

# Impediments Encountered by Female Learners in Access to Diploma Education Through Open and Distance Learning in Tanzania

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## Abstract

*This study investigates the gender-specific barriers that female learners face in accessing and successfully participating in distance education programmes, focusing on the Tanzanian context. Drawing on liberal feminist theory, which advocates for equal rights, opportunities, and institutional support for women, the paper examines how open and distance learning (ODL) environments address or perpetuate existing gender inequalities. Drawing on qualitative data from female students enrolled in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes, this study identifies various challenges that hinder access to diploma education. These include entrenched gender roles and domestic responsibilities, reproductive obligations, patriarchal constraints, financial dependency, low self-confidence, and limited digital literacy. The findings indicate that, while ODL is designed to offer flexibility and inclusivity, it often falls short in meeting the specific needs of female learners due to persistent structural and sociocultural barriers. The analysis challenges the assumption that flexibility alone guarantees equity and instead calls for gender-responsive reforms in the design, delivery, and institutional policies governing distance education. The study concludes by recommending targeted strategies to promote gender equity in ODL, such as policy reforms, financial support mechanisms, awareness campaigns, and capacity-building initiatives. These findings contribute to ongoing debates on gender and education, highlighting the need for a feminist-informed approach to educational access and reform in developing countries.*

**Keywords:** *Female students, access to ODL, distance learning, adult education*

## Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Tanzania was established in December 1992 to promote inclusive education (URT, 2003). Despite this noble mission, female adult learners remain under-enrolled and underperform relative to their male counterparts, indicating persistent gender disparities in

access and outcomes (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). Diploma-level qualifications achieved through ODL offer critical pathways to professional advancement, economic empowerment, and social mobility for Tanzanian women. Many women can overcome socioeconomic constraints by earning a diploma, enhancing their decision-making power within households, and serving as role models for younger generations. However, the extent to which ODL realises these benefits for female learners, especially in semi-urban areas like Morogoro, remains underexplored, necessitating an in-depth investigation of their lived experiences. The benefits of open and distance learning in widening access to education among females cannot be disputed (Masih & Denis, 2021; Shekar, 2023; Ukaigwe *et al.*, 2025). Since the early 1990s, Tanzania has experienced steady growth in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) offerings, largely driven by investments from the government and development partners. The National Open and Distance Learning policy of 2002 underscored ODL's strategic importance for addressing geographic isolation and resource limitations in the formal education system. IAE has subsequently established a network of regional and district centres, yet persistent infrastructure gaps, such as intermittent electricity supply and limited internet connectivity, challenge most of the sub-Saharan African countries and hinder effective delivery, particularly in semi-urban and rural districts (Mukuni, 2019).

While the policy framework emphasises gender equality, socio-cultural norms constrain women's participation in ODL. According to Prosper (2020), it is generally noted that even when female learner enrolls in ODL institutions, it is the males who own and use computers and the Internet more than females. Prosper further observed that male learners spend more time online, take more technology classes, and show more motivation to learn digital skills. Thus, limited access and use of educational technologies further impede the development of digital literacy skills and their engagement with online learning platforms and digital resources (Haleem *et al.*, 2022; Anasel & Swai, 2023). In contrast, a study by Ukaigwe *et al.* (2025) revealed that Open and Distance Learning helped female learners to be conversant and competent in using computers and internet. Again; Deuri and Gogoi (2025) indicate that ODL programmes positively impact women's empowerment and improve their digital literacy. Such differences might be due to geographical differences or ODL education tier to which the learners were studying. Generally, most female learners encountered constraints on ICT and digital applications.

