

# **ODL, an Imperative to Women's Educational Status and National Development: A Study of Bende Local Government Area, Abia State, Nigeria.**

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## ***Abstract***

This study examines how Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode of education can be used to advance the educational status of women and their involvement in national development. The role of education as a medium of empowerment cannot be overemphasised. Yet, this has remained elusive to several segments of the society developing countries, particularly womenfolk in Nigeria. Of concern here is the dearth in policy thrust that addresses women's education and empowerment to improved functional educational status of women. This paper intends to resolve this contradiction by critically projecting the concept of ODL as a panacea to increase access to education for women, thereby guaranteeing equal educational opportunities for all citizens. In view of this, this paper will investigate the role of ODL in enhancing the educational status of women, the effects of the problems on women and to underscore Nigerian Government's effort in the provision of education for women. The study adopts a descriptive method involving the use of interviews and content analysis.

***Keywords: Women empowerment, Educational status, National Development, ODL, Equality***

## **INTRODUCTION**

Education has been identified as a major instrument for development and nation building the world over. Despite this incontrovertible role, provision, access and quality education has remained elusive in many countries especially among the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, such as women. In a recent UN document, it was reported that 75 million girls in the developing world are not in School and that 64% of the adult illiterate in the developing world are women (COL, 2013). In an earlier study, Sir John Daniel painted a gloomy picture of Nigeria, **where of the 70 million children out of school, 8 million of them were girls while 53% are Nigerians (Daniel, 2010 p.6)**

The above stark reality aptly underpins the problematic of the study. Despite the policy framework on education in Nigeria, guaranteeing access to educational opportunities for all citizens (FME, 2004) and the various UN Conferences, 1975,1985,1995 on women and on the improvement and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, their position has not improved much even though they constitute over half of the population of Nigeria (UNESCO, 2000). In fact, the nation's policy on women since independence has been characterized by spontaneous reactions to the outburst of women to their marginalisation and exclusion in national development. It was not until the year 2000 that the Federal Government of Nigeria signed into law the National Policy on Women, whose key objective was to improve the general, status of women. It should be noted however, that the Bill guaranteeing equal opportunities for all gender has not been passed into law in Nigeria till date (Maina, 2012).

The main objectives of the study were to:

1. assess the educational status of women in Bende LGA of Abia State
2. determine the role of ODL as a panacea in enhancing their educational status.
3. make appropriate recommendations to government on strategies to enhance women's educational status in Bende LGA.

## **Methodology**

Bende Local Government Area is one of the seventeen (17) Local Governments in Abia State. It occupies a very strategic and significant position in Abia State as it was one of the names that Abia State was coined from. It is mainly an agricultural area that is known for its rice production and yam. Some of its inhabitants engage in fishing.

Large forest abounds in the area which provides raw materials for pulp and paper industry in the State and Nigeria at large.

Bende is bounded in the North by Cross River State, Afikpo and Ohaozara in Ebonyi State, and in the south by Arochukwu and Ohafia. It is made up of thirteen (13) communities, namely; Bende, Ozuitem, Uzuakoli, Item, Itumbauzo and Ntalakwu. Others are Umu-imenyi, Umuhu-Ezechi, Igbere, Ugwueke, Ezukwu, Nkpa and Alayi. It has a population of 192, 621, according to the National Population Commission (2006), while Bende LGA Statistical Unit (2013), gave her own figure as 192, 111. This slight difference could have arisen from attrition due to deaths, rural-urban migration, or inter- and intra-cultural marriages.

To generate data for the study, the use of primary and secondary data collection, was adopted as follows:

- a. Personal interviews
- b. Library research and review of relevant literature;
- c. Newspaper reports, conference materials, seminar papers, journals, statistical reports and internet.

