

WIDENING ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION FOR WOMEN IN GHANA THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Distance education (DE) is seen as a tool for widening access to education at all levels. It is an educational tool that breaks most of the divides in education – age, gender, race, income, space, time etc. For the past decades, irrespective of the extensive expansion of tertiary institutions in the country, provision of tertiary education in Ghana has not been adequate enough to absorb all qualified applicants. This situation has peculiar effect on women who for socio-cultural factors drop out of formal education as they climb the ladder. The limited access to tertiary education has been the concern of various governments in the country.

Various educational reforms have been made to this effect. In view of the exclusive potential of DE in widening access to education in a unique way, it has been recommended in the most recent educational reform that DE be promoted by establishing an open university and open colleges in addition to encouraging dual mode of delivery in the existing public universities. By its peculiar nature of being flexible and bridging space and time, studies have confirmed that DE has been an educational format that suits women's study plans and learning styles.

This paper explores the unique nature of DE for widening access to tertiary education most especially for women in Ghana and the issues to consider in the process.

Keywords: Women, ICTs, distance education, tertiary education, Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education (DE) has emerged as a tool for widening access to higher education for women. All over the world, gender disaggregated data on education has shown that compared to their male counterparts women have attained low level of formal education. Several reasons have attributed to this low level of formal education among women. The unique characteristics of DE as bringing education to the door step of people makes it critical for bridging the gender gap in education, especially at the tertiary level.

Recognising the need to make tertiary education highly accessible to the Ghanaian population, the Government of Ghana proposed over a decade ago to promote DE in the country. The DE programmes in Ghana has given opportunity to mainly teachers and other public and private workers to engage in work and study. This in no doubt is contributing to manpower development of the workforce in the country.

In view of the uniqueness of DE in providing access to formal education for women, this article seeks to discuss how the potential of DE could be harnessed to bridge the

gender gap in education at the tertiary level in Ghana. In doing this, the first part of the write-up will assess the tertiary education challenge in the country, and review literature on the DE concept. The issues to consider in the process of using DE to promote formal education among women will also be discussed. This will be followed by an analysis of field data on women's participation in DE and make recommendations on the use of DE to increase access to tertiary education for women in Ghana.

THE TERTIARY EDUCATION CHALLENGE AND ITS' IMPLICATION FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

Tertiary education in Ghana is defined in the Report of the President's Committee on Review of Education Reforms in Ghana (2002:xxxvi) as the education offered after secondary level at a university, polytechnic, specialized institutions, open university and any other institutions to provide training that lead to the award of diploma and degree qualifications. Tertiary institutions provide the platform for training people in all spheres of human endeavour such as the humanities, sciences and technology, which are the driving forces of development.

In post-independence Ghana, three universities were established to offer tertiary education - the University of Ghana (UG) in 1948, followed by the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (UST), 1952, and the University of Cape Coast (UCC), 1962. UG offers Liberal Arts and professional courses, including Medicine, Law, Agriculture, Engineering and Business Studies. KNUST is primarily a science and technology university. UCC was set up to prepare teachers for secondary schools, and offers its Arts and Science courses in that context. In the last two decades, two additional public universities have been established. These are the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) 1992 and the University for Development Studies (UDS) in Tamale 1992. In addition there are a number of Regional Polytechnics, which have been elevated to tertiary status. Since 1998 a number of private institutions, mostly denomination-based, have also been given government accreditation to offer degree-level courses.

The expansion of tertiary institutions has not been able to meet the increasing demand for tertiary education. Although, there has been significant expansion in enrolment in tertiary education, the participation rate of the age-group 18-21 years in tertiary institutions in the country is as low as 2.5% compared to 30-40% for the corresponding age group in some developed countries.

There is a general problem of access to tertiary education in the country. Access has been defined as places and facilities available for potential applicants (Ghana, 2002). Available statistics indicate that from 1996-2001, only about 32% on the average, of qualified applicants for admission into the universities, and about 54% of same for admission into the polytechnics, were actually admitted. The figures have not changed much over the period.

For the 2005/2006 academic year, 55% of qualified applicants were admitted into all the public universities and 78% into the polytechnics. For the same period, statistics indicate that the male-female enrolment for both the universities and polytechnics has increased slightly meanwhile the gap is still very wide. In 2005/2006 academic year the male to female enrolment ratio was 65:35 for the universities and 70:30 for the polytechnics. This is far below the national norm of 50% males to 50% females (NCTE, (2006).

