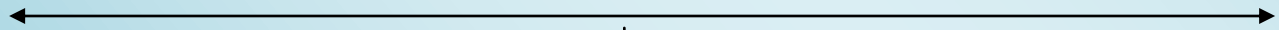


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WOMEN, MULTIPLE ROLES AND ANDRAGOGY: A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE ON OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Multiple roles and responsibilities, is a situation whereby an individual performs many different tasks and have many responsibilities, for example, being an employee, married person, parent and student. Such a situation negatively affects married people in general, but women studying through open and distance learning (ODL) in particular. This study sought to interrogate women's understanding of multiple roles and responsibilities, how those who find themselves in such a situation have their studies affected and suggest strategies that can ameliorate the women's predicament. The study calls for a gendered perspective on ODL. The methodology was influenced by the Constructivist philosophy, where a qualitative methodology was used. Since the aim was to explore the lived experiences of women learning through ODL, a case study research design was used. Twenty women who were victims of multiple roles and responsibilities and studying through ODL at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) were purposively sampled for data generation through face-to-face interviews. Of the twenty women, ten were sampled from ZOU's Bulawayo Regional Centre, while Matabeleland North and South contributed five participants each. The following measures were used to ensure trustworthiness of data - careful sampling procedures, verbatim recording of interviews, member checking and triangulating data sources. Data were analysed through thematic content analysis. Major findings were that women studying through ODL are victims of multiple roles which if not addressed have the potential to derail their studies. It was recommended that ODL should take cognizance of the women's multiple roles and put in place strategies to ensure that multiple roles will not negatively impact on the performance of women studying through ODL.

Key words: women; multiple roles; andragogy and open and distance learning.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Many women (married, single mothers, widowed, divorced, employed, among others) may face challenges when trying to further their education in conventional institutions due to their circumstances. However, the advent of

open and distance learning (ODL) seem to have opened opportunities for these many women. The characteristics of ODL and the opportunities ODL creates for the disadvantaged members of the societies seem to be the panacea to women's unsatiated educational aspirations. Unfortunately, the circumstances that deny many women opportunities for higher education in conventional institutions seem to dog them again in ODL, albeit from a different perspective. This paper argues for a gendered perspective in dealing with women in ODL. It does so by speaking to the following questions: (a) What do women enrolled in ODL institutions understand by the term multiple roles? (b) What constitutes multiple roles in their professional, educational and family lives? (c) How do multiple roles interfere with their educational engagements? (d) What strategies can ODL institutions employ to alleviate the impact of multiple roles on women in ODL's educational aspirations?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AND ITS BENEFITS

According to UNESCO (2002), ODL is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of Internet-based information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web presenting approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of students. To Dodds (2005), ODL is an approach which combines the principles of student centredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of student provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of student support, the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that students can succeed and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems.

Saide and Saide (2003) define ODL as a planned and implemented educational activity, where teaching relies on the use of teaching materials, in which this overcomes the challenges of distant students in terms either of access, or of time and place, time to be taken to finish the course, method of study, or any combination of these. This concurs with Nyaruwata's (2011) sentiments that ODL represents approaches that focus on opening access to education freeing students from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and group students.

From the above definitions, one can deduce that ODL provides flexible educational opportunities at convenient place and time to a larger population in urban and remote areas. ODL was received well by the Zimbabwean society as exhibited by ZOU's high enrolment figures during its formative years.

BENEFITS OF ODL

ODL increases access to learning and training opportunity, provides increased opportunities for updating, retraining and personal enrichment, improves cost effectiveness of educational resources, supports the quality and variety of existing educational structures, enhances and consolidates capacity. Another advantage of distance learning is its convenience because many of the technologies are easily accessible from home. Many forms of distance learning provide students the opportunity to participate whenever they wish, on an individual basis, because of distance learning flexibility. This kind of education is quite affordable, as many forms of distance learning involve little or no cost. Distance learning is also multi-sensory. There is a wide variety of materials that can meet everyone's learning preference. In fact some students learn from visual stimuli and others learn best by listening or interacting with a computer program. Also, distance learning can offer increased interactions with students. In particular, introverted students who are too shy to ask questions in class will often "open up" when provided an opportunity to interact via e-mail or other individualized means (Franklin, Yoaka and Warren, 1996).

