

Distance Education And Women Empowerment: The Women Who Dared At Distance Learning Institute

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ABSTRACT

In the past, the African female child had always been denied formal education due to various cultural and social prejudices. Distance education has been employed by numerous women, who had earlier thus been deprived, to bridge the educational gap between males and females in the country.

These are mature females, of which the majority (54%) are within the age range of 30-39 years. Most are employed, married (89%) and with children (89%). The majority (60%) study between 10 and 15 hours per week. Their reasons for studying through Distance Education vary and include attainment of higher education (80%), improved knowledge (86%), enhanced employment opportunities (47%), upgrading/promotion at work (90%), and improved economic power (21%) and social status (81%); a few (10%) have their sights set on the political terrain.

Keywords: distance learning; open and distance learning; women empowerment; face-to-face teaching; residential period

INTRODUCTION

Historical Background Of Education In Nigeria

Formal education in Nigeria dates back to 1842 when Ferguson succeeded in persuading local Yoruba chiefs to allow missionaries from Sierra Leone to teach their sons. Between 1842 and 1843, three missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) arrived on the Nigerian soil. Two years later (1845), Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther and his wife built two separate schools—one for boys, one for girls. With this development, other missionaries started arriving in Nigeria with the Reverend Hope Waddell in 1846. In 1853, the first non-British Christian Missionary entered Nigeria to also establish missionary schools (Aderinoye, 2006).

However, most of the schools were mainly for boys, while the few girls' schools were limited to teaching the girl-child up to the elementary school, with emphasis on vocational/domestic science. Besides this, most parents preferred to send their male offsprings to school at the expense and negligence of the girl-child. The thinking was that the male-child propagates the family name, while the female-child ceases to be recognized with the family name after her marriage (Ativie, 1997).

Other social and cultural prejudices include the beliefs that:

- women's place is in the kitchen;
- they are of low intelligence compared to men; and for this reason, any investment on them is a waste;
- they cannot bring fame and honour to their father's name once they marry; only the male child who carries forth the family name can bring such fame;
- they cannot support their parents financially after marriage;
- their education may be hampered by early pregnancy due to pre-marital sex relationship.

The result of these prejudices was that girls were denied access to basic education in preference to boys (Bamisaye, 2008). In some parts of the country like in the Eastern states, girls are given out in early marriage; and especially in Northern Nigeria, because of religious beliefs, girls are not allowed access to education (Yinusa, 1999). This is so because of the small number of female teachers, and parents are not happy to have their female children taught by male teachers. Today, in the northern part of Nigeria, girls are begged and paid to go to school, while various legislations are enacted to discourage parents from withdrawing their female children from school for early marriages (Bamisaye, 2008).

Those women from Eastern Nigeria who were denied access to education as a result of early marriages, and those from the West who could not obtain tertiary education for financial constraints, are now mostly beneficiaries of distance education. This positive development stems from the positive attitude of the government, e.g. through the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) and non-governmental organisations' efforts, e.g. Women in Policy (WIP), towards educating women (Yinusa, 1999).

The enrolment in distance education has helped women to a greater extent in achieving against so many odds, educational, social and political prominence (Obiona, 1993; Obodeh, 1997). It has also led to new skills, training, enhanced employment opportunities, improved working conditions, outspokenness on public affairs, increased involvement in politics, etc. Improved working conditions and improved promotional chances have in turn increased women's earning power and work options; hence distance education has granted economic independence and empowerment to women.

Empowerment simply means to enhance or give someone more control over his or her own life or situation. Power is not necessarily a function of status, gender, strength, size, intelligence or maturity. Rather, power is the ability to control few resources available to a family, communities or even a nation by whatever means. Power in a family or social relationship, for example, is based upon the answer to the following questions:

- Who does what?
- Who decides who does what? And
- Who decides the rules for determining (a) and (b)?

Power rests in the hands of the person in a system who individually or in concert with others controls the resources available to the members of the system (Yinusa, 1999).

This study was limited only to women studying for a university degree through the Distance Learning Institute (DLI) of the University of Lagos. This is because DLI is more broad-based than the other Sandwich, correspondence or distance learning institutions in Nigeria, which are somewhat regional or subregional (localized) in structure and outreach.

This study explored the profile of DLI female students, their reasons for studying through distance learning, their goals and aspirations and the benefits they have derived or hope to derive from their endeavours.

