

WOMEN OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO LEARNING BY DISTANCE AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF TANZANIA

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While the general mission of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) is to enhance adults' access to education, President Benjamin Mkapa (1996) announced that OUT's special mission is to promote the education of Tanzanian women, because their only hope of attaining higher education is by the distance mode. Despite efforts to attract female students, the extent of women's participation in tertiary education in Tanzania is limited: for the OUT only 12 per cent, 683 women of the total population of 5,689 students (Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education 1999). As a faculty member of the OUT since its establishment in 1994, as Dean of Education (1994 to 1996), and since, I have been concerned at the low participation rates for women. I believe that unless the OUT fully understands the underlying causes of women's low enrollment, inadequate participation, and unacceptable completion rates, it will be unable to adjust its planning, managerial, and administrative procedures to provide appropriate learning opportunities for women.

During the last two years (1999 to 2000), when I travelled to various regional and local OUT study centers, I met with over 80 women students and non students and listened to and tape-recorded their stories. What I heard has helped me understand the extent of the challenge for the OUT in its goal to enhance and sustain women's access and academic success. I describe the OUT system below in order to put the challenges in these stories in context.

OUT Background

The Open University of Tanzania serves an area of 945,000 sq km. Its teaching and learning system is based on print learning materials and two written assignments, but also includes an orientation, two face-to-face tutoring sessions, science laboratory sessions or teaching practica, two timed tests, and an annual and supplementary examination (if required) in each course (OUT 2000). These activities occur in the 25 regional centers, which also provide limited library services; to reach them, often across long distances, students need enough money to pay for transportation, accommodation, food, and any medical care. There are also 56 local centers, some in each region, where students meet subject peer groups and their tutors. The print course materials are delivered to students mainly by postal services, but also through public carriers and via the OUT staff during their visits to the regional centers. Plans are underway (as of October 2000) to use the regional centers as the main venues for storing and distributing study materials (Mmari 1997). The OUT buys study materials from other distance learning universities in Nairobi, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Abuja, and India and has published 84 of its own courses, written by faculty from Tanzanian universities and other post secondary institutions. The OUT has four faculties and two institutes with a total of forty-five staff (OUT 2000).

The Women's Stories

The stories I heard dealt directly with the everyday realities of the female students' lives. Many had had to overcome time constraints, cultural expectations, and financial obstacles regarding their higher education. I discuss each in turn.

Time constraints

All the time I feel tired due to too much work. If I try to study, I feel sleepy. If I force myself to study, I find myself reading with very little understanding because the brain and the body are tired. They need some rest, but I cannot rest because at 5.30 in the morning I am required to be up again to prepare for the family breakfast and go to a full day's work.

A fourth-year student told me that since she enrolled with the OUT, she was compelled to study in the brief periods between her chores and other demands in her life. This tired her and was a contributing factor to her poor academic performance. She protested that in addition to her tight family and work schedules, she had to be away approximately 85 days per year to attend compulsory study activities at the regional center (OUT 2000). While away from her family and employment, she had to pay for transportation, food, accommodation, and health care. She also had to make trips to libraries for books and journals and to the local study center to find course colleagues and part-time tutors to discuss the difficult parts of her studies.

A fourth-year student in law complained that many students did not receive their study materials, yet the OUT demanded that they pay full fees. She commented on the OUT's "lopsided" service provision saying, "This is one-way traffic!" Many other women told similar stories about the difficulties of obtaining study materials on time and then having enough time at home to study. They saw these time problems as barriers that discouraged many women from even enrolling with the OUT, explaining that a major reason why most enrolled women abandoned their studies was their inability to meet the logistical demands placed on them by the OUT system.

When I asked about the possible use of alternative learning technologies, one woman suggested that her most pressing need was not for learning technologies, but for other technologies such as washing machines, cookers, and vacuum cleaners, which could help shorten the time she spent on housework and increase the time she needed for studying. Her answer applies to many female students at the OUT.

These factors have serious implications for the OUT. First is the time stressed position of the Tanzanian woman who is entirely responsible for all household tasks. In many situations, not only does she run the household, hold a full time job, and look after the children, but she is also responsible for small farming projects such as raising chickens or cows or tilling gardens and fields to augment her income. Many women who seek OUT courses see a university degree as a means to improve their economic status. But little time for study is available for women unless family members help them.