The number of nontraditional students has grown more rapidly than the number of traditional students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The growth of nontraditional adult enrollment in higher education demands a different and more flexible delivery system to meet students' needs (Chun and Hinton, 2001). ODL is designed to ensure compatibility with the characteristics and needs of the adult student. By retaining their jobs while attending school, adult students are able to continue to gain in work experience while pursuing educational goals (Nafukho, Thompson and Brooks, 2004).

ODL is becoming an accepted and indispensable part of mainstream education prompted by the need to make learning more accessible to a wider population, the growing need for continual skills upgrading and reskilling; and advances in technology that have made it possible for teaching to be conducted at a distance. Governments are cognizant of the potential of ODL in fulfilling the fundamental rights of all people to learning and the need to incorporate it within the framework of human capital development (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2011).

Because of the rapid growth in ODL, the use of technology has overcome many of the barriers to higher education by providing traditional universities with an opportunity to meet the changing worldwide demand for education (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education in UK, 2001). The demand for higher education is expanding throughout the world - by 2025, as many as 150 million people will be seeking higher education (Goddard, 2000). This growth in demand will result in a change in the type of students undertaking higher education. Educational needs are becoming continuous throughout one's working life, as labour markets demand knowledge and skills that require regular updating (O'Neill, Singh and O'Donoghue, 2004). A recent report by the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education in UK (2001) indicated that more than 50% of higher education students were mature students (someone who starts a degree at age 21 or older). This figure is expected to increase as people realize the importance of education and how convenient it has become to have access to online learning and virtual universities that allow educational experiences to be tailored to the needs of individuals or groups.

The distance-learning environment has a major contribution to make to the educational requirements of the 21st century by encouraging general acceptance of the concept of knowledge as a vital element in social development and economic growth. The authenticity, quality, and competitive standards of such programmes should come from reputable institutions so that those in higher education can confidently say that it will eventually lead to economic growth (O'Lawrence, 2007).

ODL provides many benefits, including meeting the needs of nontraditional students with responsibilities to career and family that keep them from taking traditional college courses. In fact, this new approach provides a new source of revenue for public universities that are experiencing shortages in financial support from the state and can ease the tension of body count in classrooms to generate full-time equivalence (FTE) to avoid canceling classes (Maguire, 2005). As a result of this success, the benefits of ODL have led many higher education institutions to implement ODL classes, even if on an experimental basis, just to keep the flow of revenue going. Some are hybrid in format and some are completely online. In general, society benefits most from an overall increase in technology literacy through greater access to education (Belanger and Jordan, 2004).

CHARACTERISTICS OF ODL STUDENTS

According to Polson (1993) adult students are engaged in multiple roles which impact both the time and the energy they can devote to their role as a student. He goes on to say that unlike younger students, college is not the full time occupation but the secondary role to that of being a parent, a spouse, an employee and/or a community leader. Thus, for the demands of the additional role to be successfully integrated into the already complex life there is need for reordering of the adult's life.

Moore (2000) claims that ODL students require a great deal of interaction, mainly with the purpose of giving reassurance that everything is going well. The development of a virtual world motivates students to participate in the educational process by exploring and playing with the lesson materials. It can potentially provide an active, independent, student-centered, and tutor-facilitated engagement that enables communication with other students and tutors that may not always be available within the traditional classroom setting (O'Neill, et al, 2004).

Adults are viewed by Moore (1973) as autonomous students. Autonomy defined as “. . . the will and ability to exercise powers of learning, to overcome obstacles for oneself, to try to do difficult learning tasks, and to resist coercion” (p. 667), and uses Wedemeyer's (1969) description of autonomous learners: Autonomous learners are capable of planning and organizing their time and resources in an effort to succeed at their learning endeavors. Autonomous learners also enjoy the process of learning new things and the associated questioning, analyzing and testing. Autonomous learners have developed the personal and social skills necessary to interact successfully with teachers and peers, and they enjoy learning independently.