To help bridge the gender gap in education, especially at the tertiary level there have been several interventions such as an affirmative action in the public universities to lower the aggregate by one for women. This resulted in 33% enrolment of women in public universities during the 2003/4 academic year (MOWAC, 2004). Meanwhile, parity still remains an issue at the tertiary level and retention of girls from basic to the tertiary level is challenging. Most institutions do not apply the Affirmative Action Policy of recruiting more girls probably due to the limited vacancy and the increasing number of applicants. These are challenges that DE could be used to address due to the nature of its delivery.

The underlying factors that have been identified as accounting for the situation of limited access to tertiary education include the following:

- Existing tertiary institutions are unable to meet the high demand for tertiary education, which has arisen out of the rapid growth in population and the expansion in pre-tertiary education, following the introduction of the educational reforms in 1987.
- Mismatch between existing academic facilities and physical infrastructure on the one hand, and the increasing number of students admitted into tertiary institutions on the other.
- Limited opportunities and avenues for working people and those who, for one reason or the other, have had to terminate their education for a period to re-enter or acquire higher education through other modes.
- Public tertiary institutions being originally developed as residential institutions because of their national character and the model adopted.
- The existing structures and facilities in tertiary institutions providing limited and in some cases, no access for people with disabilities and special needs.

The following deficiencies also exist in the structure of tertiary education in Ghana which calls for alternative modes of delivery:

- Limited opportunities for academic and professional progression, especially for those who enter the technical/vocational streams
- Limited opportunities for those who end their education at senior secondary school level and decide to re-enter the formal system at a later point in time
- Inadequate opportunities for life-long learning

These are challenges that make DE an ultimate choice. In recognition of the challenges that limit access to tertiary education in the country, and the potential of the universities to admit more qualified students in an alternative delivery mode, the Government has recommended the promotion of DE and the establishment of open universities as one of the key measures for widening access in its current educational reform.

Ghana has a history in DE. According to Ansere (2002) the provision of DE in Ghana predates the attainment of the country's political independence in 1957. Records show that some members of the educated and political elite during the pre-independence era used what was then called Correspondence Courses to further their education and training. Notable examples were J. B. Danquah and Kwame Nkrumah. They did this because there was hardly any higher education institution in the country at the time. Aggor et al (1992) also note that as far back as March 1964,

there was recognition that DE and correspondence delivery was needed to serve the needs of Ghanaians, the society in which they live and the country as a whole. University committees and senior administrators have also long realised and advocated the pivotal contribution that DE could provide for tertiary education system and societal development.

As early as the mid-1980s, the universities began to look to DE for a cost-effective solution to the problem of limited access to tertiary education. In 1986 a sub committee of the Academic Planning Committee of the University of Ghana recommended that DE be explored as at least a partial solution to the university's problems of space and staffing. From the early 1990s this option began to receive government attention (Spronk, 1999). This marked the beginning of exploring the potential of using DE to address the excessive demand for tertiary education in the country and for that matter widening access to tertiary education. Following this was continuous effort by government and development partners to establish DE programmes in all the public universities in the country, thus to turn the universities into dual mode institutions.

Since the 1990s development partners like UNESCO, and some foreign educational institutions like The Commonwealth of Learning, University Partnerships in Cooperation and Development Programme (UPCD) and Simon Fraser University have supported local interventions to help establish DE in Ghana. Notable among these efforts are the following:

- *Survey on DE in Ghana* initiated by the Ministry of Education and conducted by The Commonwealth of Learning in June, 1992. This study helped to identify the tertiary educational needs in the country and made several recommendations for implementation of DE.
- *Ghana DE Development Project* - a review of DE needs in the country, in response to request from Ministry of Education to UNESCO. The study which was conducted in June 1994 enforced the initial study and recommended systems that need to be put in place for effective implementation of DE.
- *Ghana DE Development Project*. The project proposal was submitted to 1994 UPCD Tier Two Competition by Simon Fraser University and won the award in September 1995 for implementation. The five-year project was for building the national level DE consortium and developing the university-level expertise and programming as recommended in the various reports on DE.
- *Mid-Term Evaluation of the Ghana DE Development Project* by the UPCD Tier Two project and conducted by Barbara Spronk in April 1999. This evaluative study helped to assess the progress of implementation of DE and made recommendations for the way forward.

