

Case Study

Impact of distance education on marital stability as perceived by female students at selected Nairobi Public Universities

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Long-distance relationships are becoming increasingly common. Studies show that about one third of all dating relationships among university students are long distance. The study attempts to investigate how socialization and gender outcomes in public universities, interact with distance learning status to predict marital stability from the perspective of female students. The objective of this paper is to investigate how gender and long distance studies affect marital stability. It integrates analysis of gender and relationship security in predicting stability of long-distance relationship. The study thus connects the distance relationships to the distance learning associated gender needs among female students and the resultant stability in their marital lives. The study design used mainly qualitative paradigm using case study approach and 10 Focus Group Discussion between 8-10 female students together using structured questionnaires to collect data from married students. 120 female students were purposively sampled to determine their consequent marital situations. The findings reveal that physical separation of partners is associated with increased distress and depression and reductions in relationship satisfaction. The continuous separation over a prolonged period of time due to educational needs has a direct impact on marital stability.

Key Words: distance-learning, marital stability, empowerment, gender roles, challenges, marriage stability.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is a key course in education. The growing demand for further and higher education; the new and constantly changing jobs requirements; the changing employment policies and the general everyday demands all have stimulated the growth of distance education in both private and public institutions of higher learning. It is happening all over the world. This explains, in part, why increasing numbers of students are enrolling in distance study programmes.

Distance education has been defined in several ways by a number of distance education specialists: The specialists are Delling (1966), Holmberg (1977), Keegan (1983), Peters (1973), Moore (1977) and Rowson Jones (1974).

B. Holmberg (1977) states that the term "distance education" covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the contiguous immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, never benefit

from the planning, guidance, and tuition of a tutorial or a tutorial organization.

(Holmberg, 199:9) – This is probably one of the reasons why many have found distance education attractive and affordable. Never the less the purpose of distance education is based on the principle of equality of opportunity for all.

This is the mission of distance education. The philosophy of this mission emphasizes the expansion of education for self-employment for quality life. The philosophy also emphasizes the need for an individually educated population that can contribute to social and economic development. Despite the nobility of this worthy course, distance education has had impact on marital stability as perceived by female students since it has eased their gender roles thus leading to misunderstanding between couples since distance learning has also included evening classes, school based programmes, weekend and public holiday classes/lectures.

The general objective of this paper was to assess the impact of distance education on marital stability as perceived by female students at selected Nairobi Universities; specifically the study investigated how gender and long distance status interact to predict marital stability; to assess how analysis of gender and relationship security predict the stability of long distance relationships and finally to determine how gender needs are met among female students.

The study used two theories; the social exchange theory by sociologist Richard Emerson and Karen Cook (1970-1980s) which is based on a central premise; that the exchange of social and material resources is a fundamental form of human interaction. With roots in earlier theory developed in cultural anthropology, neoclassical economics and psychology which focus on how interaction patterns are shaped by power relationships between individuals and the resulting efforts to address balance in exchange relations.

The other theory is choice exchange theory which explains why mothers have to work outside the home amidst serious role strains and conflicts as well as worsening interpersonal relationships between family members which is application to role theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Distance Education

Distance education dates back from the 18th Century to the present day. Many distance educators believe that the first recorded offer of distance studies to students was carried by the following notice in a Boston gazette in the USA in the 18th Century.

“Any person who wished to study shorthand may have several lessons sent to him weekly and he would be as perfectly instructed as the person who lives in Boston”

This was an offer to students who wanted to study shorthand through correspondence which was a crude way of teaching distance learners without instituting a two way communication where you could get feedback from the learners on what they are doing. In 1840's, a more famous name in shorthand, Mr. Pitman, started offering courses by correspondence including a two way communication element.

This spearheaded a number of correspondence courses in America and Europe. Early attempts at distance teaching relied heavily on an efficient postal service and a high level of student motivation. Some innovations were made in Russia, the USA and Australia in the late 1920s. The Soviet Union adopted distance learning for a different purpose, to increase the output of the educational system. Their main concern was to offer some education to small groups of disadvantaged students.

In Australia, correspondence education was also seen as a way of extending the school system to those who could otherwise be deprived. Attempts were made to link

correspondence teaching with some face to face study and broadcasts then later computers. These innovations introduced into distance education gave rise to Open University. The Open University's commitment is to study support services which has remained an important integral part of its multi media teaching strategy since its inception in 1969. This has seen the open access to degree courses for students with no pre-requisites; course production is done through team work and students given support services. The successful story of Open University in courses of very high standards has inspired the initiation of a number of Open Universities globally a good example is Zimbabwe Open University.

