



Minority Students in Graduate Studies: An Exploration into Women's Accessibility to Higher Education through the Open and Distance Learning Mode in Nigeria

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Abstract

Despite the odds militating against women education in a patriarchal society like Nigeria, an increasing number of women are pursuing higher education studies. This study focuses on women in difficult circumstances constrained by socio-cultural factors who are pursuing postgraduate programmes through the open and distance learning (ODL) mode, herein referred to as minority women, which include women in purdah, women in remote and rural communities, women in full-time employment, single-parent women, underprivileged women, and women traders. Despite being a disadvantaged group, not much is known about the experiences and live stories of these women and how they manage to wade through the rigours of graduate studies notwithstanding the many obstacles they face. To fill this gap in knowledge, the present study aimed at developing insight into the experiences of these women including their challenges, coping strategies, sources of motivation, as well as their attitudes and perceptions toward self and in relation to their social status. A sample of 82 minority women students took part in the study. They were purposively selected study centres of the National Open University of Nigeria. The study employed a qualitative research approach utilizing focus group discussion method and personal accounts for data generation. Data collected were analysed using the thematic analysis approach. Several remarkable findings emerged from the study pointing to factors that could motivate the minority women students to rise above their limitations toward achieving their full potentials and the significant role of ODL in facilitating this process. It is hoped that the study would be a source

of inspiration to many others especially girls and women towards increased accessibility to higher education.

Keywords: women education, minority women, higher education, ODL, Nigeria

Introduction

Previously, university education was regarded as the exclusive domain of men; a preparation place for them to undertake a variety of responsibilities in the world of work. However, since the mid-twentieth century a mass education movement ushered in different social changes which resulted in increasing numbers of women enrolling in higher education institutions (Addi-Raccach, 2006; Ramirez & Woltipa 2001). Consequently, one of the unique markers of the twenty-first century higher education developments is the significant increase in women's enrolment in higher education (Davids 2015, Morley 2013). UNESCO (2007) reported that there are currently more women than men enrolled in higher education at the undergraduate level. These students, according to Oplatka and Tevel (2006), include women in mid-life ages and those who were unreached because of their observance of the Islamic practice of *purdah*; working women and full-time housewives.

The notion that education is the greatest social leveller and the most potent instrument for mental and social emancipation became the underlying philosophy for education policy. It also informed the rationale for a global race among countries to provide quality education in an equitable and accessible manner (Fafunwa, 1974). As Jegede (2002) observed, there is an insidious link between education and national development processes and this is the justification for huge investments in education by developing and developed countries alike. This accounts for the present scenario where some countries have more women enrolled in higher education than men as seen in cases of Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and Israel (Morley, 2013). There is also a considerable evidence of improvement observable in Iran and China (Davids, 2007; Ramirez & Wotipa, 2001).

In spite of improvement in the enrolment of women in higher education, modern history is replete with the achievements of men and their contributions to the development process. There is a lack of parity between the positions of women with those of men in the social structure of society. Women are categorized as the "second-fiddle" (Olakulehin & Ojo, 2006). Even in the United Kingdom, where significant strides had been achieved in

the gender equality agenda, there is still a great deal to be desired. For instance, Morley (2013) laments the dramatic increase in the number of women students has not been matched by growth in the number of women in senior leadership roles in universities. Coming down to the developing world within the context of Nigeria, Fapohunda (2006) observes that “while men have the liberty to move from university to university, gaining different perspectives and advantages along the way, women remain in one spot and have to wait for an opportunity to become available to them”. She further reasoned that “women appear to see themselves as evolving within one university setting as opposed to evolving through general university system in the country. This may, in large part, be a function of women's responsibilities to their partners and/or children that limits their mobility, and may limit also their chances of acquiring a high level position in the administration”. This aligns with Ker (1999)'s argument that women all over the world have been categorized under the disadvantaged groups of people while the society itself has systematically and consistently pursued the socialization of women into accepting their position as a disadvantaged group.