The cumulative costs of tuition fees, travel to study centres, and procurement of textbooks and digital devices represent significant financial barriers for

adult learners, with women disproportionately affected due to limited control over household resources (Swai, 2010). Moreover, IAE centres in Morogoro lack essential learner support services such as childcare facilities, gender sensitive counselling, and targeted ICT training, which exacerbate the challenges female students face when engaging in ODL environments. Entrenched gender roles and community expectations significantly restrict women's educational opportunities in Tanzania. In many communities, women are primarily viewed as homemakers, a perception that discourages long-term investment in their education and often leads to social stigma when they seek to enroll in diploma programmes. Even when enrolled, household responsibilities frequently interfere with attendance, cause lateness, and contribute to poorer academic outcomes (Karisa & Mwikamba, 2024; Peter, 2017). These cultural pressures are particularly discouraging for women in male-dominated fields, further undermining their motivation and persistence in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. This study addresses the central research question: What are the key impediments female adult learners encounter in accessing diploma-level education through Open and Distance Learning at the Institute of Adult Education centres in Morogoro region, Tanzania? While existing literature acknowledges general barriers to ODL enrolment and participation (Atriza *et al.*, 2023; Pasque & Nicholson, 2023), few studies focus on the experiences of female adult learners pursuing diploma qualifications in Tanzania. For instance, Mbunda (2022) examined the benefits of ODL for female learners, and Mbega (2017) investigated the impact of cultural norms on female access.

Most studies outside Tanzania, and even within, such as those by Anasel and Swai (2023), Ariwijaya and Ningsih (2020), and Msuya and Temu (2019), concentrate primarily on university-level ODL. This highlights a gap in comprehensive, gender-specific research at the diploma level, particularly studies employing triangulated perspectives and theoretical frameworks. By exploring women lived experiences at two IAE ODL centres in Morogoro using a phenomenological qualitative design, this study aims to generate actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders to promote gender equity in distance education.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: liberal feminism and distance education theory. These frameworks offer a dual lens to examine gender-based inequities and the pedagogical dynamics that influence female learners' experiences within Open and Distance Learning (ODL) environments.

### ***Liberal Feminism Theory***

Liberal feminism advocates for the removal of legal and institutional barriers to gender equality, emphasising equal rights and opportunities for women and men within existing societal structures. Key proponents of this theory include Mary Wollstonecraft, whose seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) argued for women's right to education, and John Stuart Mill, co-author (with Harriet Taylor Mill) of *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which critiqued legal inequalities and called for the full civic participation of women. The core principle of liberal feminist theory is equality before the law and in social, economic, and educational institutions. This theory is relevant to this study because it highlights the right to education. It further indicates how personal, cultural, and institutional impediments violate women's entitlement to equal access and underscores the need for policy and practice reforms in ODL programmes.

### ***Distance Education Theory***

Distance education theory examines the unique learning features that happen when the teacher and learner are geographically separated. Foundational contributors to distance education theory include Otto Peters, who conceptualised education as an industrialised process; Holmberg (1986), who emphasized the importance of learner autonomy and empathetic communication; Keegan (1988), who identified structural, transactional, and didactic forms of independence; and Rumble (1986), who distinguished distance teaching from conventional classroom instruction. At its core, distance education theory promotes flexible, self-directed learning environments that empower learners to control their study's pace, location, and mode. The theory is relevant to this study because it illuminates how ODL's inherent flexibility can both enable and constrain female learners, depending on factors such as digital literacy, resource availability, and institutional support.

Combining liberal feminism with distance education theory allows this study to identify gendered barriers. Liberal feminism directs attention to how socio-cultural norms and institutional practices systematically disadvantage women. On the other hand, distance education theory clarifies the mechanisms through which ODL's flexibility may mitigate or exacerbate these barriers. Insights from both theories guide recommendations for gender-sensitive ODL practices such as targeted digital literacy training, equitable resource distribution, and inclusive support services that uphold women's right to education while leveraging ODL's strengths. This theoretical framework thus provides a robust foundation for analysing the lived experiences of female adult learners in Morogoro ODL centres and

proposing interventions that promote equitable, high-quality distance education.