One wonders the extent to which these interventions have yielded results. To date only two public Universities, UCC and UEW have made remarkable impact in promoting DE at the tertiary level.

The University of Education Winneba which began its DE programme in 1998 has approximately 7000 and University of Cape Coast which began in 2001 has 17,000 students. The Government of Ghana has not given up on harnessing the potential of DE to widen access to tertiary education in the country, most especially for the marginalised in education.

In its most recent educational reforms, the Government of Ghana set up a committee to review the educational policy of the country to respond to current trends of development. The report has made several recommendations for tertiary education in Ghana which include the promotion of DE. The report notes that tertiary education is key for human resource development in Ghana and recommends massive promotion of DE at the tertiary level. The Report proposes the establishment of an Open University and Open Colleges in the country.

The Open University is to provide work-study programmes through distance learning using both print and electronic delivery systems for students and workers to acquire higher education. The Open community colleges on the other hand are to provide avenues for further studies/training for those who may end their education at the JSS/SSS levels, and meet the multiplicity of needs of different learners as well as encourage life-long learning. This is endorsed in the Government's White Paper on the report of the Education Reform Committee (Ghana 2002).

The White Paper indicates that the concept of Open University will create further opportunities for education for all. When properly established, the Open University will satisfy the need for further education opportunities for the large numbers of people who require further education. DE is no doubt emerging as the mode that meets the educational needs of the country. Obviously, DE could help tertiary institutions to achieve the national norm of 50 males to 50 females in enrolment.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND WOMEN

In a study on DE and women, Plummer (2000) explains that DE refers to learning that takes place outside schools, colleges, and university campuses. Students at any level and of any age learn independently through print packages and textbooks, audiotapes or radio, television, satellite and videotape, and teleconference. By its distance nature, DE has been helpful in providing access to education to people who could otherwise not be able to access an educational programme. This could be rural folks, women, workers or people who are located far from the educational institutions.

The societal perception of women and their productive and reproductive roles affect their participation in formal education. Society perceives women as homemakers and child minders hence any activity that takes them away from such *normal* schedules are frowned upon. As a result women find it difficult to embark on further studies, especially at their adult stage when they have began building families. Numerous studies have proved this point (Evans 1995; Compora 2003; Plummer 2004; Przymus 2004). As a mode of study, DE is particularly suited for women because of their role as housewives and mothers, which is thought to provide flexible time management possibilities while preventing classroom attendance. Women have constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic disabilities. DE is seen as having a potentially important contribution to make in overcoming barriers to women's participation in the developed and developing world. DE can help them with its outreach to their homes. It enables them to learn at their own pace and take up vocations and skills for economic and individual development. It gives them a second chance to step into the main systems of education, including higher education, enabling them at the same time to earn and learn as well as to fulfill family responsibilities.

Writing from a Canadian perspective, Przymus (2004) remarks that women are enjoying DE amid their hectic lifestyles. DE allows them to learn at any time or any place, while juggling multiple roles given that women are more likely than men to interrupt their education and careers for parenthood and temporary confinement to the home. In a study undertaken in Athabasca University (AU) by Reuss (1994), the author observes that DE has attracted women students, who are sometimes referred to in the literature as coming to the institution for a *second chance*. Meanwhile to Reuss, many of these women learning via DE may more accurately be considered a *first chance* to pursue a university education. The study identifies that approximately 67% of AU's students are women, the majority of whom may have had some post-secondary college education but may not have had the opportunity to complete their university studies.

Several other studies have given statistical evidence to confirm women's high participation in DE programmes. Most of the women who access DE have been described to be in their adult stage, married, have dependants and are workers. In a study by Qureshi (2002) it was found that the DE format attracted more married participants than the on-campus format: 30.4% versus 12.6%, respectively. Some of the women wanted to take their courses at home because they could not find or afford adequate childcare. Two-thirds of the women were married or divorced and half had at least one dependent. The study concluded that single moms, older women with families and students with jobs are more likely to choose to further their education via DE. From the Newswatch (2002) a study in the U.S. Department of Education showed that 7.6% of students took DE courses in the 1999-2000 academic year. The study confirmed that of those taking DE courses, women outnumbered men by 8.5% to 6.5%, single parents to others by 9.8% to 7.4% and married to unmarried by 10.9% to 6.7%. The study also revealed that older women with families and jobs were more drawn to undergraduate DE programs during the 1999-2000 academic years than were members of other groups.