Access to schooling is the most effective pathway to educational attainment and it is determined by the educational infrastructure provided by the society. In Nigeria, the foundations of that infrastructure in many instances are based on facilities originally built by religious leaders and organizations to promote learning and spread the faith. As remarked by Nunn (2010), there are intraregional gaps that exist between educational attainment of Christian and Muslim in sub-Sahara Africa. This is suggested by scholars to be rooted in the location of Christian missionary activity during colonial times. Frankema (2012) and Thurston (2016) traced the historic differences between colonial policy and missionary activity in northern and southern Nigeria to likely be the source of disparity that exists in the present-day Christian-Muslim education gap in Nigeria. It is also believed as substantiated by Moore (2006) that some Muslims have the fear that missionary schools would attempt to convert their children to Christianity hence not sending their wards to schools for educational attainment as Christians. Daun (2000) also posited that the educational gap derives from the Islamic schools set up as alternatives to government schools. Islamic schools operate strictly on Islamic injunctions, which potentially constitute a source of disadvantage for women. Ogunjuyigbe and Adebayo (2002) in their study on problems of gender differentials in literacy and enrolment among the Yoruba in the South-Western Nigeria suggested that many Muslim parents prefer their daughters

to attend traditional Islamic schools because they preserve traditional female roles and may preserve religious values. This attitude creates a structural barrier to women's access to secular education.

A study carried out by Adiri, Habiba, Umar, Sulayma, Yafeh and Ejembi (2010) in three villages in Kaduna State, Nigeria finds that Qur'anic education is more common than other types of schooling among young Muslim women. Instead of attending regular educational institutions, Muslim parents guided by their religious beliefs sent their girls to Qur'anic schools. Other studies also point at cultural and religious beliefs regarding the status of women and men in the social structure of society. Denga (1993) reports that one prominent cultural view is that it is better for the woman to stay at home and learn to tend to her family than to attend school under western education. Obasi (1997) also identified a host of constraints with 'Nigerian tradition' being named as top on the list of identified factors for women not being given the opportunity to attend school for educational attainment. The 'Nigerian tradition' was explained as a tradition that attaches higher value to a male than a female, whose place is believed to be the kitchen.

The cost of western education is another factor. This can be related to the issue of poverty. The decline in economic activities over the years has made education a luxury to many Nigerians, especially those in rural areas. The fact remains that Nigerian parents are known to invest in their children according to sex, birth order or natural endowments; girls and boys are not exact substitutes. With the issue of poverty as an excuse, boys are preferred to girls when the consideration to send children to school is put into a debate. Adeniran (2007) reiterated that often the family can only afford to send one child to school and because daughters have assumed responsibilities in the home, she is less likely to be the one to attend school. All are part of fundamental reasons why many women, with the exception of a few, did not acquire western education in Nigeria.

Aside from a religious factor, as well as poverty which is identified through an inability to pay for the cost of education noted in the case of women that belong to that extraction there are other issues. Other categories of minority women that are still struggling to gain opportunities to access higher education are contending with other issues such as marital challenges. For instance, single parenthood is a common phenomenon, with the woman being the sole parent taking care of her children. As a single mother, in spite of the struggle for educational achievement with the belief that it will better her lot

and hopefully open the doors of opportunity, the problems of time and finance are major hurdles. Since they are the only ones running their families, the onus is on them to provide for their children as well as themselves. Unfortunately, they are always being stigmatized by society, so it is always difficult for them to get assistance. This was attested to by Weiss (1979) when he observed that a single parent household is different from two-parent home simply because the single parent always works full-time to enable him or her financially support his or her family. Young and Parish (1977) also affirmed that single parents devote less attention to many things. This goes for those women who combine work-life with studies. They have to cater for their homes and its attendant demands. Despite the above scenario, women enrolment and attendance in schools have increased from what it used to be. This includes the women from the minority categories. They are found at all levels of educational strata although the inherent problems militating against their schooling from time immemorial can only be seen as only changing, those problems are still there, only being faced headlong by some of them. It is in Nigeria as it is in the other climes. The awareness of the value of education and the benefits that accrue from it is contributing to the attitudinal changes that are observable. This does not reflect only on the Islamic religious attitude to education aspect but it also influences other factors that hinder minority women from attaining educational achievements. This attitudinal change might be looked at as a deduction from modern day concept of awareness.

