

Distance learning boon for women empowerment

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ANNIE Nankamba, 43, a Lusaka-based working wife and mother serves as a compelling example of how open and distance learning (ODL) is increasingly becoming a powerful tool for women empowerment.

Nankamba recently obtained a bachelor's degree in commerce and business administration at University of Africa (UoA), a provider of private university education through ODL.

"This shows that distance learning has huge potential to empower women by breaking almost all hurdles, including age, marital status, income and time, to getting higher education," she says.

Nankamba says the flexibility, convenience and tailored financing packages made it possible for her to graduate despite the many challenges she had as a working mother and wife.

Her circumstances are significant given that lack of education, especially higher education for women, was largely attributed to the serious problem of gender inequality.

The gender gap put women in the unenviable position of bearing most of the brunt of negative social, cultural, political and environmental impacts in developing nations such as Zambia.

Compounding the underrepresentation of women in attaining higher qualifications are traditional patriarchal attitudes that left girls and women behind in education.

Contemporary scholars argue that there was a growing body of evidence that ODL played



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an intrinsic role of addressing challenges of bridging the gap for women and girls with their male counterparts.

The scholars also postulate the sequential link with sustainable development resulting from the promotion of ODL.

Therefore, it is noteworthy that government had identified education for all as one of the key performance indicators as Zambia moves towards attainment of Vision 2030.

The vision envisaged Zambia to become a prosperous middle-income nation by 2030.

From another dimension, Nankamba compellingly helps to validate UoA's claim of 'empowering people through education'.

According to UoA Chancellor Ruth Mubanga, higher education was a major factor that enabled people to have the freedom to make choices about their life, including having decent income

and being independent. "It is important to grasp the fact that women, for many reasons, are underrepresented when it comes to getting university education.

"Therefore, Nankamba's achievement, and that of other female graduates of the class of 2019, is a momentous occasion for the university. We are proud of her because she is the first employee hired by the university, and remains the longest serving. Second, she

really epitomises our motto of empowering people through education," says Dr Mubanga.

Nankamba was hired as an administrative officer in 2008. She has since progressed to be responsible for student affairs.

It is not an understatement to say that expectations were high for both herself and her employers to progress further.

Dr Mubanga says the positive impact of distance learning in empowering people, particularly women, was

gauged from the impressive number of female graduates who made up more than 60% of the nearly 400 students who were recently conferred diplomas, bachelors, masters and doctor of philosophy degrees by the university.

That statistic was also reflected in the university's current student base of more than 2000.

"It is a positive statistic that a significant number of women are earning university degrees

through distance learning given that they comprise the largest section of the underprivileged groups in Africa, and continue to shoulder most of the ill-effects of underdevelopment, including poverty and disease faced by the continent," she says.

In the Zambian context, one could safely argue the desire to advance women education was one of the reasons for government to repeal the University Act of 1999 and replace it with the 2013 Higher Education Act that paved way for growth of higher learning institutions.

There are seven public and 70 private universities. Remarkably, the majority of private universities are largely ODL.

ODL higher learning institutions such as UoA targeted working adults who do not have the time to pursue higher education qualification at full-time contact institutions. Anecdotal evidence suggest the share of the national headcount of ODL could be well above 35 percent.

On certain stereotypes about degrees obtained via this mode, the Zambian government was categorical that the qualifications had equivalent status to regular tertiary learning.

Justice Minister Given Lubinda, who was guest of honour at Nankamba's graduation ceremony, was forceful in dispelling the stereotypes, saying ODL helped to catalyse Zambia's development of human capital.

"You must be very proud of your degrees. Your degrees are of equal status to conventional tertiary learning," Mr. Lubinda said in a speech read on his behalf by a representative from his ministry.