Plummer (2002) a Senior Researcher at the German Fern Universität, a Distance Teaching University who has experience of evaluating DE systems and has carried out cross-national comparative research on the situation of women and men in DE has examined the often neglected area of gender issues throughout the DE world. Her study identifies that a wide variety of evidence from different countries supports the conclusion that open and distance learning has the potential to provide equal opportunities in higher and continuing education. She emphasize that DE per se is women-friendly since it does not require attendance in class at set times. The author observes that geographical location and isolation have been identified as limiting the educational opportunities of women. In some parts of the world like Australia, the significance of distance for women has been described in the context of the implementation of an external course for isolated and rural women to draw them into the building and construction field and thus provide new employment opportunities in the extremely gender-segregated labour market. Similar to women in rural Ghana, it has been described by Heiler and Richards (1988: 192, quoted by Plummer, 2000) that for rural Australian women, distance and isolation usually go hand in hand, greatly affecting their chances to gain education, training and employment. Hence DE bridges the educational and training gap for them to gain employable skills.

There is no doubt that considering the socio-cultural characteristics of women, DE, by its unique nature of being distributed learning creates an opportunity for women to pursue higher education. Research has provided statistical data to prove this point. Meanwhile researchers like Przymus, (2004), Plummer (2002), Canevale (2002) and

Evans (1995) have sounded the caution that one should not be misled by the estimated high participation of women in DE. In content the situation is different. Women are underrepresented in science, technology, technical and mathematics oriented courses. Compared to their male counterparts, this places them at a disadvantage. A way of going about this situation is ensuring gender awareness and promoting gender consciousness in all levels of DE programming. An assessment of learning styles of women in relation to DE will be useful in exploring ways of making DE more women friendly.

LEARNING STYLES OF WOMEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Women and men have different learning styles which affect their participation in DE. Plummer (2000) has stated that research has confirmed feminist theories of differential learning styles in men and women. The socio-economic characteristics of women influences their learning styles to a very large extent. The influence is so strong to the extent that some scholars attribute the under-representation of women in some courses to their different learning styles. Adults have complex lives with multiple demands on their time and energy, they appreciate flexibility and individualization in their learning experiences.

Institutional set ups have the potential of helping or hindering the chances of women to combine distance course with their family responsibilities and thereby contribute to more equal opportunities. It is assumed that distance learners are *autonomous* and *independent* learners who more or less study on their own and work their way through the course materials provided by the institution. The situation differs for female students. Female distance students have shown more interest in support and connectedness with other students and in dealings between students and academic staff. Unlike their male colleagues, they are oriented towards creating opportunities for meeting and working with other students. The study of Plummer has found women make different demands on the institution than do male students, and they value and utilize the services in a different way. Women also place a higher value on the local support services as a result they have a higher rate of attendance in study centres, even though they have to overcome more obstacles in order to be able to participate. This female oriented approach to learning at a distance need to be taken into account by a DE system which actively wants to provide equal opportunities for men and women.

Meanwhile because of excessive demands of their reproductive and domestic roles, women distance learners face challenges even in their quest for and use of existing student support systems. They find it very challenging to make time to attend tutorials or participate in study groups they desire so much, which take place outside their homes or communities. The everyday lives of family women are characterised by a degree of chaos and constant interruptions, where the mother is at the beck and call of her children and her partner and their immediate needs which tend to take precedence over the woman's desire for uninterrupted and concentrated study time. Meanwhile it is assumed that most women in unpaid family work are supposed to have time on their hands and to be quite free in how they organise their schedules. Studies have shown that only a minority of women distance students do not work outside the home at all. Most of them are in fulltime or part-time work in addition to fulfilling their commitments as housewives and mothers. They therefore face difficulty in organizing their studies. While female students have difficulties in making time and finding space for their studies, with the support of their spouses men are more likely to be granted the space and privacy needed to pursue their

distance courses. In discussing women's experiences of DE, a study by Burge (1990:18) note that the women agreed that distance study "isn't for everyone" and that it is a significantly different experience for female learners than it is for male learners". The women under study were grateful that communications technologies, despite their imperfections, allowed them to study from their own homes and at times most convenient to their personal schedules.