Given the preponderance of this categorization, it is only the observable massive social changes allowed by current exigencies that are permitting a social process required to introduce equality through emancipation of the mind achievable through education; be it in the conventional mode or open and distance learning mode.

The evolution of open and distance learning has enhanced the participation of different minority groups and diversity population in higher education globally. Those whose religious beliefs, cultural and social mores have deprived them the opportunity of acquiring one level of education or the other. Ahmad (2001) observed that there is a considerable increase in the participation of ethnic and religious minority students in higher education. This underscores the values many minorities place on academic qualifications as well as their high aspirations in terms of the values placed on acquiring education and its benefits within the society (Shiner & Modood, 2002). Although Shiner and Modood (2002) and Kettley (2007) similarly observed

that there are many explanations for the reasons why there are continuing under-representation of ethnic and religious minorities both at undergraduate and graduate levels. The various reasons canvassed include lack of family support, financial constraints, and the problem of prospect for employment, students' perceptions of university. They both also cite the tendency of students choosing prestigious disciplines and/or an institution close to home. In relation to female minorities, Kettley (2007) also raised the issue of a lack of family support and the fact that low aspirations within the women folks play a key role in their very low representation in higher education. In addition, Harper and Quaye (2009) identified the issues facing disadvantaged and underprivileged Muslim female students as including isolation, fear of loneliness, conflicts between religious holidays and college schedule and examinations, and campus spaces that contradict their religious principles. This is in tandem with the belief of Kahan (2003). In spite of the above mentioned reasons for the low rate of Muslim minority students participating in education, Keddie (2007) observed that Muslim women's education has increased dramatically at all levels in Arab and Islamic countries. This assertion was supported by Rasheed and Bagheri (2009) when they remarked that it is the same in many Anglo-American nations.

It is therefore imperative to investigate how effective the open and distance learning approach to higher education is at reaching minority populations, such as women. The open and distance learning mode promises a great deal of opportunities for expanding the higher education prospects of disadvantaged women that had hitherto been unreached. Despite the position of higher education as a means of social mobility for members of minority groups (David, 2007), it is also highly gender-biased in terms of its structure, culture and practices (Leathwood & Read, 2009). It is against this background that this study investigated minority women's access to graduate studies through ODL mode, despite the many existing social and religious barriers that these women encounter in the society. This study therefore seeks to explore the lived experiences of under-privileged women and provide insight into various complexities of experiences that they encounter and how they deal with them. This is with the underlying belief that these minority women students must have experienced different support systems required for academic achievements in higher education. The findings from this study will go a long way to increase our awareness and understanding of higher education and distance learning stakeholders about the circumstances surrounding the education women and the various ways by which women

cope with challenges; overcome socio-cultural barriers and other obstacles faced during their academic studies.

Purpose of the Study

The primary goal of this study was to investigate minority women's access to postgraduate studies with a view to develop insight on their challenges, coping strategies and sources of motivation. This would potentially encourage others towards increased accessibility to higher education through the open and distance learning mode. The study also sought to identify the barriers limiting minority women's access to higher education and possible ways to overcome them, in order to guide educational planners and policy makers on the most efficient strategies for enhancing increased access to higher education to women of all categories. The following are the specific objectives:

1. Determine the effective strategies required to handle minority women's barrier to accessing graduate studies in Nigeria through ODL.
2. Identify the factors that have prompted the minority women in spite of observable barriers to their access to graduate studies and education generally.
3. Provide appropriate response to how the minority women in graduate studies see their accessibility to education at graduate level.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. What are the barriers limiting minority women access to education?
2. What are the strategies being adopted by the minority women to tackle the barriers in accessing education?
3. What are the factors that are shrouded in their ways of life that have facilitated their access to graduate studies?
4. What priorities do the minority women attach to higher education to the extent of pursuing graduate studies?
5. How do the minority women see their success in accessing graduate studies?

