

Women In ODL Building Community Based “Women Friendly Education Support Service Circles” To Effectively Combat Women Gap In Higher Education: The Case Of The Open University Of Tanzania (Out)

Dr Edith Mhehe

Lecturer and Founding Dean, Faculty of Education, OUT

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses a vision and mission of the OUT female students (who were involved in the Women Focus Group of my Ph.D. study) in establishing “Women Friendly Education Support Service Circles” in the communities they live. The paper also describes the pilot study of the vision/mission conducted in Dar-Es-Salaam to establish possible challenges that might interfere with the mission implementation.

The 28 OUT female students, participants as Women Focus Group (WFG) founded an NGO – the “Open University of Tanzania Women Students Organization” (OUTWSO) on July 11, 1999. The aim for forming the organization is to enable all other OUT female students in the country participate in the WFG vision/mission, so that together they may participate in building the “Women Friendly education Support Service Circles” to help OUT sensitize and empower more women to enroll and participate more effectively with studies at the OUT.

The main objective of OUTWSO is to assist OUT find ways to help more Tanzanian women to qualify and be willing to enroll studies with the OUT, empower them to cope better with studies, while they continue with their family and nation building roles. OUTWSO’s vision is building “Women Friendly Education Support Service Circles” through “women-helping other-women” (KULEANA process) on face-to-face basis and/or through the help of ICTs. “KULEANA” is Kiswahili word simply meaning “taking care of each other.” Through KULEANA a woman would volunteer (where possible) to help mitigate another woman’s need, barrier, or problem that is educationally, socially, or economically limiting. Through KULEANA supported by use of

ICTs OUTWSO will be able to link together all Tanzanian women who are educationally, socially, or economically successful, and together they will work to help mitigate the unfavorable social-economic learning and study conditions most women experience in their families, communities, educational institutions, work places, and society at large.

METHODOLOGY

The study analyzed the difficulties faced by Tanzanian women considering or participating in higher education through the OUT, and identified ways the OUT can enhance the participation of women. It focused on:

- What barriers keep women from enrolling for higher education with the OUT?
- What difficulties do women students experience while studying with the OUT?
- What can the OUT do to enhance the enrollment of women?
- What can the OUT do to improve the learning conditions and study experiences for the women students?

The study used qualitative study method involving interviews, discussions, observations, and documentation. The participants comprised mainly of OUT women students and women non-students who qualified to enroll with the OUT but did not do so due to various reasons; OUT regional directors, executive and senior administrative and academic staff. The study was conducted in 17 out of 21 regions of Tanzania from July 1998 to February 2000).

OUTWSO VISION

The WFG discussed the issues raised in the study. From the discussions the following ideas emerged: (i) it is women alone who can know better the problems limiting most women from effectively participating in higher education, (ii) it is women alone who can tell better the strategies that can be used to best help women participate more effectively in higher education (OUTWSO Constitution, 1999, p. 3). The WFG arrived at this understanding after they noted that despite Tanzania's government declaration (since its independence 1961) to develop its people through education (Nyerere, 1968, p. 49) the gross participation ratio of females in education to date, particularly the

post secondary education at the OUT is about 16%. This number is much lower than the national desires. Also, the WFG noted that in justifying the establishment of a comprehensive open university in Tanzania, the then Minister of Education emphasized that, the university's importance is in filling the gap left by the conventional universities for the less advantaged in higher education, especially women (Tanzania Ministry of Education, 1990, Pp. 58-59). Further, His Excellency President Benjamin Mkapa (1996), inaugurating additional working space for the OUT stated that, the OUT has a very special mission to promote the education of women in Tanzania. He suggested that for many women, Open Distance Learning is their only hope for attaining higher education. He therefore urged the OUT to make extra efforts to ensure that women avail themselves of this alternative path towards investing in their intellects.

From the President's perspective the WFG got concerned. They wondered, "what the OUT can do to help mitigate the unfavorable social-economic learning and study conditions women experience at all levels of education in the country, and the OUT operational arrangements that non-studying women and women students of OUT complain prevent most women from enrolling and/or participating more effectively in the OUT studies?" The WFG on 11th July 1999 unanimously agreed to form an organization (OUTWSO) to help unite Tanzanian women, and together find ways and means of helping the OUT sensitize more women to enroll with the OUT, encourage, help, and role-model them to cope better with studies while they care for their families and participate in nation building (Mhehe, 2002, Pp. 171-182).