SURVEY

In a cross sectional study of 400 distance learners from University of Cape Coast, University of Education, and the foreign programmes run by University of Ghana the distance learners expressed their observations about the programme and how it impacts on women. The instrument for data collection was structured to find out the socio-economic characteristics of the learners, reasons for pursuing further studies, what informed their decision to choose to study at a distance, their perceptions about the programmes, challenges that women face on the programme and recommendations for making the programmes women friendly. The uniqueness of this study is that though the focus was on women, responses were gathered from both male and female students. The reason was that since development workers and gender advocates are using the gender mainstreaming strategy and paying attention to the male and female relationships and its implication for women's empowerment, it was useful to obtain the views of males as well.

From the results of the study, it was found that typical of DE programmes, 63% representing 252 were females while 37% representing 148 were males. Majority of the learners were found to be middle aged adults. Only 1% of the respondents had their age up to 20 years. The remaining 99% were above 20 years. The results revealed that DE creates opportunity for teachers to upgrade themselves. Majority of the respondents (87%) were found to be teachers with the remaining 13% being social and health workers, and self employed. Most of the respondents (70%) were found to be married and the 30% were single, separated divorced or widowed. This profile of the respondents is remarkable of distance learners. These are adults who have occupational, family and societal responsibilities and therefore need flexible learning arrangements to enhance their career. Hence they found the DE format to be suitable.

The mode of delivery of the DE programme was predominantly print, supplemented with regular face-to-face interactions, telephone contacts, emails and one-on-one contact with tutors as and when needed.

There were no indications of intensive use of ICT systems to enhance interaction among students and tutors. Interactive e-learning platforms, tele-conferencing, and other packages for e-learning were not used. There were no course websites that had courses to be uploaded and downloaded online. Students mainly relied on the printed materials and the scheduled face-to-face tutorials. Final examinations were written at accredited examination centres which were usually located in the host DE institution.

In outlining reasons for pursuing the programme, respondents stated that they were studying to upgrade their knowledge and skills (49.2%), to enhance their career (30.2%) and to create new career opportunities (20.6%). Being adults with career, family and societal responsibilities, respondents had several reasons for choosing to study at a distance. Peculiar of DE programmes, most of the respondents (30.8%)

stated that they were doing the courses at a distance in order to study and at the same time be on their jobs, 26% said to be able to undertake family responsibilities whilst studying, 21% was due to accommodation problems on campus and 22% were pursuing the courses at a distance because they found it cost effective.

Recognising these as the push factors for students who pursue DE programmes, providers of such programmes need to set it up in such a way that the expectations of students will be met. Much as the regular face-to-face meetings could be good support systems for students, it could be a border to those who may find it difficult to obtain permission at their workplaces or leave their homes to participate. Making long trips to host institutions could be challenging to such students as well.

Students may find it more convenient to have computer-mediated interaction and write examinations online than finding time off their work or leaving their family responsibilities to make long trips to undertake such academic exercises. Howell, Williams et al (2003) have noted that more and more learners are requiring flexibility in program structure to accommodate their other responsibilities, such as full-time jobs or family needs. With these constraints, students shop for courses that best accommodate their schedules and learning styles, and then transfer their credit to such universities to earn their degrees.

Part of the study was to find out students' (both males and females) perception of how DE courses impact on women. In responding to the issue of how DE is beneficial to women, respondents indicated that it gives opportunity for the women to improve their academic standards while at work (56%), empowers them for their societal roles (15%), and provides them the opportunity to undertake their societal and family responsibilities while studying (29%).

Thinking about how DE impacts on women, it was necessary to find out the convenience of the regular face-to-face meetings for women in terms of timing, duration of meetings, travel time and distance to meetings. The study revealed that though 69% found the regular face-to-face meetings to be convenient for women, 31% did not find it to be convenient. This was followed up with a question on problems that women face in participating in the DE programmes.

The results showed that women face the following problems:

- Inability to manage limited time
- Difficulty in meeting deadlines for submission of assignments
- Low participation in class discussions due to male domination in discussions
- Difficulty in combining house management with the studies
- Nursing mothers having problems of managing their babies
- Pregnancy related problems
- Suspicion of husbands
- Insecurity in making frequent travels to learning centres for face-to-face
- Pressure from career obligations

Just as expressed in literature, women who study at a distance are faced not only with career related challenges but that of reproduction and home management roles as well. Besides that, husbands who may not trust their wives pose a threat to the woman's engagement in meetings with their study partners and colleagues. While men could travel with ease to learning centres and return home at any time of the

day, women have the challenge of insecurity in night travels due to experiences of highway robbery which is at times associated with rape. These are issues that strictly affect women but not men.