METHODOLOGY

Well-designed questionnaires were administered randomly to a total number of four hundred (400) DLI students. Two hundred questionnaires were distributed among female Business Administration and Accounting students while the remaining two hundred (200) were distributed among Science-Education female students in Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics cohorts.

The respondents were questioned on individual socio-economic and demographic characteristics and the effect of their studies on the family and social lives. It was prepared in a form that they gave full information about their life profiles, husbands, children and family parameters for studying, previous education, social life as well as child-bearing before and during their studies. The number of hours they allot to their studies per week was inclusive.

The population of female students of DLI is in eight (8) study centres distributed all over the country. The Lagos Study Centre has the highest number of both male and female students. The survey was done during the Residential programme of 6-week intensive lectures and examinations when all the students congregate at the University of Lagos.

Three hundred and fifty respondents filled the questionnaires as requested; twenty-seven questionnaires filled unsatisfactorily were discarded while twenty-three respondents did not return their forms.

The data collected from the questionnaires was analysed descriptively using tables, which show the frequencies and percentages of each response. The responses were counted and the percentages determined.

RESULTS

One hundred percent of the respondents are females. Questions relating to a particular problem are grouped together and analyzed descriptively.

Table 1: Distribution Of Respondents By Age

Age of respondents	Frequency	Percentage
20-29	21	6.0
30-39	189	54.0
40-49	125	35.7
50-59	15	4.3
Total	350	100.0

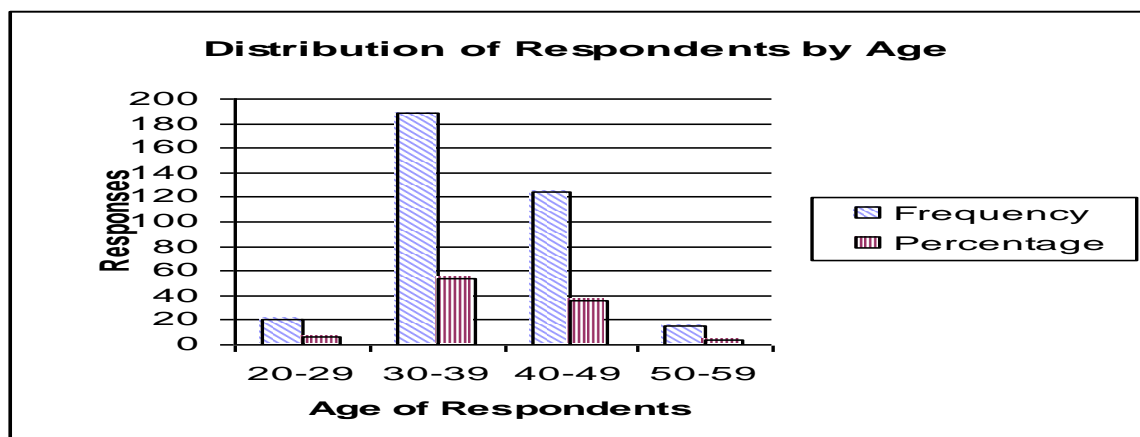


Table 1 shows that the majority of female students studying at a distance at DLI are between 30 and 39 years of age as 54% of the respondents fall into this age range. The next large age group is 40-49 years. This shows that the DLI programmes of study are for mature students.

Table 2: Distribution Of Respondents By Occupation

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Teaching	166	47.4
Civil Servants	24	6.9
Private/company	140	40.0
Housewives (full-time)	9	2.6
Self-employed	11	3.1
Total	350	100.0