### **Empirical Literature Review**

Globally, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a transformative approach to widening access to education, especially for marginalized populations such as female adult learners. Despite its potential to democratize learning, ODL remains fraught with challenges, particularly regarding accessibility, retention, and learner support for women. This section critically reviews empirical studies conducted across three contexts: developed countries, developing countries, and Tanzania. The reviewed studies shed light on key barriers female adult learners encounter in accessing education through ODL. The review starts with the studies in developed countries, followed by those from developing countries and lastly, the studies from Tanzania. Laterza *et al.* (2020) assessed the effects of internet access's temporal and spatial flexibility and household responsibilities on females' participation in digital distance learning. These scholars found that temporal and spatial flexibility was valued, but inconsistent internet access and household responsibilities hindered female participation, especially when they wanted to balance learning and caregiving roles. This implies that flexible scheduling alone is insufficient without reliable infrastructure and support networks. A study by Winfield, Hughes, and Huffman (2023) examined non-traditional adult learners in the post-COVID-19 context, focusing on the application of national standards for online teaching in human service education. The study was conducted in the United States with 150 non-traditional adult students (aged 25 and above) and employed a mixed-methods design. The findings revealed that situational barriers such as homeschooling duties and full-time work were amplified for women, reducing study time and increasing dropout risk. This implies that ODL programmes must integrate parental support services and adaptive course designs. Nonetheless, Balancing Act Research Group (2021) claims that peer support and mentor networks in persistence and emotional support play a crucial role in minimising feelings of isolation among female learners in ODL institutions. Their research contradicts the Balancing Act Research Group's findings in that it sought to establish the role of peer support and mentor networks as mediators of female participation in ODL. Their research assessed key barriers to female adult learners accessing education through ODL.

Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, and Xu's (2018) study offered an elaborate explanation of barriers and facilitators in online female adult learning using an exploratory research design. The researcher found that technology self-

efficacy and perceived academic integration predicted persistence, with female learners reporting lower digital confidence. The sentiments are further supported in Ahmed's (2020) study, which concurs with Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, and Xu (2018) that sufficient digital skills led to learning motivation and persistence, with participants citing a formal ICT training. Likewise, Bulugu and Nkebukwa's (2024) study on that technophobia and intermittent power supply were major barriers to female learners in ODL institutions in Tanzania. This implies that infrastructure upgrades and confidence-building workshops are critical.

Kumar and Singh (2018) studied "financial barriers to women's participation in open distance learning in India using a quantitative survey of 200 female adult learners enrolled in State Open University diploma programmes. The study revealed that tuition fees and travel costs were the top deterrents, and women often deprioritised education expenditures within household budgets. This is in line with Msuya and Temu's (2019) study on financial constraints and dropout rates among female ODL learners in Tanzania, where they found a significant correlation ( $r=-0.62$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) between financial hardship and course withdrawal. This implies the importance of micro-grant schemes and subsidised study materials in ODL institutions.

Time management has been found to be a challenge among female distance learners in Kenya (Ochieng *et al.*, 2019). Some female learners are constrained by domestic chores and childcare duties, which significantly reduce study hours for women compared to men. This implies that ODL providers should offer asynchronous modules and childcare support services. Likewise, cultural expectations that women prioritise household duties over study have contributed to irregular participation in diploma ODL programmes in Morogoro (Mbega, 2017). A study on barriers to women's participation in diploma Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes in Morogoro by Mbega (2017) employed qualitative interviews with 20 female learners. The study found that cultural expectations, particularly prioritising household duties over education, contributed to irregular participation in ODL. The findings suggest that community sensitisation campaigns are essential for challenging and shifting entrenched gender norms that hinder women's consistent engagement in diploma-level studies across diverse contexts, common impediments for female adult learners in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) include time management challenges, limited digital literacy, financial constraints, cultural norms, and inadequate institutional support. These recurring barriers highlight the need for holistic and gender-responsive interventions to improve access, retention, and success for women pursuing diploma-level education through distance learning.

