpose of the research

Many international and local conferences on emancipation initiatives of women (Beijing Conference 1975, 1985, 1995, International Decade of Women, Strategy for the Acceleration of Girls Education e.t.c) or through the collaborative efforts of the various Government and Non-governmental organizations have been advocating education for women empowerment. The purpose of this research therefore is to look into Girls and Women Empowerment through Open and Distance Learning, the strategic role of the library, the achievement of this and the challenges faced by the libraries. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Find out the girls' and women's main aims of taking up distance learning programmes.
- Find out the different resources available in their library in support of ODL.
- Examine the extent of utilization of the resources by the students (Girls and Women).
- Ascertain the benefits of the utilization of library resources on their academic performance.
- Find out factors that pose problems to libraries in enhancing open and distance learning.
- Suggest strategies to curtail the problems.

Research questions

- What are the girls' and women's main aims of taking up distance learning programmes?
- What resources are available in the library in support of ODL?
- 3. To what extent do the students (Girls and Women) utilize the library resources?
- 4. What are the perceived benefits of the utilization of library resources on their academic performance?
- 5. What factors do pose problems to libraries in enhancing open and distance learning?
- 6. What strategies could be used to curtail the problems?

Literature review

What is women empowerment?

According to the Oxford dictionary the word empowerment comes from empower, which means to give the power or authority to act.Similarly, Okeke (1995) sees empowerment to mean "to empower means to give power to, to give authority to, to enable a person or a group of persons gain power. Batliwa (1995) in her definition of empowerment stated that: Empowerment is the process and the result of the process whereby the powerless or less powerful members of the society gain greater access and control over material and knowledge, resources, challenges and ideologies of discrimination and structures through which unequal access and control over resources are sustained and perpetuated. Empowerment is the process whereby people are enabled to improve or gain control over their lives and circumstances to the extent that they can contribute to positive change in development (IPG, 2003). From the forgoing definitions, it shows that empowerment implies that an individual or a group had hitherto lacked power or authority by circumstances, margined, denial or default.Therefore, the issue of women empowerment has become part of popular debate and has however been misconstrued in a myriad of ways. To a great majority, women's power is used to fight men, including their husbands.Women empowerment entails equipping women with necessary perceptions, skills and socio-economic resources in order to help them make a more meaningful contribution to the society (World Bank, 2003).Odoemenam (2010) sees it as the development of mental and physically capacity, power and skills in women in their social milieu thereby experiencing a more favourable level of social recognition and subsequently enhance their status.

The relevance of distance education

Distance education serves the persons living in the isolated areas, Rai, (2000). Bukhsh (2007) citing Manjulika and Reddy (2000) indicated that distance learning addresses the needs of specific target groups, there is a great variation in the range of programs offered. Distance education according to them also serves the dropouts, older students and disadvantaged groups. The open universities Manjulika and Reddy maintained, have also isolated or excluded from regular classes because of shift patterns, seasonal or other kind of work, family and community commitments.Distance education is a global and rapidly growing phenomenon which offers formal learning opportunities to people who would not otherwise have access to schooling or college education. While open and distance

education programmes in Nigeria consist of different kinds such as sandwich programmes run by different institutions of higher learning, weekend programmes, correspondence learning and the renowned Nigeria's Teacher's Institute (NTI) pivotal teacher training programme, the most outstanding of them all is in the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) educational system. Ajadi, Salawu and Adeoye (2008) revealed that the NOUN has emerged as the first dedicated university in Nigeria to introduce education through distance learning mode.

The place of the library in distance learning

Library obviously has a unique role to play in any educational system. Distance education/learning is not left out. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2004) in its guidelines for distance learning library services stated that access to adequate library services and resources is for the attainment of superior academic skills in post secondary education regardless of where students, faculty and programmes are located. Any originating institution offering any form of distance learning programme should integrate library services in the planning, organization and management of the programmes. The roles of libraries working in distance learning institutions were enumerated by Watson (2003) as;

i) Ensure that library and information services conform to accreditation requirement.
ii) Develop and maintain quality distance education information resources like reading list for students and course developers.
iii) Help distance learners acquire library skills, critical thinking, study and information literacy skills (user education).
iv) Advice distance educators on new and appropriate course materials.
v) Support the research and scholarship activities of distance education staff.
vi) Identify other institutions that can assist with delivering distance library services to students (interlibrary cooperation).

Such libraries not only endeavour to provide a variety of library and information services and resources but also enhance users' access to both physical and electronic resources. Kavilya (2004) noted that distance learners need to use reference services and resources, book reserves, interlibrary loans and access to electronic database.

Problems and challenges facing these libraries

Certain setbacks do pose challenges to libraries generally in Nigeria and particularly those academic libraries serving distance learners. Watson (2003) revealed that libraries in developing countries are under-resourced, understaffed, and remote from distance learners. These make the libraries incapable of providing the range of services and materials needed to support higher education especially distance learners. Although most distance learning programmes are powered by information communication technologies (ICT), Nok (2006); Islam (2007) and Armah (2009) all lamented on poor state of power generator/supply, lack of required infrastructure, inadequate ICT service laboratories, lack of adequate computer literacy amongst staff and users, poor maintenance culture and high cost of maintenance of

modernized library facilities as challenges to the libraries. All these mostly emanate from poor funding of the library and the educational sector as noted by Akin and Ajayi (2008) as well as Ifijeh (2011) amongst others.