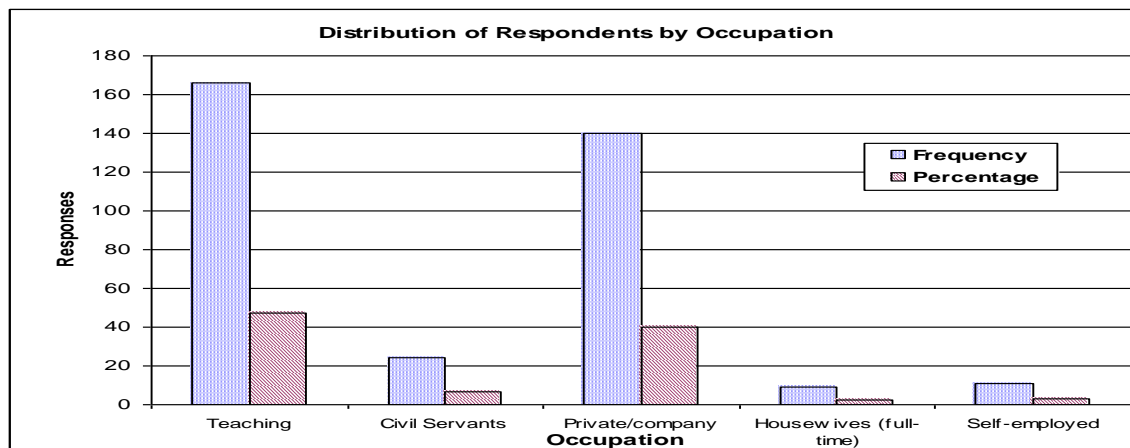
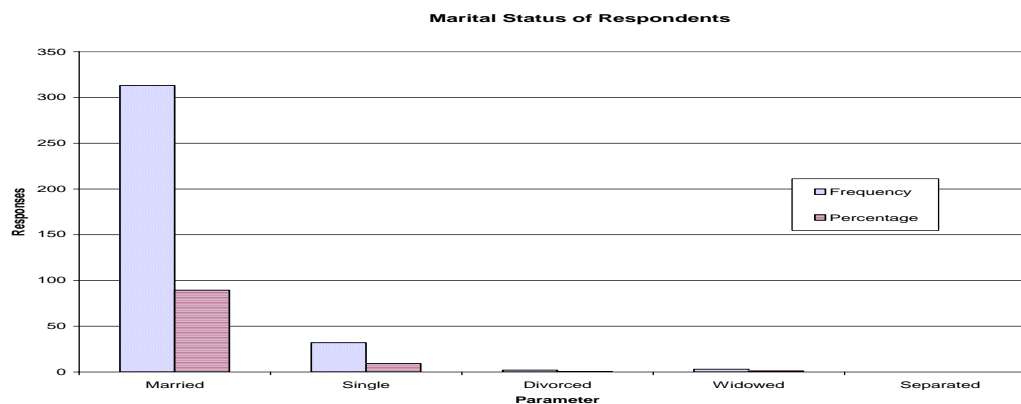


Table 2 shows that 47.4% of the respondents are teachers, 85% of whom are in the Science-Education Programme. Forty percent of the respondents work in the private/company sector, while 6.9% are civil servants. Two point six per cent (2.6%) of them are full-time housewives. Nonetheless, all respondents combine housewife duties with their studies and employment.

Table 3: Marital Status Of Respondents

Parameter	Frequency	Percentage
Married	313	89.4
Single	32	9.1
Divorced	2	0.6
Widowed	3	0.9
Separated	-	-
Total	350	100.0



From Table 3, it is quite clear that the majority of the female students (89%) are married. Thus they have family cares, work and other social duties competing with their time for studies.

Table 4: Distribution Of Respondents By Length Of Marriage

Length of Marriage	Frequency	Percentage
0 – 20 years	255	81.5
20 – 25 years	47	15.0
25 – 30 years	11	3.5
30 – 35 years	-	-
Total	313	100.0