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, emphasising understanding the meanings that participants assign to their lived experiences and social realities (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Specifically, a phenomenological research design was employed to explore and describe the lived experiences of individuals concerning a specific phenomenon, in this case, the impediments encountered by female adult learners in accessing education through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) (Creswell, 2014).

### *Study Area and Participants*

The study was conducted in Morogoro region, which was selected due to its notably low enrolment rate of female learners in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) centres compared to their male counterparts. For instance, during the 2016/2017 and 2017/2018 academic years, only 50 out of 130 diploma programme students (38.5%) were female, while 80 (61.5%) were male (IAE, 2018). This gender disparity is particularly concerning given the fact that Morogoro hosts multiple ODL centres under the Institute of Adult Education (IAE). A total of 32 participants were purposively selected for the study, comprising 20 female learners, 10 ODL facilitators, one District Adult Education Officer, and one IAE Regional Resident Tutor.

**Table 1**  
*Categories and Sample Sizes of Participants*

Category of Respondent	Centre A	Centre B	Sample Size
Female learners	12	8	20
Facilitators	6	4	10
District Adult Education Officer	-	-	1
IAE Regional Resident Tutor	-	-	1
<b>Total</b>			<b>32</b>

**Source:** Field Data (2024).

### *Sampling Techniques*

Participants and ODL centres were purposively selected, aligning with Padilla-Diaz (2015), who states that purposive sampling is central to phenomenological studies. This method enabled the researchers to engage information-rich participants who were well-versed in ODL-related experiences (Magwa & Magwa, 2015). The two selected centres, Centre A and Centre B, were the only institutions offering ODL programmes under IAE in the region. Female learners were selected using stratified purposive sampling, ensuring homogeneity within specific subgroups (Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011). Facilitators were also purposively selected with assistance from the resident tutor, based on their availability and close engagement with

female learners (Singh & Masuku, 2014). The District Adult Education Officer and Regional Resident Tutor were purposively chosen due to their institutional roles and expertise in adult education.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

The primary method for data collection was semi-structured interviews administered to the facilitators, District Adult Education Officer, and Regional Resident Tutor. This allowed flexibility to probe emerging themes (Creswell, 2013). Responses were recorded using voice recorders and field notebooks. Another method was Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), which were conducted with female learners 10 from Centre A and 10 from Centre B, 10 female learners from Centre A and 10 from Centre B, and 10 facilitators. FGDs enabled interactive exploration of perceptions about ODL accessibility and impediments.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The analysis followed the steps by Braun and Clarke (2006) which include familiarization with the data through repeated listening of audio recordings and review of field notes; manual transcription of verbal data; generation of initial codes using colored pens and highlighters; grouping of codes into potential themes and sub-themes. Then the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and alignment with research objectives. To ensure trustworthiness, the study addressed the following criteria: To achieve credibility, we prolonged engagement (one month of fieldwork) to build rapport and gain contextual understanding. To ensure transferability, we provided a thick description of the research setting, methodology, and processes to allow contextual generalisation (Anney, 2014; Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Audit trail, code-recode strategy, and stepwise replication were done to ensure the dependability of the data. Confirmability was ensured through reflexivity, triangulation of data sources (semi-structured interviews and FGDs), and objective interpretation of participants' views. On the other hand, ethical considerations were upheld. Research clearance was obtained from the Open University of Tanzania, with research permits granted by relevant regional and district authorities. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were fully briefed and voluntarily agreed to participate. Pseudonyms ensured anonymity, referring to participants by roles rather than names. Interviews and focus group discussions were scheduled in advance to accommodate participants' convenience.



