

Challenges in Distance Education: Experiences of Female Teacher-Learners at Domasi College of Education

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INTRODUCTION

The Distance Education Program at Domasi College of Education is offered as a pilot project sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) through the Secondary School Teacher Education Project (SSTEP). The program targets qualified primary school teachers currently teaching in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) due to the shortage of qualified teachers at the secondary level.

The Distance Education Program at the college has seen an increase in the enrolment of females as compared to the Residential Program. So far, there are 900 teacher-learners recruited in three cohorts of 300 each. The first cohort registered a ninety-six percent pass rate, and graduated at the end of 2003.

Perceived female teacher-learners challenges

Before the project took off in October 2000, project managers and stakeholders held consultative meetings to establish some of the challenges which female teacher-learners would face in the program. First, it was noted that expectant and lactating mothers were not allowed in the residential program. This was seen as a barrier to females' access to education. Consequently, it was agreed that this policy should not apply to distance education teacher-learners since they would spend a short period at the college for residential and examination sessions.

Second, there were fears as to whether female-teacher learners would succeed in their studies considering the many challenges they would face. These included insensitive language in modules, household chores and negative attitudes towards females in general. As a mitigation, the college and project managers established a Gender Committee to oversee these and other gender related issues in the project.

The Gender Committee organised and facilitated workshops with professional and key administrative members of staff. The workshops focused on the development of gender sensitive modules and other gender related issues in course delivery. The committee has also organised teacher-learners' gender awareness workshops. In addition, it has monitored teacher-learners' performance as well as identified challenges they face in the course of study. The committee acts as a link between the teacher-learners and project implementers. It reports on the challenges the teacher-learners face and makes recommendations on the same.

Challenges female teacher-learners face in the Distance Education Program

Over the years, Gender Committee members have held interviews and discussions with teacher-learners within and outside the college to identify some of the problems they face in the program. In some cases, the teacher-learners themselves have taken initiatives to share their challenges with committee members and the SSTEP Office. The challenges include: Domestic workload, lack of sleep, lack of electricity in most homes, the overwhelming number of assignments, unsupportive spouses, communication problems, scarcity of reference materials in the field, feedback from lectures taking long, teaching overloads, attending to babies especially during residential and examination sessions, people's negative attitudes towards women, death of relatives or community members, sickness of children, spouses or relatives, spouses needing attention, friends wanting to chat, time constraints, modules not thoroughly introduced during residential sessions and isolation from fellow teacher-learners. Some of the reported challenges related to gender, that is, female and male teacher-learners faced different challenges.

Female teacher-learners have had family problems that have affected their studies. For instance, some female teacher-learners dropped out of the program on instructions from spouses who asked the females to choose between marriage and education. Considering the value of one being married in the Malawian context, and probably in other cultures as well, as opposed to being single especially divorced, the females opted for marriage. Being a divorcee would have a great repercussion on a woman's social life and status in society. One female teacher-learner was fortunate as her spouse was admitted into the program a year later. She therefore applied for readmission. Other female teacher-learners in the same predicament have been bold enough to opt for divorce and carried on with their studies. In most cases, this happened after interventions and advice from relatives especially from the female's side. The Gender Committee has given such teacher-learners encouragement, moral and academic support.

Still others who challenged their spouses went on with their studies and the husbands gave in. However, some teacher-learners in this category have reported that whenever their spouses see that the women are studying, they give them some other piece of work.

This is done to discourage them from studying and perhaps have them demoralised and eventually drop out of studies.

Another case worth reporting is that of a teacher-learner who is on separation with her spouse. It was reported that the spouse heard that she was leading a promiscuous life because of her participation in the distance education program. This brought disagreements in the family. She was not allowed to attend study circles with fellow teacher-learners for it was believed that these were situations where she misbehaved. The husband resorted to physical violence, which even affected their children. He physically harassed his wife and used abusive language in the presence of the children. At one point he burnt his spouses' clothes. Fortunately enough, the course modules were spared. Seeing that the situation was getting out of hand, she confided in her relatives and the husband's relatives who advised her to leave him. Consequently, she left for her parents' home for fear of her life. She reported the issue to the District Education Officer who got her transferred from her previous school to a new school, but in the same district. Nevertheless, the teacher learner did not feel secure operating within the same district with her spouse. As a result, she reported the issue to the SSTEP Office and Gender Committee and requested if these could intervene. The SSTEP Office and the Gender Committee took up the issue further with responsible offices and the teacher-learner has since been transferred to a school in a different district. She is currently operating from her parents' home. The sad thing about this story is that the husband took away all the support from his own children, thus, punishing his own children.

Most of the men reported in this presentation are those with primary school teaching qualifications and battle with inferior complexes. Nevertheless, there are others who have such higher qualifications as diplomas or degrees, but still they do not want their spouses to further their education. They usually threaten to marry other women when their partners go for residential sessions. Some behave in this way because they believe that women in college are loose.