Ways of curbing the problems

Strategies for curbing these problems should be at the priority list of these libraries and their parent institutions running distance learning programmes since authorities like Ajayi and Adeta (2005); Yusuf and Iwu (2010) and Nwezeh and Shabi (2011) allattested to the academic library users' utilization of resources and services provided by the library. Akin and Ajayi (2008) maintained that there is dire need for improved funding for these libraries. Many other improvement strategies emanate from these; like automation, acquisition, installation and utilization of electronic resources and facilities including the internet, subscribing to and maintenance of access to databases in different disciplines as well as training and re-training of staff will all be facilitated when fund is adequately available. Nwezeh and Shabi (2011) recommended that in order to serve the patrons better, the libraries and institutions should re-address the issue of library orientation for fresh men, aggressive and large scale user education, providing functional library building and making library environment pleasant and comforTable amongst other things.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted survey research design where the population of the study comprised of the girls and women of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Simple random sampling was used to draw about 100 (women and girls respondents) while structured questionnaire was used as data collection instrument. The data was analyzed using frequencies and mean scores and presented in Tables. The mean scores were computed using the four-point rating scale; decision on each item was based on limits of real numbers thus:

A mean score of 3.50 – 4.00 indicates Very high extent/strongly agree
A mean score of 2.50 – 3.49 indicates High extent/agree
A mean score of 1.50 – 2.49 indicates low extent/disagree
A mean score of 1.00 – 1.49 indicates very low extent/strongly disagree

Data analysis and Presentation

Table 1. What is your main aim of furthering your education through open and distance learning?

S.No.	Items	Mean (X)	Decision
1	To get a job	3.72	Strongly Agree
2	To get promotion in my place of work	2.67	Agree
3	To gain better exposure in life generally	2.95	Agree
4	To advance in my profession	2.68	Agree
5	To be able to establish on my own	3.65	Strongly Agree

Results from Table 1 above strongly indicated that open and distance education will help them acquire jobs after their study (a mean score of 3.72), to get promotion in their place of work (a mean score of 2.67). the respondents also agreed that after their study through open and distance learning that they would gain better exposure in life (a mean score of 2.95), advance in their profession (a mean score of 2.68) and that they would be

able to establish their own business (a mean score of 3.65). Also from the above results one may infer that open and distance learning can empower women in the society who were denied education when they were younger.

Table 2. What types of library resources are available in the library to support open and distance learning?

S/N	Items	Mean (X)	Decision
1	Textbooks	3.57	Very adequate
2	Course materials	2.23	Not adequate
3	E-resources like e-books, e-journals	3.74	Very adequate
4	Databases of different disciplines	3.65	Very adequate
5	Computers for general use	2.56	Fairly adequate
0.6	Core reference materials	2.73	Fairly adequate
7	Other internet resources and services	2.64	Fairly adequate
8	Local newspapers, magazines and journals	3.85	Very adequate

From the results of Table 2 above, it could be seen that the libraries very adequately provide such information resources as textbooks (a mean score of 3.57), e-resources like e-books and e-journals (a mean score of 3.74), local newspapers, magazines and journals (a mean score of 3.85) and databases of different disciplines (a mean score of 3.65). Findings also show that the following resources are fairly adequate; computers for general use (a mean score of 2.56), core reference materials (a mean score of 2.73) and other internet resources and services (a mean score of 2.64). However, observations further show that the availability of course materials are not adequate (a mean score of 2.23).

Table 3. To what extent do students utilize the library and information resources in the library

S/N	Items	Mean (X)	Decision
1	Textbooks	2.38	Low extent
2	Course materials	2.85	High extent
3	E-resources like e-books, e-journals	1.88	Low extent
4	Databases of different disciplines	1.74	Low extent
5	Computers for general use	1.93	Low extent
6	Core reference materials	1.94	Low extent
7	Other internet resources and services	1.88	Low extent
8	Local newspapers, magazines and journals	2.78	High extent

From the results of Table 3 above, one would observe that there is high extent of use for the following resources; course materials (a mean score of 2.85) and local newspapers, magazines and journals (a mean score of 2.78). However unfortunately there is low extent of use for many resources like textbooks (a mean score of 2.38), e-resources like e-books and e-journals (a mean score of 1.88), databases of different disciplines (a mean score of 1.74), general use of computers (a mean score of 1.93), core reference materials (a mean score of 1.94) and other internet resources and services (a mean score of 1.88). From the results above, one would observe that majority of the students don't make use of the e-resources and internet services. This may be as a result of most of them not being computer literate.From the results of Table 4 below, one would observe that the use of the following library and information resources can boost academic performance to a high extent; textbooks (a mean score of 2.55), course materials (a mean score of 2.67) and local publications (a mean score of 2.56). However, the low level of computer literacy in the society has also affected the use of the following resources that

can boost academic performance to a low extent; e-resources (a mean score of 1.97), databases in various disciplines (a mean of 1.69), reference resources and services (a mean score of 1.81) and other internet services and resources (a mean score of 2.08).

