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Gender Aspects in Open and Distance Education

The impact of technologies on distance learning students

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Reflections on Gender Issues in ODL

• Starting points:
  – Access
    • geographical, cultural, social distance
  – Home study
    • privatization of the learning environment
  – Gender issues
    • Learning styles, division of labour, time management

• Impact of technology
  – Access and control
  – (Virtual) ODL learning environments
  – Communication and collaboration
Starting points

• **Towards new horizons**
  – Opening educational opportunities:
    • Overcoming geographical, cultural, social distance

• **A woman’s work is never done**
  – Making time for her studies:
    • Overcoming time constraints due to multiple commitments such as family & housework, paid work

• **Home study**
  – Taking control of the learning environment:
    • re-organizing her life,
    • negotiating the domestic division of labour,
    • setting different priorities
Gender issues in access & control

• Women still tend to have
  – less access to the technologies,
  – less control over the ICTs in their homes and places of work,
  – less confidence and competency in using the technology.

• Women still tend to choose subject areas with less access to technologies
  – people studying mathematical and technical subjects (mostly men) are more likely to have a computer and be computer literate
  – people studying education, social sciences and the humanities (mostly women) are less well equipped.
Home study: Privatization of the learning environment

Multiple determinants of online study conditions:

• students set up their own learning environments; its quality is dependent
  – on the resources and competency available to the students,
  – on the circumstances and demands of their professional and personal lives;
• the type of provision by the university / educational provider affects
  – students‘ ease of access
  – and patterns of work and communication;
• outside factors, such as internet service providers, phone companies, browsers etc. affect
  – the quality
  – and cost of on-line provision.
Advantages of a “privatized” learning environment

• Students do not have to fit in with schedules and locations set by the university.
• Their learning activities are more compatible with their other commitments.
• Many students, especially women, have no other way of pursuing their education and studying face-to-face at another university.
• Students can communicate with other students and with tutors & lecturers either live or through asynchronous channels.
• Working in groups and co-operating with others can be done via electronic channels, the telephone or even "snail mail" and does not cost as much time and money as traveling to meetings & classes would.
Disadvantages of a “privatized” learning environment

• Students are responsible
  – for setting up their own learning environment
  – and have to supply the necessary equipment.

• In the case of e-learning
  – women may be economically disadvantaged as
    • Electronic communication and online studying require expensive hardware, software and online-access
    • and women are less likely to have the necessary resources and financial means
  – Students have less direct contact with other students and staff
    • this tends to be more of a problem for women
    • Overcoming this isolation through internet communication may be costly and time-consuming, again disadvantaging women more than men
External and internal pressures

• **External pressures affect men and women differently since women**
  – are under more pressure from family and work-related commitments
  – have to fit their studies around these commitments and
  – tend not to be relieved of their burdens when they take up studying.

• **In addition to outside demands, women tend to**
  – set (impossibly) high standards for themselves, both as mothers and housekeepers and as students
  – "make up" for spending time on pursuits outside their home-making and childrearing roles and
  – make sure their partners and children „do not suffer“ because of their studying.
Taking control of the learning environment

- Women can overcome these difficulties if they
  - are aware of the problems caused by an inadequate learning environment,
  - set / change priorities to make time and space for their studying,
  - are sufficiently self-confident to claim their own space
- Women can overcome the disadvantages of low income, inadequate housing and lack of support by
  - pooling their resources & co-operating in domestic chores
  - trading childcare and homework supervision,
  - mutual support through discussion & self-help groups
- Thus
  - claiming their own space, even in the face of opposition
  - making use of limited resources to improve their domestic learning environment
Communication and collaboration

• Research in the field of open and distance education has shown the importance of communication for the successful studying of women distance students:
  – It helps them to assess their own situation through comparison with others in similar circumstances.
  – It shows where difficulties and "failure" might be due to structural factors rather than to individual inadequacies.
  – It shows potential ways to improve their situation through learning about solutions used by other students.
  – It is a means of breaking out of the isolation associated with distance and virtual learning.
Internet communication against isolation

• Women distance students
  – often find it difficult to meet other students, especially women students in similar circumstances, in person.
  – tend to be more adversely affected by the isolation experienced by both female and male DE/ODL students

• For these women the internet provides a real opportunity for communication and networking:
  – The diverse forms of communication allow asynchronous as well as synchronous contacts and exchanges.
  – E-Learning offers opportunities for co-operation and connectedness without forcing women to travel and be present at a specified time in a specified place outside the home.
The role of women only communication

• Provision for women only communication offers networking opportunities in non-threatening environments
  – A "Women’s Room", off limits to men, and women-only groups provide an opportunity for open and unguarded exchange not possible in mixed groups.
  – By exchanging personal experiences women can recognise similarities in their circumstances and patterns of discrimination and oppression.
  – The need for action can then be identified and strategies for action can be developed.
Women on the Net: Using technology for empowerment

- There are two aspects of the INTERNET which are inextricably linked and extremely relevant for women:
  - POWER and COMMUNICATION
- The empowerment of women is a necessary requisite for their success as distance students enabling them
  - to be in control of their ODL and e-learning environments and
  - to combine their distance studies with their other commitments
- By providing the means for empowerment through communication and cooperation,
  - technologies can have a valuable impact on distance learning students
Thank you for your attention!

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