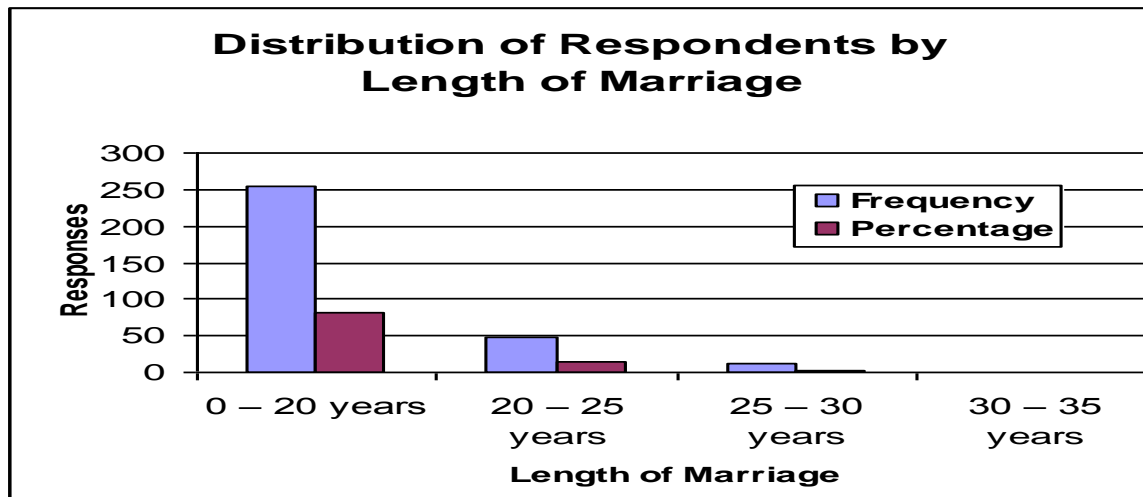


Table 4 shows that 81.5 percent of the respondents have been married for less than 20 years, while 15 percent have been married between 20 and 25 years. Only 3.5 percent of the respondents have been married for as long as 25 – 30 years.

Table 5: Distribution Of Respondents By Marriage Before Starting With Distance Education

Parameter	Frequency	Percentage
Yes (married before DE)	301	96.2
No (not married before DE)	12	3.8
Total	313	100.0

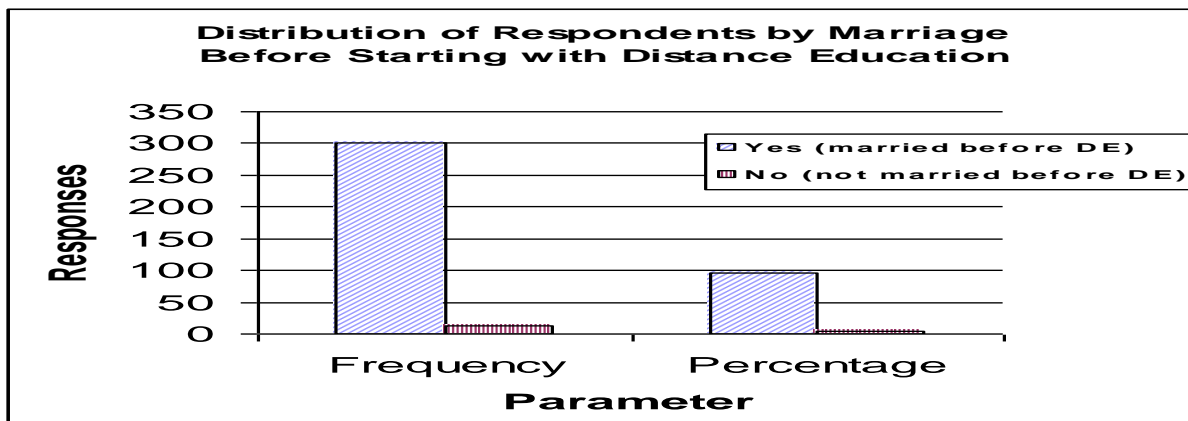
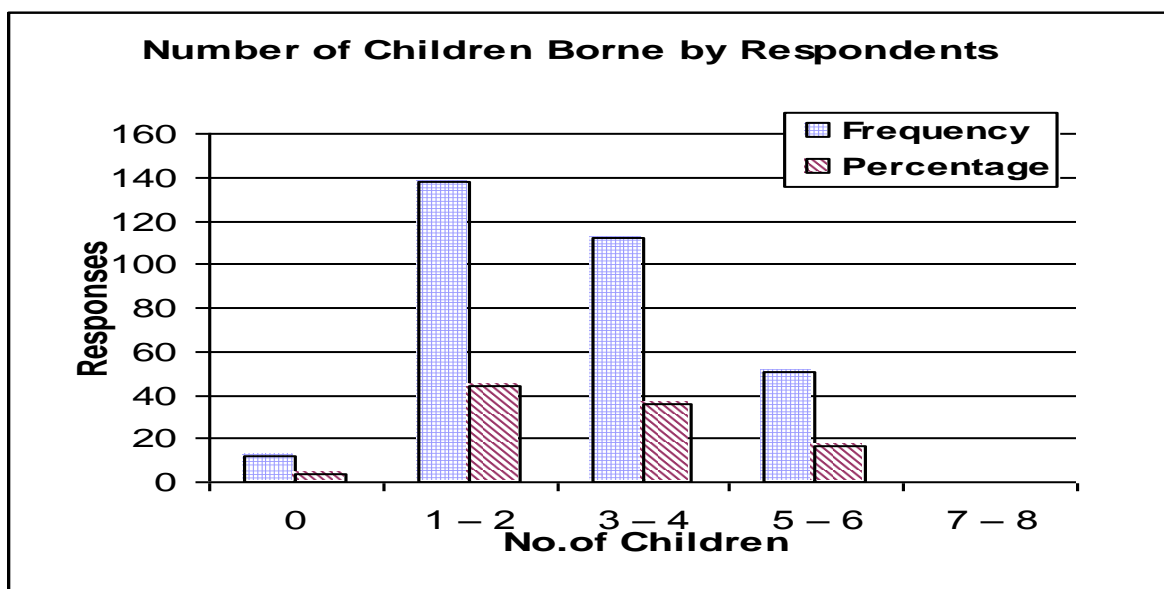