Table 4. To what extent does the utilization of the library and information resources boost your academic performance?

S/N	Items	Mean (X)	Decision
1	Use of textbooks	2.55	High extent
2	Use of course materials in exams	2.67	High extent
3	Use of information from e-resources	1.97	Low extent
4	Access to databases in my discipline	1.69	Low extent
5	Information gotten from reference resources and services	1.81	Low extent
6	Information from other internet services and resources	2.08	Low extent
7	Utilization of information from local publications	2.56	High extent

Table 5. Problems encountered by the libraries in provision of services and resources in support of open and distance learning

S/N	Items	Mean (X)	Decision
1	Funding problem	3.89	Strongly Agree
2	Lack of required infrastructure especially electronic	3.75	Strongly Agree
3	Poor maintenance of available electronic and other resources	3.55	Strongly Agree
4	Inadequate number of workers	1.9	Disagree
5	UnsTable power supply to power the electronic facilities	3.95	Strongly agree
6	Low level of computer literacy amongst users and some workers	3.57	Strongly Agree
7	Poor or inadequate library accommodation	2.3	Disagree

Findings and results from Table 5 above show the various factors that pose problems to the library in providing library and information services to support open and distant learning. Factors like poor funding (a mean score of 3.89), lack of required infrastructure especially electronic (a mean score of 3.75), poor maintenance of available electronic and other resources (a mean score of 3.55), unsTable power supply for the electronic facilities (a mean score of 3.95), low level of computer literacy amongst users and some workers (a mean score of 3.57).

Table 6. Strategies for overcoming the problems encountered by the users thereby enhancing the library and information provision for open and distance learning

S/N	Items	Mean (X)	Decision
1	Improved funding of the library	3.51	Strongly agree
2	Improved funding of the education sector generally	3.85	Strongly Agree
3	Sound user education for users even in the area of electronic/computer skills	3.75	Strongly Agree
4	Training and retraining of the library workers especially in electronic skills	3.11	Agree
5	Re-addressing the issue of (alternative) power supply	3.85	Strongly agree
6	Providing adequate space for both the ordinary and the e-libraries	2.65	Agree

Further results showed that poor library accommodation(a mean score of 2.30) and inadequate number of workers (a mean score of 1.90) also affect provision of library services

moderately.Results from Table 6 above indicate that some strategies could be utilized in overcoming the problems encountered by the users thereby enhancing the library and information provision for open and distance learning to a very high extent. Such strategies as improved funding of the library (a mean score of 3.51), improved funding of the education sector generally (a mean score of 3.85), sound user education for users even in the area of electronic/computer (a mean score of 3.75), re-addressing the issue of alternative power supply (a mean score of 3.85). All the above had mean scores above 3.50. However, training and retraining of the library workers especially in electronic skills (a mean score of 3.11) and providing adequate space for both the physical and the e-libraries (a mean score of 2.65) has mean scores above 2.50 which indicates just a high extent.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Distance education is an important milestone in the development of higher education and has great potential to equalize opportunities and take higher education to the door steps of women. It is expected that this school of distance education will lead to empowerment of women especially among rural and tribal women. Therefore, education given to a woman is unquantifiable. It has a spillover effect on children, families, communities and the nation. An educated woman is a better mother, wife, social mobilizer and citizen. The role of ODL in reducing the low level of literacy of Nigerian women and also empowering them to contribute to sustainable development cannot be overemphasized. The library with its resources and services is at the heart of the educational system and ODL is not left out. Without sound and adequate provision of library and information services, the core objectives of the ODL, teaching, learning and research may not be realized. Although, the libraries are supposed to provide a variety of adequate library and information resources and services, certain factors such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructural facilities and skills etc. pose problems to these libraries in the Nigerian setting. Certain strategies as adequate funding which will facilitate a lot of things, training and retraining of librarians, etc. could help to curb these problems and enhance the provision of information services and resources by the libraries for ODL.

The government need to do a lot to translate the goals and objectives of ODL as stated in the national policy on education into reality by encouraging and promoting ODL programmes. First of all, the government should mount a sensitization exercise to let people know the existence of ODL and what they can offer. This can be done through mass media, radio jingles and also town criers in the rural areas. Government should sponsor some women who are interested in reading but cannot fund the exercise. The government should ensure steady supply of electricity in urban and rural areas to enable centres use online resources. The government should provide adequate funds for the institution to enable them make education accessible to those who desire it. It is also recommended that the government and the governing councils of ODL institutions should re-address the issue of funding and library budgets since a lot of improvements depend on funds available and how they are managed. The librarians and library managements on their own should seek best practices as obtainable in advanced countries to provide quality library and information resources to the contemporary users in line with the current trends in this information era.

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