STUDY FINDINGS

The study established that Tanzanian women experience two sets of problems when they study with the OUT. These are:

1. Institutional and societal barriers.
2. Personal difficulties and problems with the OUT operations.

The institutional barriers related to the OUT funding shortfalls, and lack of publicity including inadequate information about studying at distance, while the societal barriers were linked to cultural expectations and religious influences regarding women's roles, including the marginalization of women's concerns, patriarchal control, early marriages and inadequate societal support. The

personal difficulties linked to societal lack of support, competing and conflicting family concerns and the social discouragement, while the operational concerns involved the OUT course delivery model, delays in assignments and feedback, limited access to resources, physical and social isolation from support services and other female students, uncertainty, and lack of confidence.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

The difficulties facing women higher education in Tanzania appear immense, but the WFG suggested that there is need to attempt changes if we are to motivate more women students. They identified three areas where changes might be made: (i) a review of the OUT teaching and learning system, (ii) a reexamination of the financial requirements, and (iii) a reassessment of the OUT's position with regard to female students.

First, they see that there is much the OUT could do to ensure that the pedagogical system in use at OUT is supportive of women. 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. The OUT could begin by assessing how realistic the present course and examination timelines are given female students' life role demands. When women apply, they need to be informed of the time requirements expected of OUT students. Then the OUT needs to ensure that the study materials are delivered before the course begins to give women maximum time for study. To help women use their time and money most effectively, OUT could provide more advice and suggest strategies for studying, develop more realistic deadlines and provide the means to study more effectively with less stress (OUTWSO Constitution, 1999, p. 8).

The present OUT system of frequent visits to regional centers for tutoring, examinations, and practicum needs to be reassessed. Courses need to be designed with female perspective way of learning, knowing their limits that they do not have easy and frequent access to libraries, or resources and the freedom 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, I believe this would greatly increase the likelihood of women enrolling with the OUT. Another alternative would be to provide affordable 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 suggested by several women is for the government to provide full-tuition bursaries and for the OUT to remove the regional center food and accommodation expenses, assist women with extra free academic tuitions and mobile libraries in their local communities. They believed that the present structure reflect the dominant male view and seems as though it is 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 all the housework and child care is the sole responsibility of the wife, and not many women will be allowed by their husbands to attend university studies, demanding so much money and putting wives away from their homes in guest houses/hotels in towns for so many days.

They also blamed the government arguing that it was quite aware of the average income of most employed women when the costs for study with the OUT were set and should therefore have known that most women learners would be disadvantaged and have no powers to force their husbands or fathers pay for them.

Third, the OUT could be more vigilant 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 from the beginning. One founding OUT senator and councilor addressed the systemic issues blocking women academic success. She expressed frustration with the system complaining that women have been raising this matter, over, and over, and over and over, at last they have convinced the administration to at least include a gender analysis when they supply any statistics. She continued saying,

We have proposed many ways of reaching women, and really giving the idea of open learning as the way for many 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 councilor, the WFG, other women students and myself is that many of our male colleagues have no conception of the realities of OUT and other training institution women students' lives. For example, a senior male 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 (not only in numbers but also in qualification) if the project is to benefit all parties equally, thus be gender free/not lopsided. (38-40)

One beginning OUT 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 well 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 much earlier and more clearly, with the result that relevant services would have been improved and higher participation rates achieved. At present all the OUT top senior administrative staff (the Chancellor, the Vice Chancellor,

The Deputy Vice Chancellor, The Registrar, the Secretary to the Council, the Bursar) are men; all the Deans of the five Faculties are men; and majority of the regional directors and student leaders are also men. This situation needs to be remedied.

The OUT acknowledges the lower participation of women, as such it has 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).

Addressing the issues of policy to increase access and sustained academic success, effective use of various learning technologies, and for raising participation rates above the current 16 per cent, OUT 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, study materials and examinations tailor-made and home-delivered with exemption of tuition fees, and provision of mobile library service, OUT would in the very near future be able to mark an anniversary success of women equal participation rates of 50 per cent, and this larger group of women students would be recruiting other women to enroll, role model them to learn distance education study techniques through the KULEANA process to prevent them from dropping out.

Further 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' strategies of success. 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.
3. 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 reduce 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 center) 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 organizations are ways to "walk our talk" of wanting full participation of women students.

THE PILOT STUDY

The founding members of OUTWSO officially registered their organization (registration No. SO. NO. 10587) on December 1st 2000. December 13th 2002 OUTWSO held its second Annual General Meeting and decided that beginning January 2003 they would carry out a six months pilot study of their vision/mission: "women – supporting – women education through KULEANA process." They planned to initiate a "Women friendly education support service circle" linked to three primary schools in Dar-Es-Salaam city, Kijitonyama and Sinza area communities as these have easy access to transport and women in low income and housewives. It was decided that the center would also be OUTWSO headquarter office. Efforts to get an office were not immediately successful. I offered OUTWSO a temporary office space in my old home place in Kijitonyama, and assisted in setting it up using my old family furniture and other facilities (three tables and some chairs; a TV, radio, telephone, and two old computers; a steamer, and two driers) to help them initiate a small income generating hair salon and telephone café activity to sustain the daily running of the center.