## **Results and Discussion**

This section presents and discusses the study's findings in alignment with the research question, which aimed to unfold the key impediments encountered by female adult learners in accessing diploma-level education through Open and Distance Learning in Tanzania. The findings revealed that female learners enrolled in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes faced several individual-level challenges. These included managing multiple responsibilities, low socio-economic status that limited their ability to afford tuition, lack of self-confidence, pregnancy-related interruptions, limited time for self-study at home, mistrust from spouses, and, in some cases, outright denial of support for their educational advancement. Furthermore, female learners were often burdened with multiple responsibilities arising from traditional gender roles, which negatively affected their academic performance. One resident tutor observed that:

I think female learners are challenged by family responsibilities such as cooking, formal employment, and self-employment duties aimed at contributing to the family income. This is unlike male learners who, although employed, are less involved in domestic chores (Interview with the resident tutor).

Similarly, another facilitator added:

Women, especially those who are married, face many household chores. These responsibilities can lead to missing classes, exams, or even postponing studies. For example, a mother cannot attend class if her child is unwell (FGD with facilitators).

Female learners echoed similar sentiments. A participant from Centre A said:

As a woman, I must complete all family duties before I can study. These chores exhaust me, affecting both my college and home study time. The family duties such as domestic chores deprive my private studies time at home (FGD with the female ODL learners, center A).

Another from Centre B elaborated:

I must attend various social and family responsibilities, including funerals and weddings, whether my husband is present or away. Coupled with my job and studies, this overwhelms me mentally thus failing to concentrate fully with my studies (FGD with the female ODL learners, Centre B).

These interview narratives underscore the significant impact of gendered domestic and social responsibilities on female learners' ability to fully engage in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. The participants' experiences reveal how deeply entrenched cultural expectations around women's roles as caregivers, homemakers, and participants in social obligations interfere with their academic commitments. These obligations reduce the time available for study and contribute to mental exhaustion and

decreased academic focus. These findings are consistent with Ariwijaya and NingSih (2020), who noted that the educational progress of married female students often suffers due to domestic roles. However, it is important to acknowledge variability among learners; some benefit from domestic help or live in nuclear rather than extended families. On the other hand, pregnancy emerged as a significant constraint, often interfering with academic schedules.

One learner shared:

Pregnancy is another obstacle impeding studies. I was pregnant in my first year and had to postpone exams due to health issues. I was given a bed rest and so could not proceed with studies until when I resumed in the next year (FGD with the female ODL learners, Centre B).

This challenge, though substantial, varied depending on age and life circumstances, with older women or those not currently pregnant experiencing fewer disruptions. While pregnancy may not be regarded as a disease, yet it takes a toll on women's time.

Similarly, husbands' lack of support driven by jealousy, mistrust, or cultural beliefs also hindered female learners within the ODL mode. One learner noted:

My husband thought our children should be prioritised in education spending. He often insisted that I focus solely on family duties rather than spending family resources, which could be used by children. Though I keep on studying, he is always furious whenever I go back home late due to taking part in group discussions. It seems he is jealous and not trusting me (FGD with the female ODL learners, Centre A).

This narrative highlight how patriarchal attitudes and a lack of spousal support can undermine women's participation in ODL. It underscores the need for community and household-level sensitisation to promote shared support for women's education. These findings align with research by Furnborough (2012), Peter (2017), Abimbola *et al.* (2015), and others, who emphasised that female adult learners struggle to balance professional, domestic, and academic responsibilities. Gudhlanga *et al.* (2012) and Ncube & Mudau (2014) also reported that unsupportive spouses often restricted women's participation in educational activities like group discussions. Despite this, not all participants experienced such challenges. Some did not cite jealousy or mistrust from their partners as barriers, indicating variability in experiences.

During the interview, financial hardship was a recurring challenge. Many female learners mentioned that they lacked access to government loans and had to self-finance their studies. A resident tutor stated:

Even with such affordable tuition fees, many learners struggle to pay on time because they depend on their or their husbands' salaries. They are thus private sponsored who are also parents requiring to take care their children's education (Interview with resident tutor).

A facilitator added:

Low income is a common issue. Most learners are primary school teachers whose salaries must support their entire households. It is thus hard for them to foot college fees at the same time take care of their families (FGD with a facilitator, Centre A).