The question then is how do DE institutions deliver programmes and provide student support services that will address these gender related challenges? Probably the provision of child care services or child minders at learning centres, reducing the travels to learning centres for face-to-face interactions and examinations by introducing e-learning systems and providing flexible assignment turn in time for women could be helpful. Facilitators of interactive sessions will also have to be made conscious of the need to encourage women to participate in the discussions. Respondents also proposed ways of addressing the above problems which is useful to consider in the provision of DE in Ghana. The suggestions were as follows:

- Increase student support services
- Take the programme to the doorsteps of women through ICTs
- Encourage women to draw a study plan
- Provide full study leave with pay and other financial support
- Reduce house workloads
- Provide special support for pregnant women and nursing mothers
- Seek house helps to support in the house
- Negotiate time with spouse to support in home management
- Seek family or parental support in managing the home
- Take personal initiatives in managing the challenges and remain focused and determined.

The support of the extended family, spouses and house helps cannot be underestimated in supporting women to excel as they pursue further studies at a distance. Respondents highlighted this in their responses. There is also a financial dimension to supporting women who study at a distance which government and policy makers need to consider.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Harnessing the Potential of Adult Learning Methodologies

The study by Burge (1990) and Plummer (2000) have shown that the different learning styles for men and women determines the teaching learning approaches to be adopted. Being adult learners who appreciate participatory approaches to learning and come to the teaching learning situation with some level of experience, special teaching-learning approaches should be utilized in the process. Burge (1990) and Wallace (1996) have found the andragogical principles and assumptions regarding adult learners useful, and outlined the roles of the course leader as follows:

- plays facilitative roles, respects learner experience, and gives rapid feedback;
- enables learners to exercise real freedom, choices, and responsibilities;
- promotes experiential learning;
- articulates and distinguishes between her/his own and learners' responsibilities;
- involves the cognitive and the affective elements of learning;
- encourages learners to ask questions and share concerns with others;
- acknowledges that learners will not always be self-directed;
- maintains academic rigor in content and process.

Building on Malcom Knowles' (1980; 1990) principle of andragogy, Maehl (2000; 2004) confirms that the characteristics of adult learners invite the following recommendations for those charged with establishing formal educational programs for adults:

- **Incorporate problem-centred learning and directly address the life experiences of adult learners.**
- **Provide opportunity for adults to play a role in the design, direction, and implementation of learning experience.**
- **Offer flexibility in time, place, mode, and pacing to accommodate changing circumstances.**
- **Recognise that the relationship between learner and teacher must be filled with mutual respect, emphasizing cooperation rather than control.**
- **Provide a positive learning environment including regular and constructive feedback.**

Female distance students have specific learning needs that are most effectively met by these woman-centred as well as learner-centred approaches. It is crucial to adopt learner-centred approaches both in the development of instructional materials and course delivery to facilitate the learning. Women engage differently in class and it helps to use the adult learning methodologies to harness their participation in class discussions. Burge concludes in her study that whether or not the content of the course is explicitly feminist, gender analysis of that content, along with the recognition and validation of female learners' specific life situations and experiences, need to be integrated into the teaching and learning process.

Communal Support

In Ghana and for that matter Africa, communal living and support from relatives is the norm. Since the use of household equipments like clothe and dish washing machines, micro waves, mowers, vacuum cleaners etc to support house work is limited, women could seek support from relatives to help them manage their homes while they study. Even in recent times where as a result of urbanization and modernisation it is becoming increasingly difficult to get relatives to help in one's home, commercial *house help* or *domestic help* services are rapidly emerging. Agencies for domestic help services are sprouting out at a fast rate. Their services are not too expensive for the career woman to afford. Labour in Africa is relatively cheap. High level of professionalism is being injected into the service. Though this affects the fees charged by the agencies, one gets quality service that could support women as they work and study.