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted the qualitative research design in examining minority women's access to higher education. The focus group discussion (FGD)

research approach was adopted for this study. The employed methodology for the focus group discussion was based on life story telling, which is hinged on discussion method. This design was aimed at examining the subjective meaning of lives from a holistic point of view in terms of participant's religious belief or the categories they fall into as minority students. This enabled the focus group coordinator to draw inspirations from the perspectives of events and actions from life story narration in order to bring out contextual meanings from each participant.

Population and Sample

This study employed the purposive sampling technique to source for the typical categories of subjects required for the study. This was carried out in selected study centres of the National Open University of Nigeria located in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria that were chosen for the study. The population for the study is the registered women students in the postgraduate programmes while the samples were the women students that fall into the minority strata listed for the study. A total of 82 minority women students took part in the study. They were purposively identified through the assistance of the Study Centre Directors and Student Counsellors. The profile of participants is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics (n=82)

Description	Number	Percentage %
1. Age		
(a) 15-24 years	1	1%
(b) 25-34 years	31	38%
(c) 35-44 years	32	39%
(d) 45-54 years	14	17%
(e) 55-64 years	3	4%
(f) 65 and above	1	1%
2. Academic programme enrolled		

Description	Number	Percentage %
Science related	11	13%
Arts and Social Sciences	34	41%
Education	20	24%
Management Sciences	4	5%
Health Sciences	12	15%
3. Employment status		
(a) Unemployed	12	15%
(b) Self-employment	12	15%
(c) Employment	57	70%
(d) Pensioner	1	1%
4. Marital status		
(a) Married	50	61%
(b) Divorced/separated/widowed	11	13%
(c) Single	21	26%
5. Geopolitical zone		
(a) NW zone	-	-
(b) NC zone	43	52%
(c) NE zone (ravaged by terrorist attack)	-	-
(d) SE zone	12	15%
(e) SW zone	13	16%
(f) SS zone	14	17%

Instrumentation

For the purpose of the approach adopted, structured items on which discussion was based during the focus group discussions were generated by the researcher in conjunction with experts in test and measurement. These items were validated and subjected to scrutiny for the purpose of clarity and reliability. These items were used to train the five members of the research team that went to coordinate the focus group discussions in the study centres that were chosen in each of the five zones in which the country is delineated since the North western zone was excused because of the terrorist problem ravaging the place. Four of the focus group discussion coordinators are Senior Lecturers while one is an Associate Professor.

Data Collection Procedure

Participant's life stories were disclosed through semi-structured interviews that did not last for more than 60-90 minutes in all. The interview was face-to-face at each of the study centres of the National Open University of Nigeria where the focus group discussion took place while deductive, inferable and inferential reasoning through an understanding of how certain things work rather than by observation with guidance through presupposed acquired experience are made from the content of discussions. The language of interview was English language based on the assumption that the participants studying for graduate degree programmes are fully competent in the language while the skill of silence communication guided the interviewee for the purpose of allowing the participants to come out of their shell in order for them to reveal what they have as responses to the raised issues.

Participants were made to explain what they understood by higher education and also describe their status in the society-women in *purdah*, women in remote and rural communities, women in full-time employment, single-parent women, underprivileged women (poverty-stricken; students who are struggling to cope with finance requirement of schooling), and women traders. This appellation was generally regarded as Participant Self Identity (PSI) throughout the focus group discussion in all the used study centres of the university. The participants discussed what their motives are regarding being a graduate degree students whose focus is centred on acquiring the certificate; they discussed what their experiences are regarding their category of minority being a graduate degree students and the wish to acquire it in spite of stigmatization attached to them. For instance, as a Muslim student, discussion centred around the tenets of the religion regarding women freedom, schooling, stand of the husband, and also the stand of the family

relations due to the identity of being a Muslim amongst other disturbing experiences; they were made to reflect on what their feelings, attitude and experiences are as graduate students considering the belief surrounding their status as women in the Muslim world or any of the class of minority women to which they belong as listed above. The participants through discussion defined what encouraged or motivated them to pursue graduate study programme and also revealed how they are coping with the programme of study in spite of public opinion about their situations.

Rapport was established with the participants by the coordinators in a manner that gave assurances of safety and confidentiality, which also minimise any potential threat by explaining to them the strong desire and purpose of the research which objectively focus on understanding the story of women who are Muslim students and also those from other minority class of students as listed above.