Cultural expectations

If the husbands would allow their wives freedom to make decisions for their own lives and act on them, many women would be studying with the OUT by combining their multiple roles in whatever circumstances are possible in their families.

Many stories convinced me of the accuracy of this statement from a young female would be student. I first met this young schoolteacher with her daughter when I visited her regional center. On my second visit some months later, I learned that although she had registered with the OUT and paid the initial sum of 60 per cent of the total fees, she had failed to start her studies because her husband refused to give her permission. When I tried to get him to change his mind he told me, "At the moment she has so many other family responsibilities, and if she starts now there will be nobody to take care of the family." He further argued that if she began studies, she would concentrate on them and have no time to think about family matters. At another center I heard from a primary schoolteacher who was married with five children. She complained that her efforts to be a student had been stifled after only six months of struggle. Her husband prevented her from doing anything on weekends other than take care of family responsibilities: the children, the cows, the farm, receiving visitors, and visiting.

He would say, "Ah, ah, school work! This you can do other days when I am not home. When I am home, I do not like you to do that." You see! So I cannot study at all when he is at home, and I could not attend [the regional center].

On several evenings when she wanted to study he turned off the lights claiming that the electricity bills were too high and demanded that she study in the daytime. But with teaching all day and doing family chores in the evening, she had little time or energy left to study. One regional director told me of cases where the men picked up their wives' study materials and did not allow them to participate in the learning activities. Any attempt to negotiate with a husband to allow his wife to participate in the activities generally led to termination of the wife's studies.

Traditional cultures and some religious practices in Tanzania empower men (husbands, fathers, brothers, grandfathers, or uncles) to control female relatives in all aspects of their lives. Women (wives, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, or aunts) are not allowed to take any action or make any final decision that might affect their lives or those of others, including other women or children in their families. Through culture and socialization, most women are taught that husbands and other men will not participate in any tasks or roles usually ascribed to women. Many women thus unquestioningly carry out all the unpaid family work, their paid work in employment, and other life tasks such as studying. Without their husbands' permission they cannot use their own money to enroll with the OUT or to participate in the activities at the study centers. Tanzanian laws and society have retained traditional division of labor to the extent that a Tanzanian woman may not sue a man for family support and child care expenses. Even with changes in the law the men, especially in rural areas, tend to follow the traditional power structure. Despite the recent land reform bill passed in the National Assembly early in 1999, research reports show that "still in the Kilimanjaro area, customary practices continue to reckon land along lines that are independent of the bill" (Stambach 2000: 178); that is, women are still barred from owning land.

The stories the women told me indicate that the OUT has not yet provided a flexible and convenient distance education system suitable for Tanzanian women who live under this culture of male domination. They complained that they faced “unique to women” difficulties (*shida za wanawake*) when they tried to participate in OUT studies, particularly those at the regional and local study centers. For example, the women have to travel to the centers, which are in towns usually some distance from their homes. But for cultural and religious reasons, rented accommodations (guest houses or hotels) in towns are not considered respectable places for women to stay without their spouses. Social mores claim this is for the women's own safety and protection. In fact it enables the men to exercise their authoritative power over the women by denying them permission to participate or spend funds on rented accommodation and by requiring them to be unquestioningly obedient to male family members.

An even more sensitive issue is that when in the centers, the women have to interact often and over several days with their tutors (often male) and study with male students. This situation has prevented many women from enrolling with the OUT because their husbands will not allow them to participate under such conditions. Nor can the women easily ask permission of their husbands as they themselves understand the culture and abide by its traditional restrictions (Synder and Tadesse 1995; Mbughuni 1994). Additional constraints on choices for women students may arise in the workplace: female employees need to negotiate frequent absences from work, but many women have told me that their male bosses demand “personal” favors as a condition to giving permission for the absence. Complying with such demands could severely damage both their marriages and their health (i.e., HIV/AIDS).

Taking examinations and tests presents further logistical challenges to OUT women. The long distances, the uncertain state of the country's transportation system, and the pressure to take the least time possible away from family and work cause difficulty for many women. At present a student who misses the tests must wait to write supplementary examinations (sometimes up to three months). This delays a woman's ongoing studies or may extinguish her motivation to continue her education.

Financial obstacles

I saw there was a chance for me to do my university studies with the OUT. I applied right away and they sent me their form explaining the procedures for enrolling. One of them is paying 70,000 Tanzanian shillings [Ts] per year for tuition fees, something I knew right away I could not afford because I am still paying for my children's education, and other needs in the family including my bus fare to work. So I quitted the idea right away.