Having lived long, adult students are resources as they bring life experiences into the classroom. According to Polson (1993), their experience provides a rich resource for learning and a foundation upon which to build new knowledge, hence applying what they are learning to their experience. Billington (2000) also believes that adult students take full responsibility for their learning, incorporate past experiences to help in their learning process, and tend to view teachers, as well as fellow students, as peers in the learning process. Furthermore, adult students, if encouraged to develop their own critical thinking skills, are able to elaborate on current knowledge and transform previous ideas and opinions and develop a “habit of mind” (Mezirow, 1997:10) in which they become aware of their own reflective processes of critical evaluation and realize the limitations of previously held assumptions. Thus, their knowledge and experience should be respected. In our view, the above characteristics are generic to all students enrolled in ODL universities. However, there is one characteristic that is unique to most

female students in ODL - that characteristic being that such students have multiple roles, beyond those of their male counterparts.

THE CONCEPT OF MULTIPLE ROLES

We view multiple roles as a situation where an individual performs many roles. In the case of women in ODL, depending on their situations, these could be performing roles as mothers, wives, daughters-in-law, employees, supervisors at work, and at times as students in a higher learning institution such an ODL university. Our point of departure is that such a scenario, presents women with challenges which may limit the extent to which they could have performed in their studies all other things being equal. Elis, Daniels and Jauregui (undated), commenting on multitasking, a concept closely related to multiple roles, concur that in a learning situation, multitasking results in lower grades.

THE IMPACT OF MULTIPLE ROLES ON WOMEN IN ODL

The Unesco Secretariat (1998) posits that the Beijing Women's Conference of 1995, was a turning point in women's social empowerment and leadership for the following two reasons: First, it confirmed that the entire gender issue had gained worldwide attention as a crucial component in the development process; making it possible to redress the inequalities more efficiently. Second, compared to earlier gatherings of this nature, this conference resulted in more concrete recommendations to help ensure that women take full place in the world of the 21st Century. However, many problems that were illuminated at the Beijing 1995 Conference Declaration remain unresolved to date. These include – persistent poverty; inequality of access to education, health and welfare; violence; impact of armed conflicts; absence from decision-making in the economic sector; unequal participation in the power structures of society; insufficient mechanisms to promote the advancement of women; inadequate recognition of women's rights; failure to recognize women's contribution to society; and insufficient recognition of women's contribution to environmental protection and management. It is our assumption that some of these problems, particularly when it comes to equity and equality in education are intricately linked to multiple roles played by women in the home and in the society at large.

Sweetman (2004:3) states that:

Schools, training establishments, and education systems reflect the social context from which they come; as in the societies that surround them, certain participants will be favoured and others disadvantaged. The barriers faced by women and girls in gaining access to education arise from a mixture of economic, social, and cultural factors, which define norms of women's capabilities, their existing activities within society, and views on how these should or should not be challenged.

Challenges faced by women studying in higher learning institutions are aptly captured by Chopp (2013). She identifies three such challenges – little understanding by university management about the predicament of women; challenge of balance between work, education and family demands; and societal attitudes driven by the perception that women should not be trying to go to university and should not be working if they have young children at home. Chopp's views are echoed by a Sage publication which expounds that work, family and education intersect in a number of ways. The publication identifies three significant forms in which the three facets intersect: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict and behaviour-based conflict. Below is a brief explanation of each form:

- Time-based conflict is a result of competition for time between the activities that people pursue in life. It is prevalent among employees who work long hours, travel extensively, frequently work overtime, and have inflexible work schedules. Family characteristics such as marriage, young children, large families, employed spouses, increase the amount of time required to fulfill family role requirements, which can interfere with work and education related activities.
- Strain-based conflict exists when psychological strain produced within one role affects our functioning in another role. Work stresses can produce such symptoms as tension, irritability, fatigue, depression, and apathy. Family role has its own share of stressors such as difficulties with partner or children, and receiving little support and aid from family members may affect one's performance at work and/or in one's studies.
- Behaviour-based conflict is experienced when behaviour that is effective in one role is simply inappropriate in another role. For example, managers when at work are expected to be self-reliant, aggressive, detached, and objective. Yet, when they come to class are expected to behave like any other students. Failure to de-role may hinder learning.

Our assumption therefore is that in the absence of mitigatory strategies, multiple roles have the potential to derail the accrual of ODL benefits to women. As rightly argued by Vryonides and Zembylas (2016) one of the most paramount issues regarding women in higher education is time management amidst conflicting responsibilities as women struggle to balance themselves between the public and private spheres, generally resulting in anxieties and tensions.