It was also agreed that at the end of the pilot study, efforts be made to continue services in the center including: day care and internet services; computer skills training; a mini stationery, grocery, and tailoring services. In the evenings

women and their families be encouraged to use the center for recreational and socializing activities (e.g. community drama, debates, choir), and listening to TV/radio news and other educative programs (on HIV/AIDS, community health, agriculture etc.). It was agreed that OUTWSO activities be basically women volunteer work (KULEANA process) providing free extra academic tuitions, seminars, guidance and counseling services to girls/women studying at any level of education in the country. The tuitions should be conducted through, "women-helping other women" (KULEANA process), e.g. women/girls who are academically senior/achieving volunteer to offer free extra academic tuitions to support other women/girls who are academically junior/not as achieving. For instance achieving/senior girls in primary/secondary schools can help less achieving/junior girls in their schools with reading and arithmetic. Also, women studying with the OUT can practice the same, -they can help sensitize and encourage non-students women in their communities enroll studies with OUT, and role model them how to study by distance and cope with family and employment demands without too much stress ("juggle" it all together") to achieve better academically. Similarly, women who are economically/socially successful can help (in kind/financially/guidance /counseling) other women who are not doing so well. In the same vein, the activities conducted at the center can help provide for poor women's other needs/problems (day care service, skill training, communication, socialization, employment). For example, housewives, primary/secondary/OUT students from poor families can be given part-time jobs at the center to earn money to pay for school fees and needs like sanitary towels, stationery and washing and bath soaps.

OUTWSO vision/mission is also to educate women of all kinds the importance of community volunteer work, and train them how to organize/initiate community development services. For instance, women should know that they can volunteer in manual, academic, financial or social work to participate in the center activities (e.g. clean up, baby sit, prepare a meal for a family, train other interested women/girls to learn some skills such as tailoring, embroidery, salon, computer, child care, family management etc.).

THE PILOT STUDY OUTCOMES

Immediately after setting up OUTWSO office several women came seeking employment with the center, some asked to volunteer clean up the area to initiate the project activities. Within the first three months the center had more than 60 girls from primary and secondary schools receiving free academic

tutions in different subject areas, and nine (OUT students and non-students) women helping and learning from the center. In April 2003, six grade six girls from the primary schools reported that for the first time they managed to score 100 percent in their co-ed mathematics class. Two female teachers from one of the primary schools came to the center to inquire how the girls managed to make such drastic change in their mathematics performance. The center tutor (Flora) told them that probably isolating the girls from the boys helped the girls' concentration in their studies. The teachers complained saying if free tuitions are offered with such good results it will impede their paid extra tuitions. One grade six girl (Habiba) also reported to have scored 80 percent for the first time in her co-ed mathematics class. Her father came to the center to thank the tutor for good work on Habiba. He explained that he had hard time helping his daughter improve mathematics grades in school. He said that despite making Habiba repeat grade six she continued scoring between 30-40 percent in her mathematics. He commended on the project support to her daughter's performance. Several mothers also came to the center requesting to enroll their daughters. By March 2003 it was not possible to enroll more girls due to limited space.

Worth noting also is my volunteer work conducting two (July and October 2002) sensitization seminars in Kilimanjaro region. The July seminar included 73 female teachers from three primary schools in Moshi town. The October seminar was organized for 120 Christian women leaders from the Northern Diocese Lutheran church. The sensitization brought immediate awareness results during the seminars. For instance, several women came up spontaneous with reactions/comments such as, "why didn't you come to talk to us earlier?" Another commented, "I would not be where I am today if I had heard this much earlier!" And another said, "I wish I knew all this much earlier!" Such reactions indicated that during the seminar the women were spontaneously realizing the importance of having good education and the potentials that are available through the OUT as the seminar was going on. In 2003 more than 40 women consulted the OUT Kilimanjaro regional center to enroll studies with the OUT (Kilimanjaro regional center Director and Rev. J.J. Ringo verbal reports). Unfortunately most of the women did not have the academic qualifications to enroll with the OUT. OUTWSO is finding ways to help the women improve their qualifications.

POSSIBLE RISKS TO OUTWSO VISION AND MISSION

The pilot study ended in July 2003. At the moment the project operation is limited due to resources. Major risks identified during the pilot study are:

4. Most OUT women students' financial constraints and overhead study costs aggravated their inability to volunteer work.
5. It was observed that many girls preferred to spend most of their daytime at the center even after their tuition session probably to avoid the home chores, or for lack of ideal study place at home.
6. Many girls complained of demands to participate in family chores.
7. OUTWSO has no way of reinforcing girls' attendance to the extra tuitions, nor is there law to protect girls from parents/guardian control when they do not allow their girls study better in their homes or at the center.
8. Classroom teachers conducting paid extra tuitions victimize in class girls who do not register in their paid private tuitions.

CONCLUSION

While women in Open and Distance Learning can help ODL institutions build effective community-based women friendly education support service circles to effectively combat women gap in higher education, the issue of women rights as equal human beings in decision making, planning and controlling their own lives and development in the society, adequate financial support, proper management and administration of women issues' must be given prime consideration in the government sector, training institutions, and donor support.

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