Most female teacher-learners have reported that they lack sleep due to household chores and other family demands. The saying that the woman's place is in the

kitchen victimises women, even educated ones. The female teacher-learners have so much domestic workload that they do not have enough time to study, let alone prepare for their lessons. Most of them report that they wake up around 3:00 am or 4:00am to study before they do household chores and prepare for classes. After knocking off they are busy with household chores and other responsibilities at home. This is a clear indication that female teacher-learners lack enough sleep.

The other challenges that teacher-learners face are bereavement and illness in the families, which makes it difficult for the teacher-learners to concentrate on studies. These problems were common for both male and female teacher-learners. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that in case of illness, traditionally is a woman's responsibility to attend to sick members in the family.

As stated earlier on in this paper, one of the distance education policies at the college is that female teacher-learners bring children during residential and examination sessions. Expectant mothers too are allowed to participate. This policy is unique to the distance education program at the college to give more women access to higher education. The policy, however, has its own implications and challenges.

Teacher-learners with babies bring baby sitters most of whom are not mature enough to take good care of the babies. Consequently, some teacher-learners miss classes as they are expected to attend to crying babies just within the teaching area, sometimes. Some children get sick and thus, put pressure on the mothers, as they have to take them to hospitals. One teacher-learner lost a child in 2002 during the residential session and her spouse blamed her participation in the program as the cause of the child's death.

In addition, teacher learners who bring babies reported that they do not have thorough preparations for examinations. They lack concentration on the studies or actual writing of the papers. Sometimes it happens that one is sitting for an examination, and hears a cry of her baby just outside the examination hall. Such a person loses concentration.

The other challenges associated with teacher-learners who bring babies to college are inadequate space in the hostels and inappropriate food for the babies. The college hostel rooms were designed to accommodate two students. However, although distance education teacher-learners are allowed to bring babies, they use the same rooms that were meant for residential students. Therefore, they are

forced to squeeze into the same rooms. Thus, a room, which was meant for two people, takes in six: two teacher-learners, two babies and two nannies. Such an environment is not good for the babies who have their own demands. Female teacher-learners with babies are accommodated in one hostel and the author was impressed to see how they were managing the whole situation. Nevertheless, there is a need to explore mechanisms that would solve the problems these teacher-learners are encountering. For instance, establishing a baby care centre.

Similarly, food prepared for the teacher-learners is not appropriate for the babies. This, therefore, puts extra pressure on the teacher learners. They have to prepare separate meals for the young ones. The implication is that apart from the facilities that both male and female teacher-learners bring to college, the females have to bring extra facilities to cater for the babies. It should however be noted that cooking is not allowed in the hostels and teacher-learners who do the cooking do this at their own risk. The teacher-learners are also always affected psychologically since they do not know what would happen to them if found cooking by college authorities. The nannies get meals from the college at a very small fee.

For expectant mothers, it was reported that due to the demands of pregnancy, they get tired or sick and miss classes. Lectures during the residential session last for not less than two hours. Expectant teacher-learners therefore get tired sitting in an uncomfortable posture for a long time. They also move up and down the college corridors attending different lectures and this is a big challenge. The other challenges include lack of concentration, passivity in class and missing examinations. Most of the deferred examinations are administered to teacher-learners who were unable to sit for examinations due to birth related issues.

The number of female teacher-learners getting pregnant during the course of study is increasing. Considering the problems they have in coping with the demands of pregnancy and studies, the Gender Committee has been advising teacher-learners to access family planning services until they complete their studies. The committee has worked hand in hand with competent professionals from a leading family planning organisation in this cause. The awareness meetings involve both male and female teacher-learners so that both sexes are knowledgeable in this very important issue. After all, no single woman made herself pregnant. Apart from addressing family planning issues, the organisation deals with sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS.

Increased cases of pregnancy in the program could be blamed on the policy that allows teacher-learners to continue with their studies even when pregnant. One may conclude that teacher-learners are taking advantage of such policy. While the policy addresses access issues, it has some implications on teacher-learners' performance and use of the limited facilities at the college. In discussing the issue with both female and male teacher-learners, it was discovered that some men considered pregnancy as a protective measure. Such men believe that the pregnancy would make their partners behave, thus, not to be involved with other men in college.

Responding to a question on how teacher learners who bring babies to college could be assisted, some teacher-learners had the following suggestions.

- Provide spacious accommodation
- Provide them with regular transport to hospital whenever their babies or nannies are ill
- Abolish fee for nannies
- Accommodate sick teacher-learners in a separate room, that is, a sick bay
- Encourage teacher-learners to use contraception.

Some teacher-learners were of the opinion that expectant teacher-learners should be asked to withdraw from the course and be readmitted when the child is at least six months old just like is the case in the residential program.

CONCLUSION

The inception of a distance education program at Domasi College of Education has given more women access to higher education than was the case when the college offered residential courses only. So far the female teacher-learners have competed well with their male counterparts in terms of performance. In several cases they have outperformed the males. However, the program has registered a number of challenges for female teacher-learners. As the Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology institutionalises the program at the college, there is a need to find lasting solutions to the same.