Table 5 reveals that 96.2 percent of the female students were already married before starting their DLI study programme. Three point eight percent were not married at the time of starting the distance education studies, but a few do get married along the line, even to DLI students.

Table 6: Number Of Children Borne By Respondents

Number of Children	Frequency	Percentage
0	12	3.8
1 – 2	138	44.1
3 – 4	112	35.8
5 – 6	51	16.3
7 – 8	-	-
Total	313	100.0



From Table 6, it can be seen that 44.1 percent of the respondents have one (1) or two (2) children, 35.8 percent have either three (3) or four (4); while 16.3 percent have 5 or 6 children. Only 3.8 per cent do not have any children; it is assumed that these are newly married or still earnestly praying for the fruit of the womb.

Table 7: Years Of Respondent's Working Experience

Years of Working Experience	Frequency	Percentage
0 – 5	23	6.7
6 – 10	101	29.3
11 – 15	93	27.0
16 – 20	91	26.4
21 – 25	32	9.2
25 and above	5	1.4
Total	345	100.0

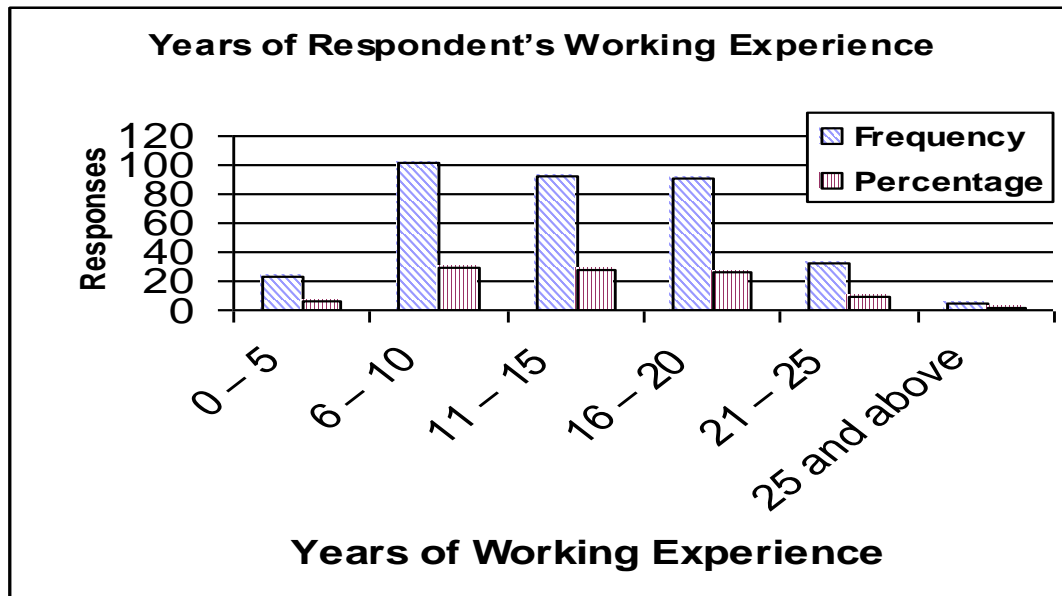


Table 7 shows that 29.3% of the respondents have 6-10 years of working experience, 27% have 11-15 years working experience, while 26.4% have 16-20 years of working experience, 6.7% have a maximum of five years working experience while 9.2% have worked for 21-25 years. Only 1.4% of the respondents have worked for more than 25 years.