The interviews were conducted among 300 men and women that were randomly selected from three communities in Bende LGA. These are Bende, Item and Igbere. The method of analysis was mainly narrative and descriptive. The data collected from Bende LGA Statistical Unit as at 2013, show that the population of Bende LGA was 97,789 for males, and 94,333 for females, giving a total of 192,111, whereas the total value of 192,621 from the National Population Commission (NPC, 2006) show a slight difference from the earlier data which could have arisen due to inadequate reporting at the LGA level.

## **NIGERIAN WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Education has been acknowledged as the instrument for affecting social, economic, political, scientific and technological advancement, as well as improving the well-being of people. However, studies have shown that the participation of women in education has remained dismal. And in most countries of the world, women's education lagged behind that of men. This is worse in the developing countries where nearly 98% of the World's illiterates live, with Africa having 54% and of which 60% are Nigerian women (UNESCO, 1990).

Corroborating this, Okeke (2011) reported that the literacy disparity between males and females fell by half (54%-74%) between 1970 and 1990, where two-thirds were women. However, girls account for 60% of 130 million children without access to education. This is because there is usually that preference for the education of the male to the female child. In Nigeria, Asodike (2009) provides statistics to show that 58% of teenage girls are uneducated. The reason she adduced for this, is that female education has been seen as a secondary factor compared to that of male until recently, when discrimination against females became an issue. Furthermore, Olojode (2004, p.120), observed that societal norms or expectations limit women's access to education. Various studies have contended that pre-colonial Nigerian society relegated the status of women over her husband and children. In a nutshell, a woman in the traditional society was only domestically inclined.

In the colonial Nigeria, education was centered on literacy whose origin can be traced to Muslim traders and the Portuguese priests. During this period, women generally had no place in the early literacy efforts in Nigeria. Attention was given to only men. Commenting on this situation, Maduwesi (2005) observed that Nigerian women were seen as passive sexual object who were both a devoted wife and a mother for whom society has carved out defined roles, manners and acceptable characteristics. Because of these roles, women were shielded from the influence of early education until very late, attesting to the gulf between educated men and women. In contemporary times, even though the education of women has witnessed a boost, the gap between men and women

remains wide. Perhaps a report made by UNESCO (2000) will attest to this fact. Nigeria ranked one of the lowest literacy countries of the world (54.19%) with a literacy rate of 54.19% (See Table 1)

**Table 1 Distribution of Illiteracy in Nigeria by Age Group**

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Number of Illiterates</b>
15-29	13.6 million
30-59	14.8 million
60 years and above	1.6 million
<b>Total</b>	<b>30 million</b>

**Source:** (UNESCO 2000)

Since “an illiterate person” stands outside of politics which encapsulates every other aspect of life” (Lenin as quoted in Ityavyar, 1989), this stark reality confirms how women are disproportionately excluded from access to education, and consequently development

### **EFFECTS OF LOW LITERACY LEVEL OF WOMEN ON NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Low educational status of women stands as stumbling block for women to contribute their quota effectively in the social, economic and political life of a country. This has serious repercussions. For example, Oyinlola (2000), pushing further Kofi Annan’s assertion noted “ in economic terms, the gender divide is still widening; women earn less, are more often unemployed and generally are poorer than men. In Nigeria, in spite of women’s numerical strength, they have been excluded from national development due to limited education. In Agriculture, women who make up 75% of the labour force have no access to land, training and credit (Kaegon, 2009). Lack of knowledge restricts women access to land, credit facilities and social capital.

On the other hand, the low level of literacy has continued to adversely affect the scope of women participation in politics. Ityavyar (1989) and Okoronkwo (2013), in their separate studies observed that only the privileged few women from well-to-do backgrounds riding on the back of their parents or husbands are able to secure a space to participate in politics. The examples of Senator Iyabo Obasanjo, Hon. Beni Lar, and Hon. Nnenna Elendu Ukeje (who happens to come from Bende L.G.A of Abia State- our study area), readily come to mind. Women also lack legal assistance arising from legal illiteracy and this leads to misplacement of justice. Similarly, women are not allowed to post bail. This contravenes section 35 of the Nigerian constitution (Nigerian Constitution, 2004).