A learner further explained:

My salary supports both my family and tuition fees. My husband handles the children's fees, but I still face difficulties affording everything on my studies. If he could have supported me, I could fully concentrate with studies (FGD with the female ODL learners, Centre B).

These interview narratives illustrate how financial dependency and limited household income constrain women's ability to fund their education. Even with affordable tuition, competing responsibilities such as supporting families and children's education—create financial strain. This underscores the need for targeted financial support, such as scholarships or fee waivers, specifically designed for female adult learners balancing education and family obligations. These findings corroborate Chawinga and Zozie (2016), who noted similar challenges at Mzuni. They are also akin to those by Njihia *et al.* (2016) who identified financial limitations as a critical barrier in e-learning. Galusha (2012) also noted that ODL learners, often adults with multiple obligations, lack the financial resources to sustain their education.

Again, the experience varied in which some learners had economically stable spouses who could support their studies. However, lack of confidence emerged as a notable issue. A District Adult Education Officer remarked:

Some women underestimate their academic potential. Empowerment is necessary to help them realize that they are as capable as men. Others could pay tuition fees timely but less hardworking though intelligent. I am sure If they worked hard, they could perform wonders in their examinations (Interview with District Adult Education).

With the same sentiments, a facilitator commented:

Low confidence is prevalent to some of our learners. Often, only males make presentations of their assignments during class sessions. Female learners seem to feel shy and are less confident to make presentations in front of the class (Interview with a Facilitator in center B).

Learners confirmed this view. One of the study participants noted:

I sometimes feel shy speaking in front of the class, especially speaking in English language. I normally stay quiet during group discussions as I believe others, particularly men, are more articulate than I (FGD with the female ODL learners, Centre A).

These sentiments reflect entrenched gender norms that associate academic confidence with male dominance. As Ray (2019) observed, low confidence in female learners' spans class, social, and cultural boundaries. Enhancing learner support is crucial to boosting self-efficacy in ODL contexts. Nevertheless, not all learners lacked confidence; some demonstrated strong self-assurance, suggesting this challenge is not universal.

### **Implications of the Findings to Liberal Feminism and Distance Education**

Liberal feminism is grounded in the principle that women should enjoy the same legal rights, access to opportunities, and institutional freedoms as men. It advocates for the removal of systemic barriers that hinder women's full participation in public life, including education, employment, and political engagement. Within the framework of liberal feminism, education is seen as a fundamental pathway to individual autonomy, social mobility, and empowerment. These values are particularly salient in the context of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), given that distance education is often positioned as a flexible and inclusive model capable of widening access for marginalised groups, including women. However, the findings of this study underscore several persistent gendered constraints that limit the participation and success of female learners in ODL, thereby challenging the egalitarian potential of this educational mode.

#### *Gender Roles and Domestic Responsibilities*

The findings reveal that entrenched social expectations surrounding women's roles as primary caregivers continue to hinder their educational engagement, even in flexible learning environments such as ODL. Liberal feminism critiques the naturalisation of caregiving and domestic work as inherently female responsibilities and argues for their redistribution within households and society. The study highlights how the so-called "flexible" learning environments fail to accommodate women's disproportionate time and emotional burdens. From a liberal feminist perspective, this implies the need for institutional interventions such as assignment extensions, childcare support, and gender-sensitive curriculum designs that explicitly acknowledge and address these disparities.

### *Pregnancy and Reproductive Roles*

Pregnancy and related reproductive responsibilities were reported as factors that negatively affect women's academic continuity and progress. Liberal feminism asserts that reproductive roles should not be grounds for educational exclusion or marginalization. Rather, institutions must proactively accommodate such roles through policies that include maternity leave, flexible attendance and participation requirements, and exam deferrals. Failure to do so constitutes indirect discrimination, further entrenching educational inequities.