Table 8: Study Time Per Week

Study Hour	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 10	100	28.6
10 – 15	213	60.8
16 – 20	31	8.9
21 – 25	5	1.4
26 – 30	1	0.3
More than 30	-	-
Total	350	100.0

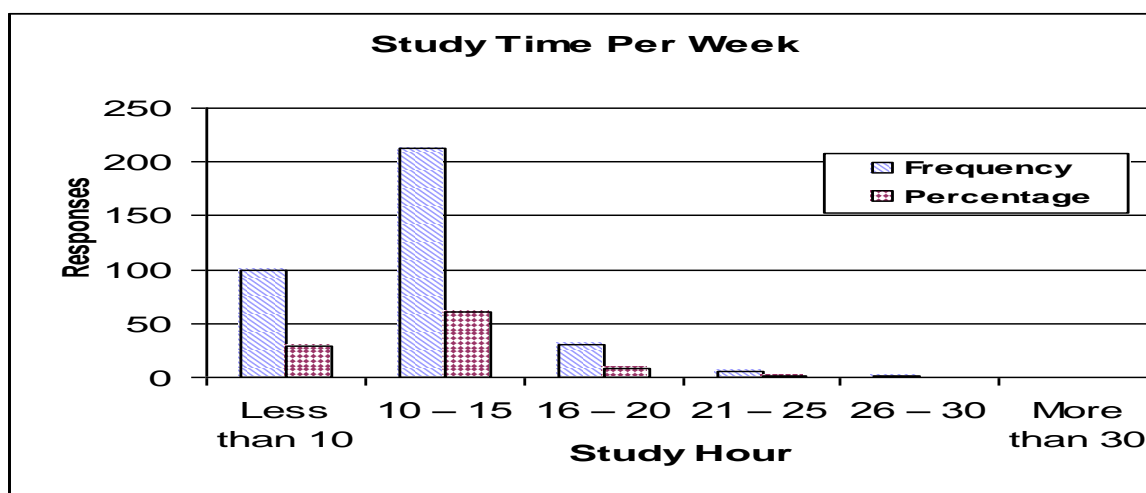


Table 8 shows the majority of the respondents (60.8%) study between 10 and 15 hours per week; 28.6% study for less than ten hours per week, while only one student (i.e. 0.3%) expends between 26 to 30 hours per week to study.

Table 9: Reasons For Studying Through Distance Education

Parameter	Frequency	Percentage
Higher educational attainment	280	80.0
Economic power	73	20.9
Politics	36	10.3
Enhanced employment opportunity	164	46.8
Improved upgrading/promotion	315	90.0
Improved knowledge	305	86.0
Status (social)	283	80.9

(Respondents were asked to choose as many options as applicable to them).