### **EFFORTS OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF NIGERIA AT MITIGATING THE LOW EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF WOMEN.**

In the 52 years of Nigeria’s status as an independent and sovereign nation, several policies and programs reflecting appreciable measures of intellectual inputs were introduced. Although there are several policies and programs bothering on women, they have superficially addressed the women question. This is because there has always been a gap between policy statement and policy output.

In 1976, the Mohammed-Obasanjo’s regime introduced the Universal Primary Education which gave more girls opportunities to acquire education. Also in 1977, the new National Policy on Education was introduced, and revised in 1981. Although no specific effort was made to improve the educational status of women by the document, the document noted that “With regard to women’s education, special efforts will be made by Ministries of Education

and Local Government Authorities, in conjunction with Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare and of Information to encourage parents to send their daughters to school” (NPE, 1981).

In 1989, under the leadership of General Ibrahim Babangida, the Federal Government of Nigeria, being a party to the implementation of the Nairobi declaration on the advancement of women by the United Nations, came out with a blue-print on women education in 1986. Again, in 1989, the same Babangida’s administration stepped up public enlightenment on women education through film shows, talks and drama etc. It also created the National Commission For Women (NCW), in 1989 by decree No. 30, which mandated the state governments to promote the welfare of women in Nigeria and propagate issues that will bring about their social, political and economic empowerment (Ityavyar and Ityavyar, 1997)

Similarly, Sani Abacha’s government, through the Family Support Program (FSP) established in 1994, made further impact on the educational status of women. The FSP provided Mass Literacy Program and guidance and counseling services for women. An attempt was also made to establish a FSP special University for women and task force on girl-child education (Ibid).

In spite of all these efforts by the military governments in Nigeria especially, the educational gap between boys and girls during this period remained wide. Sotuminu (1995) asserted that of the 130 million out-of-school children in 1990, 81 million were girls and only 38% of Nigerian primary school females reach primary five (Ofoegbu, 1997).

The desire to ascertain the effect of these programs/policies on the educational status of women in Bende LGA of Abia State was part of the motivation for conducting the study from which this paper was derived.

## EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN BENDE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF ABIA STATE

**Table 2: Summary of Primary School enrolment by Bende LGA, Year and sex ( for 7 years, 2005-2012).**

S/NO	YEAR	MALE (M) (%)	FEMALE (F) (%)	MF (100%)
1.	2005/2006	2748 (55.5%)	2205 (44.5%)	4953
2.	2006/2007	3184 (52.1%)	2937 (48.9%)	6121
3.	2007/2008	3971 (54.7%)	3285 (45.3%)	7256
4.	2008/2009	4189 (53.4%)	3652 (46.6%)	7841
5.	2009/2010	3326 (52.2%)	3048 (47.8%)	6374
6.	2010/2011	3747 (52.3%)	3414 (47.7%)	7161
7.	2011/2012	5193 (51.8%)	4834 (48.2%)	10027

Source: Statistics Unit, Bende LGA,

**Table 3: Summary of Secondary school enrollment, (2006-2013).**

S/NO	YEAR	MALES (%)	FEMALES (%)	TOTAL (100%)
1.	2006/2007	1785 (49.7%)	1814 (50.3%)	3599
2.	2007/2008	1921 (47.8%)	2107 (52.2%)	4028
3.	2008/2009	1893 (49.7%)	1918 (50.3%)	3811
4.	2009/2010	2114 (51.5%)	1987 (48.5%)	4101
5.	2010/2011	1937 (50.5%)	1902 (49.5%)	3839
6.	2011/2012	1917 (49.1%)	1984 (50.9%)	3901
7.	2012/2013	1948 (49.2%)	2008 (50.8%)	3956

Source: Abia State Secondary Education Management Board.