Data Analysis

For analysis purpose, the records of various study centres interview and FGD sessions were transcribed and organised with a view to generating categories, bringing out themes and patterns in relation to how items were formulated regarding the focus of each item with allowance for generation of alternative explanations. This was subjected to interpretation with the assistance of the experts who assisted in the generation of the items that guided the questioning and responses of the focus group discussions.

Findings and Discussion

1. Participants' Understanding of Higher Education/and What Motivated them to Seek a University Degree

The participants see higher education as any education beyond secondary school and advanced college. Varying reasons were proffered for their interest in university education; some of the participants said they wanted to acquire more knowledge, more skills to pass on to the next generation, career mobility, and one of them said, "women are more than housewives". To this participant, who is a second wife, observed that she wants to live a life that goes beyond being a wife and a mother, like her co-wife. She seeks more and yearns to go beyond the status quo society has prescribed for her. Some other participants also cited a sense of belonging; like other women who have achieved in the society, more open doors, better certification, respect, financial freedom and financial independence as their reasons for seeking a

higher university degree. They all have positive perception of higher education as an avenue for improvement of their lots in life. This actually have direct impact on the reasons and the decision why they venture to pursue higher degree, without minding the impact it will have on them and their daily activities. This is invariably in tandem with the observation of Shiner & Modood (2002) when they offer reason given for minority students' under-representation in higher education. This, according to them, is the negative perception they have towards education. Unlike in some other researches on the minority students, what was absent in the interviewees' stories are many factors attributed to minority women students' under-representation in higher education in the literature of studies conducted by Kettley (2007) and Shiner and Modood (2002). The participants did not mention the issue of economic problems, early marriage, social prohibitions, religious constraints, or any issue of anti-academic atmosphere, nor do they feel any sense of racial discrimination in spite of the way people see them generally as indicated in Halperin-Kaddari (2004) study.

Many of the participants defined higher education as university education, although some described it as any studies after secondary education, but they were largely in agreement that university education is a form of higher education. Their responses to what motivated them to seek a university degree vary. Most respondents stated that they wanted a university higher degree in order to have better career choices; some participants said a university degree would enable them to break the poverty cycle that they find themselves. While some others wanted the degree as a form of self-actualisation goal, a target that they had set for themselves several years before, which they now have an opportunity to achieve. A summary of the reasons given as motivation for pursuing higher education via open and distance learning by the participants across the study centres investigated is as follows:

- *For self-improvement*
- *Career progression; without postgraduate qualification, I will not be promoted to the highest grade level in my organisation. It is a standing rule.*
- *For self-actualisation*
- *For additional knowledge*
- *To have more opportunities in life*
- *To have more respect from my husband*
- *To be better equipped to solve problems in my community*

- *To have more business opportunities*

The participants have no knowledge of a female student that withdrew from school, and many of them mentioned female public figures, or their mothers as their role models.

2. Participants' Experiences in Relation to their Social Status

One of the participants aptly termed the responses to this aspect of the discussion as "No time to read". All of the women complained about the time constraint they experience daily, especially during examination period, when they have to juggle so many social roles and responsibilities as wives, mothers, workers and students. One of the participants, a grandmother and a divorcee, complained that she reads till daybreak and suffer many headaches. Other participants mentioned their husbands' uncooperative attitude, and many also mention lack of sufficient funds to pay their school fees. They say that most times, they are overworked and tired. The grandmother participant advised that ladies should get their university degrees before getting married, in order not to go through the challenge of time constraint. A participant, the banker, said she wanted to live a better life than her mother who was battered many times by her father. Through university education, she hopes to break the vicious cycle.