### *Patriarchal Control: Husbands' Jealousy and Mistrust*

Another critical finding relates to the influence of spousal attitudes, particularly jealousy and mistrust, which often manifest as restrictions on women's mobility, time, and autonomy in making educational decisions. From a liberal feminist perspective, such patriarchal controls are viewed as violations of women's autonomy and fundamental human rights. These dynamics underscore the importance of legal protections and public awareness initiatives aimed at transforming harmful gender norms and promoting women's agency in personal development.

### *Economic Dependency and Financial Constraints*

Economic dependency emerged as a significant barrier for female ODL learners. Many participants reported relying on spousal income or minimal personal earnings, which limited their ability to afford educational expenses such as tuition, data, and learning materials. From a liberal feminist perspective, equal economic access and financial independence are essential prerequisites for genuine educational choice and meaningful participation. Addressing these constraints necessitates the provision of scholarships, subsidized internet access, and targeted financial support mechanisms for women in distance education.

### *Low Confidence and Internalized Inferiority*

The prevalence of low self-confidence among female learners reflects broader social conditioning that discourages assertiveness in women and reinforces male dominance in intellectual and academic spaces. Liberal feminism interprets this phenomenon as a product of unequal socialisation processes and calls for systemic empowerment strategies. These may include leadership development programmes, mentorship opportunities, and learning environments that actively encourage female participation and voice.

### *Digital Literacy and Technological Access*

Limited computer skills and inadequate access to digital tools were cited as impediments to successful ODL engagement. Given the increasing centrality

of technology in educational delivery, liberal feminism emphasises the right to digital inclusion as a core component of educational equity. Institutions must provide women with equal opportunities to develop technological competencies through accessible training programmes and infrastructure support.

### **Synthesis: Distance Education, Equity, and Liberal Feminist Thought**

Although ODL is widely regarded as a mechanism for democratizing education, the findings of this study suggest that structural gender inequalities persist and, in many cases, are replicated within virtual learning environments. From a liberal feminist standpoint, it is not sufficient to guarantee formal access to education without addressing the deeper socio-cultural and institutional constraints that disproportionately affect women. Thus, the overarching implication is that distance education cannot fulfill its transformative promise unless restructured through a gender-sensitive lens. Equity in distance education requires open access and the active dismantling of social, economic, and technological barriers that inhibit female learners' full and meaningful participation. Liberal feminism offers a critical framework for reimagining ODL in ways that advance both gender justice and educational inclusion.

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) remains a viable pathway for enabling female learners to pursue education while balancing family and work responsibilities. However, the persistent bottlenecks identified in this study, ranging from cultural expectations to economic and technological barriers, must be strategically addressed to enhance access and success for women in ODL programmes. Grounded in the principles of liberal feminism, which advocate for equal access to opportunities and institutional reforms to dismantle systemic discrimination, this study proposes several actionable recommendations. ODL institutions should adopt and implement gender-responsive policies that directly address the challenges faced by female learners, such as flexible learning schedules, maternal leave provisions, and academic accommodations for pregnant and parenting students. Governments and educational institutions should introduce targeted scholarships, fee waivers, and grant programmes to reduce financial barriers, particularly for single mothers and learners from low-income backgrounds. Furthermore, given the centrality of ICT in ODL, institutions should provide compulsory digital literacy training for female learners and expand access to mobile-compatible platforms and offline resources for students in remote or underserved areas.

Several areas merit continued scholarly investigation to inform effective policy and practice further. Future research should explore the long-term educational trajectories of women in ODL programmes to identify key turning points, coping mechanisms, and dropout factors across different sociocultural contexts. Empirical studies assessing the effectiveness of gender-sensitive interventions, such as mentorship programmes, digital skills training, and flexible learning models, on women's academic achievement in ODL are essential. Additionally, comparative research across diverse institutions and cultural environments could yield valuable insights into best practices, innovations, and persistent challenges in promoting gender equity in distance education.

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