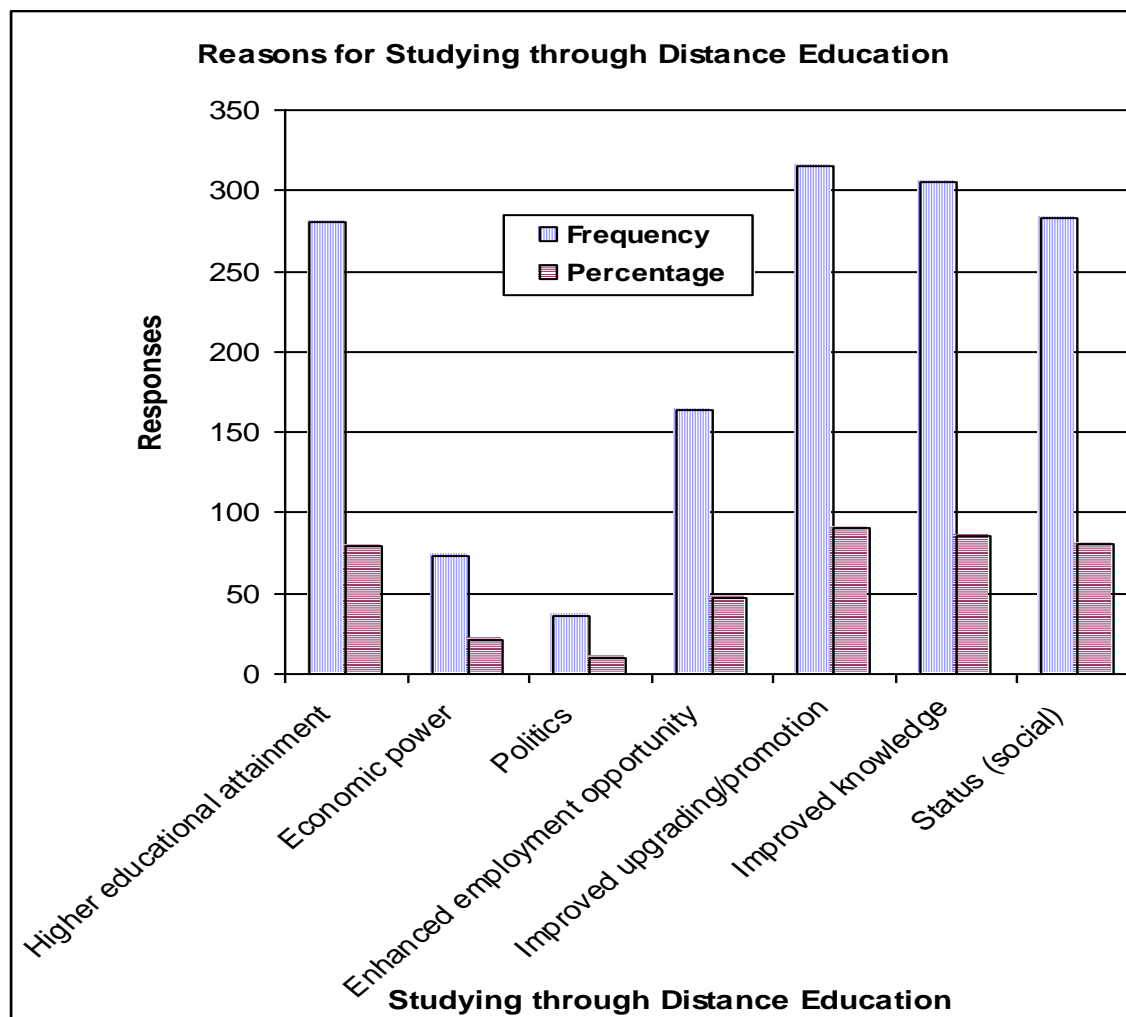


Table 9 shows enhancement of promotion at work induced 90% of the respondents to study for a degree through distance studies. Eighty six percent are driven by the thirst for knowledge. Attainment of higher

educational (80%) and social status (80.9%) are also driving forces. Forty six point eight percent of the respondents would want to change jobs, while 10.3% are gearing for politics. Twenty point nine percent were influenced by the need for improved economic power.

Table 10: Distribution Of Respondents' Husbands By Educational Levels And Relevant Occupations

Educational Level	Frequency	Percentage	Relevant Level/ Occupation	Percentage
SSCE/GCE	4	1.1	Business	60
OND	30	8.6	Business	70
HND	51	14.6	Civil Servant	45
NCE	76	21.7	Business	40
B.A/B.Sc	141	40.3	Civil Servant	65
M.A/M.Sc	36	10.3	Business	35
Ph.D	1	0.3	Lecturer	100
No Response	11	3.1	-	
Total	350	100.0		