Interestingly, all of the participants, except one, did not see their being women, or of particular status (e.g. being in *purdah*, being full time housewives, being single parents, etc.) as presenting any barrier to their acquiring a university degree of any level. Many of the married ones narrated the initial hesitancy of their husbands, who eventually gave them the approval to start the programme. A particular participant said it took years before her husband eventually gave her the approval to start a programme. He opened a provision store for her and asked her to manage that and take care of the home. But she wanted more than that, and luckily for her, the Minna Study Centre where she attends her face-to-face tutorials, is not far from her home. After much pleading and prayers, her husband eventually allowed her to start the programme. This can be related to the report of Ahmad (2001) study when he aver that some Arab families have been encouraging their daughters to study at university for the past decade because an educated woman is preferred for marriage and that such moves raise the family status in the society. He also observed that belief is shared among Muslim students in the United Kingdom. This corroborates the story of many Muslim women activists who, according to Bullock (2005), align with the role of higher

education as a source for improvement of their society, and thereby got encouraged to study in order to help their own society. The notion of allowing Muslim women to acquire education is now on the increase and in every nook and crannies of the world. Since Islamic religion makes it mandatory for the husbands to take care of their wives' needs and the women see education as one of their needs, the onus is on the husband to cater for that aspect of their needs. Moreover, many of the women believe it is a form of empowerment.

Ten of the participants who were in *hijabs* in their narration, remarked that their husbands take care of all the needs in the home; which include for some, their schooling. Half of them fund their schooling themselves. Their husbands' approval of their schooling is all they need, they said.

Many of them recounted that the major challenge they experience in terms of their gender is the fact that they have to manage the home and school as well. They especially experienced this when examinations are approaching. They have to juggle the responsibilities of being wives, mothers and workers in the private and public sectors of the town. Out of the 18 participants, only one was unmarried. They complained that apart from the initial approval their husbands granted them when they wanted to start their higher education, their husbands offer no support whatsoever whenever they have to study and write their examinations. Their husbands expect them to still carry out their responsibilities in the home, without lifting a finger to help. This is the only challenge they face as women. However, this is noted to be a common denominator among women students irrespective of age, religion or race. Women students, as pointed out by Oplatka and Lapidot (2011), experience some barriers and difficulties. Some of these barriers are common to women in many countries regardless of their religion and race. For instance, a lack of support from relatives and economic difficulties are a common phenomenon, in the Arab world, it may be related to social rules while some may be peculiar to cultural scripts embedded in traditional societies. Any woman, like Muslim women who managed to enrol in a graduate programme must be ready to face social expectations for marriage, motherhood and strong loyalty to their husbands. There is no issue of modernisation regarding this. It is the only way she could have peace and an enabling environment for her study. This sense of loneliness according to Peek (2003) and Harper and Quayle (2009) is very common among minority students worldwide. According to them, they can only ignore these senses and not get dissuaded by them.

However, one of the participants, the oldest, complained that her husband never supported her aspiration to start the university programme. She is Hausa from the northern part of Nigeria and her spouse is Igbo from the south-eastern part of Nigeria. She said he has given her the option of stopping the programme or leaving the marriage. She has made several entreaties and asked some family members to intervene in the matter, but to no avail. On why the husband is antagonistic towards her quest, she said he complained that she wants to be independent and empowered against him. The participant was very sad and said she is at a crossroad as she does not know what to do anymore. This is the belief of some men in reality. They do not like educated women and would not support women acquisition of education because their belief is that if women have power, there is tendency for them to threaten their men. This has similarity to the outcome of David (2007)'s research wherein higher education is being conceived of as a source for social mobility both for men and women, with connotation for what the mobility meant to each gender. In this instance, the women see education as a source of empowerment and betterment of status whereas the husband sees it differently.

There was a comment from some participants regarding the issue of marriage, which was an important aspect of the sociology of females in Nigeria. It was felt that in contemporary times, most men do not want to marry graduates because they felt that they were too old and have engaged several social relationships during their times in school. So the advantage of the open and distance learning mode is that women can get married as soon as they wish and then proceed to earn a university degree through the open and distance learning mode. This is seen as a win-win situation for everyone.

3. Ability to Acquire the Degree

They all claimed and showed that they have the pre-requisite academic qualifications and also have the interest and the good health to do it. One of the participants observed that she has the determination to get the higher degree. She claimed she refused to get married during her undergraduate years. She said that she chose to complete the undergraduate programme, after which she completed the one year National Youth Service Corps (NYSC); a programme designed for Nigerian youths to undergo for a year compulsory national service after the completion of the university education wherein participants are deployed to other parts of Nigeria for the purpose of social integration. She registered for this postgraduate programme after and she claimed to have just got married now while she is on the programme.