Characteristics and Scope of Distance Education

Distance education, throughout history, has been used to provide education to adults because of its characteristics and scope. For example, individualized learning, which is a major characteristic of distance education, is extensively used for social and community action. It has the scope to provide new curricula as well as diverse programmes to meet individual needs. This is why institutions all over the world have a record of large student members. For example, China's Television University System (GTVU), established in 1979, had a population of 530000 students in 1994 with an annual intake of 77,000, UNISA in South Africa, established in 1873 as the University of Cape of Good Hope had 130,000 students in 1995, with an intake of 60,000 students per year, and in India, the Indira Gandhi National Open University, established in 1985, had 242,000 students in 1995 with an annual intake of 91,000 students. Since 1873, Distance education has grown tremendously and is being used in most fields of knowledge such as medicine, theology, teacher education, banking, industrial training, aviation, co-operative education and lifelong education for adults. The most recent characteristics of education include, evening classes, school based, weekend classes and public holiday classes.

Gender Roles and Education

Gender refers to the social agreements among the community members that distinguish men and women beyond the biological characteristics that they possess and thus determining the kind of rules that either can play, the constraints they might face, the opportunities they are likely to get and the extent to which they access and control resources and benefits from any gainful activity (USAID, 2010 and USAID, 2012).

The gender aspect in the assignment of tasks comes in the form of gender roles and relation. Gender roles are more pronounced in male headed households than female headed households. Societal gender norms are thought to have an impact in gender role allocation. These norms are complex to change and many times are disadvantageous to wo-

Students	What they said
Student 1	My life has turned upside down. I feel I am no longer in control of my house.
Student 2	I no longer go to visit my relatives.
Student 3	During exams, I even miss church service
Student 4	My husband has given up on me since I am always busy
Student 5	Life as student wife is unbearable. We hardly chat the way we used to.
Student 6	My house help took off the Monday I was starting exams. It was bleak to me.
Student 7	My sleeping time has changed especially when I have term papers to work on.
Student 8	I don't have social life anymore ever since I went back to college
Student 9	My children cannot understand me anymore. I am always reading.
Student 10	My husband got married recently complaining of ignoring him because I am always busy in the house or with books.
Student 11	Doing term papers is a challenge because I didn't have a laptop of my own and my husband would not let me use his
Student 12	Using a computer is a challenge even after doing a unit in first year on how to use it
Student 13	I no longer do cleaning of the house the way I used to do. My husband has noticed this and is not amused
Student 14	These days I find going to the salon on weekend, market visit a waste of time since I have to catch up with college work
Student 15	My home budget has increased because I am no longer in control of how things are used, most of the time I am either at work, in college or studying
Student 16	I have become very irritable. I don't associate the way I used to do before, tasks are overwhelming.
Student 17	I nearly broke down when I had a sick child. I was admitted in hospital just weeks before exams.
Student 18	During rainy season going home is a challenge; my husband cannot wait for me so that we go home together. I end up home very late and wake up early. It is all stress.
Student 19	There is nothing as bad having re-sits because you never had adequate time for study and your spouse cannot support you either
Student 20	I am very rare in family gatherings. At times when the clash with college programme I miss them all together. This has not been taken kindly
Student 21	I have to part with lots of money in order to keep a house help which is not a welcome idea by my husband but I can do nothing about it, he can't understand it either
Student 22	Why are you studying, I thought I can take care of you – equipped my husband

men particularly in limiting women access to education and decent work compared to men.

Gender gaps have been created because of these roles and to handle these gaps, policies and programmes brought into distance education should consider the different roles, needs and perceptions of men and women in education in particular distance education. This if done well, will lead to increased access to learning and reduce challenges faced by those undertaking distance education. In addition, it has been suggested that policies should be formulated concerning women's access to jobs, level and regularity of earnings, opportunities for mobilizing and organizing and the coordination of productive and reproductive roles for men and women in societies (Tontana and Paciello, 2010) upon completion of education.

Gender equity programmes are the only ones that can help in alleviating burdens placed on one gender over another. To achieve such equity socially accepted roles for men and women have to be changed.

Gender roles are then borne out of the focus on different gender and thus refer to the kinds of roles, duties and behaviours that are expected of a particular gender to match the society standards. These roles then bring challenges to women especially when they add it distance education since they add up to household roles and reproductive roles. As such their burden is tripled as they are expected to accomplish all these roles in good time (Kobayashi, undated).