This young woman had wanted to become an OUT student, but she could not meet pay the required 60 per cent of the annual fee that must be paid before students receive any study materials. The total fee is Ts120,000, more than many women can afford from their salaries. The average salary of a woman with the requisite high school completion or diploma qualifications to apply to the OUT would be between Ts35,000 and 90,000 per month. The annual fee is much more than they can save from their small household moneymaking projects. For widows or single mothers

with young children, the costs become prohibitive. A fourth-year student and mother lamented:

Their father has died, and the whole burden is left to me. The pension he had is so small, and my monthly Ts50,000 salary cannot cover much when I also have to pay the house rent in town, pay for three children's private secondary school, and for food and medicines. Unless OUT can provide free education for women, women will still fail to seize the education opportunity provided by the OUT.

As well as the initial course fee, the women must also pay for the compulsory trips to the regional and study centers. A fifth-year student from Hanang explained her costs for one trip to the closest center with subject peers and a tutor.

To attend a one day face to face session in Dodoma I must have not less than Ts100,000 if I don't have a relative to stay with. With a relative, I normally spend about Ts50,000. From Hanang town where I live to Dodoma the return ticket alone is about Ts30,000 because I normally pay Ts15,000 one way. The other Ts20,000 I spend for my needs and local transport in Dodoma town itself.

Many women described their attempts to obtain enough funds to pay for their enrollment at the OUT. Although a few were supported by a husband or male relative, many others had to save a few shillings at a time until they had enough to pay the fee. It was not clear to me whether many women were fully informed of the costs extra to the tuition fees at the time of enrollment. Many told me that their difficulties in understanding the course materials were eclipsed by their continual need for enough money to continue their studies. In many cases their savings were enough only to take one course at a time; and even then personal and family circumstances could completely derail their plans.

I was surprised at how many of the OUT women students I met were widows, single parents, Catholic sisters, unmarried women in their late 30s and early 40s, or women whose husbands had retired. In each of the regional centers I visited, more than half the students belonged to these groups. Ironically, although the tuition costs are a serious hardship for these mainly single salary earners, their life circumstances have freed them from male control.

I am glad I decided to talk to the women about their experiences with enrolling and studying at the OUT. Their stories made me admire their determination, cry at their frustration, and feel anger at the systemic discrimination inscribed in the OUT operations. How can we solve such complex problems unless the whole sociocultural system is changed? What practical measures can be considered immediately?

Suggestions for Change

Although the difficulties appear huge, we need to attempt changes if we are to encourage more women students. I identify three areas where we might make changes: a review of the OUT teaching and learning system; a reexamination of the financial requirements; and a reassessment of the OUT's position with regard to female students.

First, there is much we OUT staff could do to ensure that the pedagogical system in use at OUT is supportive of women's circumstances. The major issues are the present timelines, the extensive use of study centers for reference materials, tutorials and examinations, and the design of the course materials. We could begin by assessing how realistic the present course and examination timelines are given female students' life role demands. When they apply, women need to be made aware of the time requirements expected of OUT students. Then we need to ensure that the study materials are delivered before the course begins to give the women maximum time for study. And to help them use their time most effectively, we could provide more advice and suggest strategies for studying. Developing more realistic deadlines and providing the means for them to study effectively would do much to help ease women's stress.

The present OUT system of frequent visits to study centers for tutoring and regional centers for examinations and practica needs to be reassessed. Course designers need to be made aware that female learners do not have easy and frequent access to libraries or the freedom or resources to travel to study centers. One alternative would be to develop self contained study and evaluation materials. This would remove the need for the women to obtain regular permission to travel to the study centers and, in my estimation, greatly increase the likelihood of women enrolling with the OUT. Another alternative would be to provide woman friendly, clean, and safe hostel accommodation in the regional centers, which would help more women gain access to OUT programs.

Second, OUT operational procedures have exacerbated the female students' financial difficulties. A solution offered by several women was for the government to provide full-tuition bursaries and for the OUT to remove the regional center food and accommodation expenses. They believed that the present structure reflected the dominant male view and was a deliberate attempt to stop women from obtaining a university education. As one put it,

Most Tanzanian men know the culture, and the male domination of the woman: that not many women will be allowed by their husbands to attend university studies, demanding so much money and putting wives in guest houses/hotels in towns for so many days.