According to her, “this is due to the interest I have in ensuring that I have at least a postgraduate degree”. Another of the participants observed that she wishes to pursue a doctoral degree after this programme. As observed by Swall, Redd and Perna (2003), international research has shown that participation rates in secondary education are closely associated with academic success in higher education among minority students. Similarly, the participants’ remarks above indirectly pointed to the significant impact of their pre-requisite academic qualifications, which put them in good stead for their admission to study at university based on their preparedness and readiness which is attitudinal.

4. Position of Husband, Support from Relations and Community

“Our husbands give us only moral support. They do not pay our school fees, but we are able to pay because we have jobs and are also engaged in businesses”. Many observed that their relations are in total support, but a few are against it because they don’t see why we should be studying after marriage and with children. One of the participants revealed that her husband did not want her to pursue the degree at the time they were still living together, so she had to suspend the programme. But after they separated, she continued to study and now she is about completing her law programme. According to the other one studying for a postgraduate degree in Conflict Resolution;

‘My husband was totally against my undertaking any higher education programme because he felt I would be his equal. He also has a Master’s degree so he does not want me doing a Master’s Degree programme. When we divorced, I promptly obtained the Open University of Nigeria admission form and now I am doing a Masters in Peace and Conflict Resolution’.

When asked if they divorced because of the education issue, she remarked thus:

‘No. we divorced because of his womanising and not because he does not want me to do a Master’s Degree’.

5. Advantages of the ODL mode of Education

In spite of the time constraints, they all commend the mode of education. The participants hailed the ODL mode of learning as giving them enough time and space to plan their day and activities. For many of the participants, the convenient nature of the ODL system is the number one reason that

facilitated their pursuing their various programmes in the university. The fact that they can study at their own pace and time enables them to plan their time judiciously and juggle the different challenges that come with their being wives, mothers, workers and students all at the same time.

The participants commented that the open and distance learning mode enables them to make more time for themselves to do many other things, which they would otherwise not have been able to do if they had been in the conventional university system; although a participant reports that she had failed to gain admission into the conventional university system, and that is why she enrolled for a programme in the Open University. However, she later gained admission to a conventional university, unfortunately, since she had paid her fees at NOUN, she is financially incapable of paying to the conventional university again. Hence, she has to continue her programme here at the Open University. She concludes that she likes the quality, but only wishes for the residential experience of attending a campus-based institution.

6. Being Able to Cope

Many of the participants said the ODL system of education has taught them how to manage their time and how to endure to the end. In terms of paying their school fees, two of the participants said their husbands pay, while others borrow, or take part in the '*esusu*' contribution (thrift). Others said they rely on the charity of some family members to help them during very trying times. Many of the participants complained about not being able to raise enough money to pay their school fees on time. Apart from the unmarried young woman whose parents are funding her school fees, the remaining married participants mentioned some of the strategies they adopted in order to be able to pay their school fees. Some of these include borrowing, participating in monthly contribution (locally referred to as '*esusu*'), deferment of semester, selling some of their gold trinkets, savings from their salaries and profits, etc. Many of the participants also mentioned family responsibilities as a constraint. This presents a barrier to their having sufficient time and space to study and prepare for their examinations.

Some participants also report that they had faced severe financial challenges as a result of a polygynous family background, which accounts for their delay in enrolling in the university. So when the Open University alternative came, they were enthused and eager to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the university.

Participants felt that the limited contact that students have with the university has the advantage of preventing cheating in form of having to give bribes to lecturers for the purpose of succeeding in their programmes. The participants also commented that not having to meet with the lecturers regularly has another advantage for them as women, because it prevents incidents of sexual harassment which some participants claimed that they experienced in the conventional universities before coming to NOUN.

7. Feelings as a Postgraduate Student (feelings, attitude and experiences)

I feel great and I am excited. Postgraduate study is very good and important, so I try to encourage others that I know to develop this attitude of seeking knowledge and enrolling as well. We feel more confident to speak in public and people generally accorded us more respect when they discover that we are postgraduate students. Many of the participants submitted that they are appreciated by their people. As put by one of the participants,

‘I am better appreciated by my husband’ while another put in the following terms *‘My children are appreciative of me’*.