Meanwhile some women and families frown on the services of domestic helps. Some women have the attitude of doing their domestic chores - washing, cooking, cleaning all by themselves. They find it difficult to trust other people for quality service or just simply enjoy doing it all by themselves and for themselves. Society and some husbands also frown on a wife going for domestic help. It is flagged as laziness on the part of the women. Some men just simply enjoy only the food and services of their wives. This puts much stress on professional women and affects their studies as well. Society is changing, and both men and women need to wake up to the realities that modernisation brings and adjust their way of life to create space for women and provide both traditional and modernized support systems to enable them enhance themselves professionally.

The Potential of ICTs

DE has evolved into a viable and innovative delivery system for higher education. It is playing a key role in university outreach and training. As the field has developed, its distinguishing characteristic of "distance" has grown virtually obsolete. Oclot (1996) has observed that education in the 21st century will simply be considered education, regardless of where, when, and how it is delivered.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been identified as a tool for bridging the gaps in various divides in society. Notions about a global village and the information age are rapidly becoming a reality as more individuals, organizations, and institutions communicate together or access various data bases through large electronic networks like Internet (Darkwa and Mazibuko 2000). Computer based instruction is one of several important DE approaches. Computer mediated conferencing gives opportunities for individualizing instruction, offering education to learners in various locations, and even providing learning opportunities to people who ordinarily would have difficulty participating in educational programs. The use of personal computers for home, business, and education has increased tremendously in the past decades. Just as technology has already blurred the distinction between home and work via the Internet, the web, and remote access to the workplace, technology also has the potential of transforming the home into a learning community where students, parents, teachers and employers could participate in education as part of a vast distributed learning system (Hiemstra 1994; (Leary 2007). These are the potentials that modern information technology presents and provides opportunities for learning at a distance most especially for women.

The use of ICTs for DE has special usefulness for women due to uniqueness of their multiple roles and its impact on their learning styles. Scholars have done studies on the interface between ICTs, DE and women. While some argue that due to the learning styles of women and their multiple tasks, ICTs could be a supportive facility for their studies at a distance, others are of the view that the inherent technological challenges of women will not help the use of ICTs for DE for women. These diverse views are evident in the studies of Evans (1995); Apt and Grieco (1998); and Davenport, (2004) for instance. Apt and Grieco (1998) have discussed that there are certain benefits to the DE mode in seeking to improve women's access to education most particularly in its electronic form. For women, electronic DE can greatly reduce their time costs in education and allow them to overcome the obstacle that fragmented time usually presents in undertaking education. To manage their range of tasks, women frequently handle their task overloads by multi-tasking. They undertake many tasks at the same time: child care, income-generation activity or food preparation. It therefore makes great sense to enable education to be undertaken within the routine scheduling of the day of a woman. Davenport (2004) remarks that technology brings a degree within sight for adults who couldn't pursue one otherwise. Online education opens college doors for adult women, who often are tied to non standard schedules by children and employers. The academic *third shift* starts at the computer after the kids go to bed. Internet connectivity on cellular phones, PDAs and laptops like the \$100 laptop initiative by MIT could be devices that could support women in their studies at a distance.

It is obvious that if ICTs have so much potential for promoting learning at a distance most especially for women, then there is the need for the State and development partners to make it a priority.

The Government of Ghana has not been silent on the use of ICTs to support education

in the country. Several proposals have been made for the use of ICTs to facilitate learning and widen access.

In a report on the President's Committee on Review of Education Reforms in Ghana (2002), it has been highlighted that Ghana cannot be left out in this global economy of using ICT for development. A well planned and effective training programme in ICT will provide the country with a pool of ICT manpower and skilled labour with ICT knowledge necessary to meet the demands of industrialized education.

CONCLUSION

Women have longed for higher learning to emancipate themselves. DE has proved as a sure way of making women meet their educational aspirations as they meet the obligations of society and career. The study styles of women in DE have implications for administering DE in a women-friendly manner. By nature women learn best in groups and interaction. Their confidence increase when they are in constant interaction with their tutors and co-students.

Most DE institutions provide intensive support systems which could help meet the learning styles of DE students, most especially women. Much as the support systems are what women need to survive on DE programmes, their socio-economic roles make it challenging to make the best of the support systems.

Recognizing the cost involved in putting up more learning centers that will be closer to distance learners, the potential of modern technology could be harnessed to make all support systems highly accessible to women. The use of cellular phones has tremendously increased in Africa.

Even in the remotest rural communities, people use cell phones. Text messages alone could be a basic tool for keeping in constant touch with female distance learners to motivate, support and sustain them on DE programmes.

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