## **Results and Discussion**

In Table 2, the summary of primary school enrolment is displayed. The percentage difference in enrolment between male and female from 2005/2006 to 2011/2012 school years showed a marginal variation, which is not significant. For example, in 2005/2006 school year, 2748 (55.5%) male and 2205 (44.5%) females enrolled; in the 2008/2009 school year, slightly higher males (4189 or 53.4%) than females (3652 or 46.6%) were enrolled. The differences of 11.0% and 6.8% for 2005/2006 and 2008/2009 enrolment years respectively, seem apparently high. This confirms the UN report that male enrolment is higher than females, even at the primary school level. The same trend is observed for the other school years as can be seen from table 2 above.

However, at the secondary school level, female enrolment appears to be slightly higher than that of the males in Bende LGA. This could be attributed to the practice in Igbo land, where boys are not willing to go to school but prefer to learn a trade in the hands of a master in order to earn some financial benefits, especially after the Nigerian civil war in 1970. This is further confirmed when the researcher interviewed some of the respondents about their views on this disparity. The respondents opined that more females enrolled at the secondary schools because the males were more eager to make money than their female counterparts. They cited the fact that 80% of the rich traders and successful businessmen at Aba, the commercial nerve-centre of Abia state, received less education and they are mainly from Bende LGA. On the contrary, the females who have educational ambition end up marrying the rich semi-literate men who do not give their opportunity to advance educationally.

Another observation was that there was increased advocacy and sensitization for girl-child education during the election years of 2007 and 2011 respectively in Nigeria. During these periods, female enrolment rose slightly above that of male (see Table 3, items 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7). Secondly, parents have become more aware of the benefits of the girl-child education through the strong advocacy embarked upon by the federal, state and local governments.

### **THE ROLE OF ODL IN ENHANCING THE EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN BENEDE LGA OF ABIA STATE, NIGERIA.**

Open and Distance Learning creates opportunities for women education to learn throughout their life time; this is important because education given to a woman is not quantifiable as its spillover effect on the children, families, communities, and the nation are quite enormous. ODL is also a source of development for women. Although marriage had hitherto been the terminal point of women's education in Nigeria, this has witnessed a reversal with the introduction of ODL mode of delivery.

This mode of delivery has brought succor to women's access to education and invariably, contributing to national development. In Bende Local Government Area, women can now aspire to reach any level in their educational pursuit through ODL programmes. Several women in Bende LGA have now enrolled as students via the various ODL institutions available to them such as the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), whose study centre at Umudike, close to Bende LGA has nearly 10,000 students; the Nigerian Teachers' Institute (NTI), with over 600 outreach centres, Distance Learning Centres located in the dual mode universities amongst others. Women in the study area are admitted without much demand on the entry requirement, and they are developed educationally to become literate house wives, business tycoons, politicians, teachers, and holders of other important positions in society.

## **CONCLUSION**

The educational status of women has continued to receive global attention. In Nigeria, many policy frameworks have been put in place to address this issue. However, it was discovered that these policies do not match the output, thereby creating disparity in the number of educated women. The other challenges women faced educationally are

related to cultural, social and economic factors. The introduction of ODL has contributed to widen access to women's education. This new educational concept has also reduced the limitations women faced such as early marriages, resistance from husbands and parents' unwillingness to train the girl-child.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

From the findings in the Bende LGA study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The federal, state and local governments should provide more community study centres to boost access to educational institutions to the grassroots. This will reduce the distance from the various communities in Bende LGA to the Umudike, which is presently the only and closest Study Centre to Bende.
2. Increased advocacy should be mounted in Abia state, and Bende LGA in particular, to encourage many more women to go to school, since ODL does not have age barrier.
3. Governments at the three tiers should provide adequate funds to the ODL institutions for the procurement and maintenance of the available facilities, in order to serve the people better.
4. Bende LGA should provide scholarship to the women as a source of encouragement and motivation.

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