Attitudes are fundamental to understanding social perception of people because they strongly influence people. Cohen (1973) in Ojo (2000) reiterates that it is the disposition of man to view things in certain ways and to act accordingly. Therefore, the dispositions of the participants in higher degrees acquisition showed that their perceptions have been influenced by the prevailing norm of the society and the benefits therein has opened them to wanting a change in status and the opening and opportunities that accrue from it. The recruitment in the world of work favours those with higher degree qualifications rather than other prospective employees.

Observations

All of the participants enjoy the fact that they are in the university studying programmes of their choice. The fact that the institution is an ODL mode also gives them the empowerment they need to plan their time well. More than half of the participants are adult students who made the deliberate choice of going for higher education.

For the Muslim participants, the culture and religion give them a leeway, for their husbands finance all the needs in the house, and also go to the market to buy foodstuffs for the home. One of the Christian participants, who is

married to a pastor, also said her husband takes care of the needs of the house and does the shopping for the home. One of the youngest participants, who is in *hijab*, and a full-time housewife, confides that her husband chose her course, Public Health, for her, and she is alright with it. Two of the participants said they operate a joint system of finance with their husbands and this has empowered them, as the husbands help out whenever their school fees are not complete.

Many of the married Muslim women are second or third wives, and one of them said, she hardly touches her personal money as her husband takes care of all her needs and also gives her monthly pocket money. However, he does not pay her school fees. The participants have no knowledge of a female student that withdrew from school, and many of them mentioned female public figures, or their mothers as their role models. The grandmother participant said she decided to pursue a degree programme because she had enough time on her hands and to make her life more meaningful.

Other comments from Participants

- The open and distance learning mode did not afford them the opportunity to engage in the full university experience like their counterparts in conventional universities. Examples given include activities such as seminars, symposiums, etc., which are absent in the distance learning environment but abounds in large numbers in conventional universities. They also felt that the fun activities such as parties and raves that students engage in are not available in their own university. They suggest that this limits their sense of pride as university students;
- Some participants felt that the scheduling of the university activities such as tutorials and registration procedure affects them as females, especially as married women with family commitments. They commented that a situation where tutorials lasts a whole day all through Saturday affects their families and when they chose to absent themselves they lose a lot;
- Although social presence and interaction with other student colleagues is missing, it has the advantage of avoiding victimisation either from lecturers or from student cult members. Having previously been a victim of sexual harassment during national diploma studies at a campus-based polytechnic, one of the participants sees a lot of advantage in open and distance learning, which affords her the opportunity to work effectively since whatever she scores in the final assessment is her own handwork.
- There is a lack of sense of belonging to the university environment as there are no opportunities to participate in seminars, social activities.

- Has tough inspiring parents who set a high standard for her and her siblings to follow
- Has a high sense of responsibility as a result of being the first child in the family of five and determined to earn her degree despite previous setbacks.
- Friends have been major motivation who have contributed to mentoring and personal development along the part of her development.
- Being a Christian has positively influenced her as a distance learner. It motivated her to succeed against all odds and her faith strengthens her when things became difficult along the way.

Conclusion

The study has looked at various categories of minority women students who are in various postgraduate programmes at the National Open University of Nigeria. Noting the particular gender challenges these women experience in their quest for higher education, the study discusses the support of the ODL system of education that has facilitated these minority women's desire to acquire university degrees. Through the life story telling methodology, many of the minority women interviewed identified the major barriers/challenges they experience as women living in a patriarchal society, some of which include cost of education, Islamic injunctions, traditional culture, lack of family support, and time. However, these challenges have been mitigated by their quest for formal education through the ODL mode. To them, the major advantage of the ODL system of education is its flexibility, which has provided a platform for them to manage their time and finances, and make their dream of impacting positively into their society possible. It is hoped that the study would be a source of inspiration to many others especially girls and women towards increased accessibility to education and higher education- an instrument of social and economic transformation.

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