STRATEGIES TO COUNTER THE IMPACT OF MULTIPLE ROLES

One of the key strategies is support from family members, especially the husband. Vryonides and Vitsilakis (in press), in Vryonides and Sembylas (2016: online) state that:

. . . The need for support becomes paramount for whether the whole experience would develop positively or negatively. In particular, the role of the immediate familial surroundings and particularly that of the husband appears to be crucial as his supportive or indifferent and unconstructive stance affect to great extent women's educational experiences.

At the institutional level, literature shows that a number of strategies can be employed. These include the following – modularization; pre-packed open and distance education opportunities; increased emphasis on professional practice; development of notions such as the 'reflective practitioner'; new modes of assessment such as portfolio development and performance-based assessment; and tailoring programmes to individuals' needs (Schon, 1983; Harris, 2000) in Vryonides and Sembylas (2016). Azaiza (2012) recommends a raft of strategies that ODL universities should use to increase women's access to higher education. These include – providing ICT training to students and faculty members to enable e-learning; increasing bandwidth to enhance connectivity; providing professional development training for faculty members on student support, encouragement and motivation; providing technical support to students and faculty; and having well equipped libraries. Gudhlanga, Magadza and Mafa (2012) reiterate that as women seek to combine education with their other roles, support from family, work and the university in which they are registered is critical in determining the success and completion of their study programmes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach. The approach was deemed appropriate since our purpose was to explore and understand the meaning individuals ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). In our case, it was how women undergoing degree programmes through ODL, viewed the impact of multiple roles on

their studies. This approach accorded us the opportunity to explore How and What questions as opposed to percentages of women who said this or that. Data collection and analysis were within a case study research design. Twenty women enrolled for degree programmes at the Zimbabwe Open University were purposively sampled to provide data for the investigation. We used purposive sampling since it enabled us to identify data-rich sources (Johnson and Christensen, 2014). Using this approach, we yielded a sample of women having the following attributes: school heads, senior teachers, wives, mothers, daughters-in-law, holding posts of responsibility in the private sector, and students in ODL). Data were generated through face-to-face interviews. With the permission of the participants, interview proceedings were recorded verbatim. After the interviews, data were transcribed and sent back to the participants for verification before analysis. The thematic content analysis process involved the following activities: segmenting, coding, enumeration and arrangement of data into themes and sub-themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

(a) What do women enrolled in ODL institutions understand by the term multiple roles?

Participants understood multiple roles as one person doing many tasks such as professional roles, family roles, educational roles and social roles. For example, being a mother, wife, employee, student, church elder and a friend to some other people. Time has to be shared to accommodate the mentioned activities. Also, one has to shift from one role to another. The participants' conceptualization of the term is consisted with definitions of the concept by a number of authors such as Polsen (1993), Elis et al., (undated) as well as Gudhlanga et al., (2012). Women's understanding of the term was of great significance in this study since participants were aware of the issue that was under discussion. Apart from this awareness, participants were experiencing the effects of multiple roles in their daily lives.

(b) What constitutes multiple roles in their professional, educational and family lives?

According to participants, the professional field requires one to meet targets and achieve organizational goals and mission. Professional activities highlighted by school head were to be a supervisor, administrator, liaison officer, and teacher and make sure communication is effectively done. The mentioned activity requires one to plan, implement, monitor, evaluate and assess progress. Also, professional roles highlighted were work meetings, workshops, field visits, report writing and returns

compilation. Educationally, one has to do assignments and project at stipulated deadlines, attend tutorials, raise school fees, attend group discussions and prepare for presentations and examinations.

Family roles requires one to be a mother who takes care of the family composed of children, husband and extended family, help children do their homework, make sure children's school fees is paid, give guidance and counselling to teenagers, do housework duties, attending to visitors and make sure family budget is managed properly. For single parents, they play a part of being a father and mother. One of the participants highlighted that one cannot fail to meet deadlines at work because there is education, ignore children because there is education, thus education is usually the last resort. The contribution below from one of the participants captures most participants' views:

....cultural practices affect womens' engagement in education. Though times are changing, there are some women who are still glued to cultures that say women should not be educated and are marginalized, hence cannot accomplish their dreams. These women tend to be loaded with roles such that they would not have time to study or have no value on education at all.