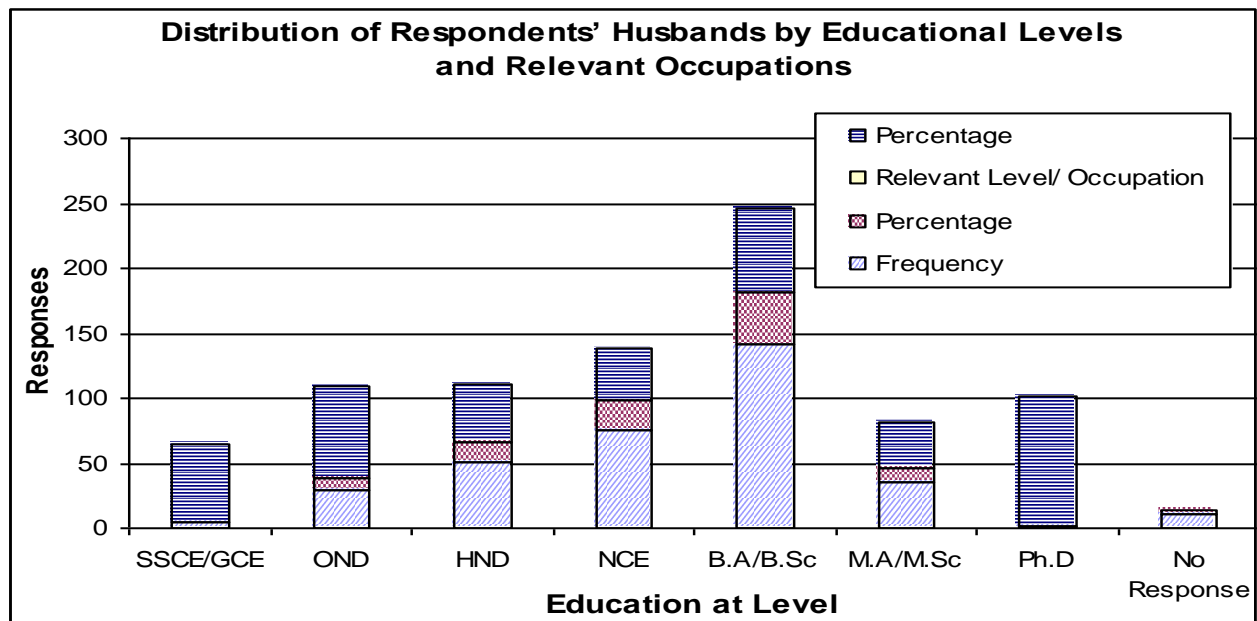


Table 10 shows that most of the respondents' husbands were educated through various levels. Forty point three percent of the husbands have a university first degree, while 10.3% have a Master's degree and 0.3% has a Ph.D. Twenty one point seven percent of the respondents' husbands have an NCE, 8.6% have OND and 14.6% are holders of HND.

The table also shows that 60% of respondents' husbands with school certificate, 70% of those with OND, 40% of NCE holders and 35% who have Masters degrees are businessmen. Hence, the prevailing occupation for the husbands is business. 45% of HND graduates and 65% of husbands with university first degrees are civil servants. Only one (1) respondent's husband is in the academics.

DISCUSSION

The adult female literacy rate of less than 50% in Africa is the lowest in the world. In 1990, the adult literacy rate of males was 61% while that of females was 39% in the sub-Saharan Africa (Africa Platform for

Action, 1994). Statistics show that in the Nigerian educational sector, the gross enrolment ratios for the girl-child are still very low, at 18 per cent, while the dropout rate stands at 47.8 per cent as at 1992. There is also a clear trend of low enrolment of girls in the secondary and tertiary levels of education, most especially in Science, Technology and Mathematics (Africa Platform for Action, 1994). This high level of illiteracy among women is a serious impediment to national development as women make up more than 50% of the population.

The neglect of women's education has severely militated against rational national development. In spite of the spectacular expansion of educational facilities at all levels since independence, women have continued to be discriminated against for various socio-economic reasons (Umar, 2000).

The woman, assuming all the cultural and economic roles imposed on her by the society, wants and needs to be educated. However, a woman faces a major hurdle in her quest for education: she has neither the time nor resources to attend school on a full-time basis. This is where Distance Education (DE) now comes in very handy. It comes to the rescue of the woman more than any one else. After all, distance education involves the application of the multimedia to supplement or reinforce the print media, thus making education more accessible to a much wider audience.

Education in its entire ramification has gone a long way in bringing about civilization. It is regarded as a dynamic instrument of change. Education has helped to pull individuals out of the pit of ignorance (Adekanola, 1998; Ekunbunor, 1997 and Umar, 2000). Distance Education bridges gender disparity in education (Isyaku, 2000) and empowers women in nation building (Adekanola, 1998; Fasusi, 1996; Nwukora, 1993; Oshodi, 1996 and Umar, 2000).

The many advantages of educating women especially through Distance Education, include the facts that:

- Educated women bear fewer children;
- Education of women is panacea to maternal and infant mortality;
- Educated women are more responsive to programmes of enlightenment, especially health programmes (Bamisaye, 2008; Osokoya, 2008);
- Educated women take more active role in public life (politics) (Malcow, 2006);
- Educated women are more conscious of their rights and are able to fight for them;
- Education enhances better employment and promotion for women;
- Distance education empowers women.

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