Societies in different parts of the world have certain life styles that perpetuate gender relations in distance education. For example in Kenya, unequal gender rela-

tions are witnessed through access to education, employment and leadership opportunity.

Many studies that have been done in Africa, Asia and the Pacific contend that women spend more time working than men accounting to 12 hours more than that of men. Even with these many working hours, women have limited access to education, resources and services which affect their productivity and earnings and do not help in any way to reduce their burden of responsibility (Cooke et al, 2011). This therefore explains why most of their work is unpaid, unrecognised and not valued which puts them at a disadvantaged position than men (FAO, 2008 a).

From the gender roles men and women can gain some advantages or disadvantages in their pursuit to distance education. This could be because of the gender relations or bias in the policies that eventually lead to a kind of gender disadvantage (Kabecr, 2008). The gender constraints are specific to men and women and have different impacts on the performance of each gender in any activity. Women for example are constrained in their work by the expansive domestic roles that take most of their time.

The second constraint that affects women in distance education is limited knowledge of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which is a very important tool in today's world. Gender roles provide the women with little time to access or use computers at home due to household chores that take a toll on them.

Gender Disparity in Education

According to (Boabu, 2000), various factors cause disparity in the number of girls and boys who successfully complete their education. Girls and boys from wealthier families have always performed better than those children from disadvantaged families. This means that the economic status of parents has a bearing on their children's education. The allocation of funds however affects the girls more than it does to the boys (Boabu, 2000). Early domestic responsibilities, especially among the young girls come in direct conflict with pursuit of education.

This therefore means, later on as adults, those who would like to continue with education can do so through distance education.

METHODOLOGY

The study design used mainly qualitative paradigm using case study approach and Focus Group Discussion between 8 to 10 women together using structured questionnaires to collect data from married students. A total of 120 female students were purposively sampled to determine their consequent marital situations.

FINDINGS

These findings reveal that physical separation of partners is associated with increased distress and depression and

reductions in relationships satisfaction as expressed in the table below generated from the Focus Group Discussions.

Case Study 1

Maria, then a school teacher, enrolled at the university as a distance learner only having contact with the lecturers during the school holidays. During the last semester of the last year of study after five years of study Maria was forced to visit her gynaecologist to help her delay labour pains so that she sits for the final exams. This worked well. After the last paper Maria went into labour. The labour pains went on for a whole night and by noon there was no child in sight despite induction. She had to opt for Caesarean Section and this was her sixth child. The others had been born normally. This birth brought strain in the family because of the bills which were blamed on studies.

Case study 2

Jani has had a lot of problems ever since she enrolled as a student of distance education at a local university. One year into her studies, she lost her job. She could not balance studies, job and household chores so her efficiency declined. Besides, her son who was by then three years old started urinating at night. She attributed this to lack of attention the child missed. To add insult to injury she one day arrived home at night from college only to find her husband had relocated to an unknown place leaving a note behind with the words, "tell me when through with education, I will come back since I cannot be cooked for, washed for and taken care of by a house help. I thought I had married a wife who would do all that and be there to receive me not to receive her when she comes from college".

SUMMARY

Distance education is the best for female adults who seek to further their education. This will lead to their empowerment and also help them deal with challenges brought about by gender roles which are context based and learned through socialization. Gender roles may change over time even though they are reflections of long standing assumptions that a society holds about men, women, boys and girls. If these are shed, marital stability will improve since upon completion of education, a family changes in terms of increased income and social ability.

CONCLUSION

Changing gender roles have caused instability in the family unit. The nurturing of children is now left to house helps as the mother is engaged in distance education.

Bonding between family members is strained due to conflicting time schedules when either the mother or the father is engaged in distance education. Children grow up with strange values acquired from the house helps and media since parents have no time for them.

RECOMMENDATION

Distance education should strictly be confined to a range of technology such as radio, audio cassette player, mobile phones, computer, television, video and satellite dishes which can reduce distance between spouses and also can encourage learning within the confines of homes through correspondence. This will fit very well with the definition of O. Mackenzie, E. Christensen and P. Rigby (1968) where they defined distance education as

correspondence between the student and the teacher and which requires interaction between the student and the instruction (1968: 2-4).

The above definition was further emphasized by the French law (1971). On 12th July 1971 the French Government passed a law regulating the conduct of distance education in its territories. The law contained this definition: Distance Education is education which either does not imply the physical presence of the teacher appointed to dispense it in the place where it is received or in which the teacher is present only on occasion or for selected tasks (Loi 71: 556 du 12 Juillet 1971).

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