Participants' views on what constitutes multiple roles are in accord with views of a number of authors such as Sweetman (2004). In our views, participants' ability to identify multiple roles in their lives may make it feasible for them to try to come up with strategies to mitigate the negative impact of multiple roles, true to the adage that: 'Identifying the problem is halfway the solution'. If one knows her roles and responsibilities, one will be in a position to balance and prioritise one's activities in undertaking one's roles and fulfilling one's responsibilities, all other things being equal.

(c) How do multiple roles interfere with their educational engagement?

Participants highlighted that they first attend to professional and family engagements without fail then education at last, and this leads to women failing to meet educational deadlines in terms of assignments and projects and end up doing their work hurriedly and produce unsatisfactory work and sometimes fail examinations or dropout of school because they cannot stand the pressure. For instance, one participant who is a supervisor at a certain organization highlighted that, when she is at work she cannot study. She has to run day to day activities at work and when she gets home, she has to be engaged in housework activities, hence lesser time is rendered to studies worse still the body has to rest. As put forth by one of

the participants: “ that some of the working conditions are very rigid that one cannot be allowed to leave the office to attend to personal work, but it calls for discipline in order to attain what one intends to achieve”.

The views that were put forth by participants were consistent with observations by a number of authors who include Unesco Secretariat (1998), Chopp (2013), and Vrynoides and Zembylas (2016). From the foregoing, it goes without saying that multiple roles and responsibilities may have a negative impact on the achievement of women enrolled in ODL programmes. Therefore, lecturers in ODL institutes should be cognisant of this impact when dealing with female students.

(d) What strategies can ODL institutions employ to alleviate the impact of multi roles on women in ODL’s educational aspiration?

Participants suggested that ODL institutions should change their mode of learning to interactive learning through online, and generally offer e-services so that they can access institutional services from wherever they will be, thus saving time and transport costs. Women can also be empowered with computer skills so that they don’t encounter challenges as they access services. For those without internet, libraries should have current sources of information that suit every programme offered by the institution.

The personnel in these institutions should be a listening ear to the challenges encountered by women during their time of study and how they interfere with their educational work instead of comparing them with their male counterparts. The institution can alter its way of operation and offer services during lunch hour, where most organizations will be closed for lunch and this would be the only times for ODL students visit the offices for various services. ODL institutions should provide guidance and counseling on how to manage their multiple roles.

Have lectures during weekends instead of tutorials and increase the assessment instrument so that the mood of learning is stirred up in women. Women’s’ time was said to be very limited that one has no time to go through the whole module, but if one can have a lecture, that can cover up the gap. It was also pointed that the tutorials that ZOU promises to offer, are not due to the institution’s policies patterning to enrolment. This was said to be spreading negative publicity in the community and women end up not keen to learn. Though it is very challenging, handling pressure from various roles, a sense of achievement drives women’s’ enthusiasm and it’s only a matter of good time management and study skills. The zeal is

also on getting educated and be part of the managers of organizations like men, hence demonstrating their capabilities. Some of the strategies to address multiple roles that were suggested by participants resonate with ideas from a number of scholars such as Azaiza (2012) and Gudhlanga et al., (2012).

CONCLUSIONS

We arrived at the following conclusions:

- The notion of multiple roles and responsibilities is a reality and it affects women in ODL more than their male counterparts enrolled in the same degree programmes.
- Women are aware of what constitutes multiple roles and responsibilities in their social, economic, professional and educational lives.
- In the absence of coping mechanisms, multiple roles have the potential to derail women enrolled in ODL degree programmers' educational aspirations.
- It is possible to have a gendered perspective of ODL and employ strategies that ameliorate the predicament of women in ODL caused by multiple roles and responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the conclusions arrived at in this study, we recommend that:

- Individuals managing ODL institutions should acknowledge that women enrolled in ODL degree are victims of multiple roles and responsibilities.
- ODL institutions should practice positive discrimination to accommodate women when delivering services library services and tutorials so that women can access these as and when they have the time.
- ODL institutions should embrace strategies such as e-tutoring, e-learning, e-brary and submission of assignments online. Students, especially female students should be trained in the use of these strategies.
- ODL student management departments should take concerns brought to their attention by female students seriously especially if they have something to do with challenges emanating from multiple roles and responsibilities.
- The study should be replicated on a larger scale, triangulating methodologies, methods and data sources in order to come up with a more informed position regarding how the issue of multiple roles and women in ODL can be handled.

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