They also blamed the government, arguing that it knew the average income of employed women when the costs for study with the OUT were set and should therefore have known that most women learners in low paying jobs would be at a disadvantage.

Third, as well as addressing the discrimination embedded in its pedagogical and financial systems, the OUT could be more active in modeling its desire to provide equal educational opportunities by adopting a different standard for women's participation in its activities. It could involve more women in its planning and administration to ensure that decisions include gender analysis. One OUT senator and a councillor since the university's inception who has consistently tried to address the systemic issues blocking women's academic success expressed her frustration with the system: "Women have been raising this matter, over, and over, and over and over."

She went on to explain that at last they have convinced the administration to include a gender analysis when they have supplied any statistics. She continued,

We have proposed many ways of reaching women, and really giving the idea of open learning as the way for women and girls to catch up with their education.... But we have failed very much. We have paid lip service more than really do something tangible.

One reason for the difficulties and frustrations of female academics like this councillor and myself is that many of our male colleagues have no conception of the realities of OUT women students' lives. For example, a senior colleague, when explaining what he considered to be the major factors preventing many women from enrolling with the OUT, said,

The distance education program is designed for those who are ready to push themselves rather than to be pushed by somebody. So our [OUT] responsibility is to provide the enabling environment and it is for the clientele to take the advantage of the environment that is provided.... So the responsibility rests on the target groups. The best we [OUT] could do within the system would be to raise consciousness, awareness of the existence of such programs, the levels, the potential, and maybe the benefits of such programs.

This statement takes the predominant view that the OUT need only offer the service: it is up to the women to apply. No consideration is given to whether they are free to make this choice. The Forum for African Women Educationalists (1998) argues that in

planning for development of any project, it is necessary that there be equal participation of the decision making bodies, in this case, Tanzanian men and women be equally represented if the project is to benefit all parties, thus be gender free/not lopsided. (38-40)

One beginning student explained it well:

By their nature, men and women are different although they are all human beings; just as mango trees and orange trees are different, although they are all fruit trees. As such, it is not easy for mango trees to take nutrients from the soil to give to orange trees. In the same vein, it is not easy for men to plan developments that fit women although they are all human beings.

I believe that if enough women had taken part in the early planning of the development of the OUT, the issues involving women's participation would have been raised more clearly, with the result that relevant services would have been improved and higher participation rates achieved. At present all senior administrative staff are men. This situation needs to be remedied.

Because the OUT acknowledges the low numbers of women applicants, it has taken some steps to understand the underlying reasons. One step was to create the position of Dean of Students, to be held by a woman, because as the administrative head of student matters a woman would more easily understand the problems of female

students' and be better able to guide and encourage them. In addition, the OUT and the government have made some efforts to obtain financial aid for female students' tuition fees, although the amounts are small (OUT 2000).

Much work remains. To address the issues related to setting policy for increased access and sustained academic success, for the effective use of various learning technologies, and for raising participation rates above the current 12 per cent, we need a systemic review of educational assumptions and processes and increased staff development. If the operational services are adjusted, fees and regional center costs taken care of, and study materials and examinations made self contained and home-delivered, then it would be a mark of our success as OUT staff if on the OUT's tenth anniversary in 2005 the participation rates for women were 50 per cent and this larger group of women students were working with their new student colleagues to help them learn distance education study techniques.

Suggestions

1. In identifying why there is such a low participation rate for women and what might be done to resolve these difficulties, I found it essential to ask students and former students. I suggest the same route for others. Their stories of how they had tried to overcome the barriers in their path were heartwarming and saddening. They fueled my persistence to try and ensure that we did not make the same mistakes with other students.
2. It is easy to become overwhelmed when it seems that the entire socio-cultural and economic structures are designed to keep women from active participation. I found it helpful to identify arenas where I could focus my concerns. First, at the government level, it is important to share the women's experiences in ways that might help bring about policy changes. For me, the financial difficulties for women is one area where the government might be made aware of how its policy in setting OUT fees effectively reduced the likelihood of participation for many women in low-paying jobs.
3. At the institutional level, I asked what we as an institution might do within these barriers (such as not forcing women to choose between disobeying their husbands or participating at a study centre) to enhance the learning opportunities of women students.
4. It is also important that we model what we hope society will adopt--equality of participation. Hence, at the staff level, I think workshops that sensitize staff to these "unique to women" issues and structural changes that accord women visible participation through all levels of the organization are ways to "walk our talk" of wanting full participation of women students.

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