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## Women in Purdah: The Challenges of Open and Distance Education in Nigeria

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### **Abstract:**

*In Nigeria, purdah exists as a viable institution among the Muslims population as we have in other parts of the world. As a consequence of purdah system, a woman is allowed to see only her biological sons, brothers, uncle and husband, or any other relation in position of trust. She cannot even go to mosque to pray, and must wear veil if she must go outside the house. This practice is more popular among the Northern Nigerian, because they are predominantly Muslim.*

*Literarily, purdah means curtain or veil and refers to various modes of shielding women from other sight. It can also refer to the veiling or covering of the entire body. According to (Naim 2004), purdah is a practice of the seclusion of women inside their homes. In this sense, seclusion means restrictions on women's movement outside the home.*

*However, part II of the Nigerian Constitution guarantee education for all citizens without barrier coupled with international instrument which Nigeria are signatory to and has adopted. The UNESCO declaration Education for All (EFA) by the year 2015.*

*Also going by the result of 2005 population census conducted in Nigeria indicating more women in the Northern part of Nigeria than other parts, this translate that we are having more married women in the North than other parts, hence possibility of having an army of uneducated women in purdah in the Northern part of Nigeria lacking access to functional education which is a violation of many of both the international treaties (UNESCO, African Charter on Human and People Rights), and part II of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution.*

*This paper will examine the government policies, legislations and innovative strategies of the National Open Universities of Nigeria to bring education to the door step of all. Without prejudice to their culture or religion.*

**Keywords:** Purdah, Women, Education, Open and Distance Education, Programmes

### **1. Introduction**

Education of people in purdah has suffered various forms of neglect in Nigeria in the past by various governments. But now that National Open University (NOUN) has been established, it is the only institution among other institutions that has the capacity to reach the unreached such as those in the purdah. NOUN is an institution that transcends all barriers. Conceptual framework of NOUN as contained in the blueprint is to make education available and accessible to citizens irrespective of their age, sex, tribe, religion etc. While various acts and government policies are targeted towards solving problems with specific education sector. For example, NOUN has the course materials written in Braille, this is meant to provide education to those who are physically challenged by sight. i.e. the blind. NOUN also provides education for inmates.

At a point in Nigeria, a government policy was directed at solving the educational needs of the Nomads through Nomadic education, and it is still in operation till today. But regrettably, women in purdah except in very societies in the southern part of Nigeria have access to formal education and employment. Their educational status/qualification remained what it was before they became purdah, no more opportunity for them to mix and interact with the conventional educational system.

### **2. Women in Purdah**

Literarily, purdah means 'curtain' or 'veil' and refers to various modes of shielding of women from others sight, or covering the entire body. It can also be referred to the veiling or covering of the entire body, (Naim 2004), defined purdah as a practice of the seclusion of women inside their homes. In this case, seclusion means restrictions on women's movement outside the home. Thus, a woman in purdah is in seclusion within the home. In Women and Law project (1999), 24 years old unmarried Sudanese woman said;

*Seclusion seems to her that women are created to be prisoners.  
First by always staying at the back of the houses to serve the daiwan.  
Second by seeking permission from brothers to go out and third by  
Having everybody including your young brothers telling you  
what you should and what you should not wear...pp. 13*

The above statement shadows significant dimensions that reveal how much women express and define the practice. Women in purdah are prevented from interacting with the society, so also, they are prevented from access to conventional education because of the restriction. This makes it difficult for women in purdah to contribute to the social, economic and all other forms of development in the country.

It is the practice whereby men and also restricted from seeing and interacting with their women counterpart at will. For both males and females, free association with opposite sex is limited. Purdah is also a practice of segregation of the sexes and the requirement for women to cover their bodies and conceal their womanhood. Restricting women to household endeavor rather than involving them in tasks, also shield them from unwanted male advances. This practice is however associated with prestige and high rank Muslims. Their husband's employs servants to perform the domestic house jobs and make supervision; most women in purdah make rare appearances in any family functions where males from extended family are expected to attend. They are not allowed to talk to men other than their close relatives.

Purdah system is found among the Muslim community all over the world. However, the practice is not different in Nigeria, it is also found among the Muslim community but more pronounced in the Northern part of the country because vast majority of the Northerners are Muslim, and more so, Islam came into Nigeria through the Northern protectorate. This perhaps accounts for one of the reasons why Islam and the practices of purdah are more pronounced in the Northern part of Nigeria. Women in purdah are not by practice allowed to study in a co-education schools and colleges and there are no separate institutions established for them, this means that they have no more access to education once they become purdah. Occasionally when women in purdah go out, they will cover all the entire part of their body with special black dress.

From the above, it can be deduced that purdah is depriving some citizens i.e. women in purdah their fundamental right of interacting with other members of the society and access to education. This makes it difficult for them to have free access to conventional education because the practice has restricted them to a type of life style that separated them from the large society; their interaction is restricted to their nuclear family. Hence possibility of having an army of uneducated women in purdah lacking access to functional education which is a violation of many of both the international treaties (UNESCO, African Charter on Human and People's Rights), and part II of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution. The largest percentage of the women population are from the Northern Nigeria which means, women from this zone suffers from sex discrimination and sometimes suffer from double discrimination if supplemented by purdah discrimination.

However, part II of the Nigerian Constitution guarantee education for all citizens without prejudiced or barriers coupled with international instrument which Nigeria are signatory to and has adopted. The UNESCO declaration Education for All (EFA) by the year 2015. It is expected that all Nigerian citizens are entitled to education, but the practice of purdah that restricted movement, interactions and contacts of those in purdah restricted them from access to education and this may not make UNESCO declaration a reality by the year 2015. In developing countries in general, and Nigeria in particular, the women's role in the economic growth and social development is quite clear and hard to underestimate especially in their working abilities in different occupations, such problems are still waiting for solutions. Differences between men and women are found in work opportunities, education, income, political representation and sex role stereotype. That is the belief in differing interpretations of actions of women and men, dominated most of the developing countries.

| S/N | States      | Male      | Female    | Total     |
|-----|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1   | Abia        | 1,434,193 | 1,399,806 | 2,833,999 |
| 2   | Adamawa     | 1,606,123 | 1,561,978 | 3,168,101 |
| 3   | Akwa Ibom   | 2,044,510 | 1,875,698 | 3,920,208 |
| 4   | Anambra     | 2,174,641 | 2,007,391 | 4,182,032 |
| 5   | Bauchi      | 2,426,215 | 2,250,186 | 4,676,465 |
| 6   | Bayelsa     | 906,648   | 800,710   | 1,703,358 |
| 7   | Benue       | 2,164,058 | 2,055,186 | 4,151,193 |
| 8   | Borno       | 2,161,157 | 1,990,036 | 4,151,193 |
| 9   | Cross-River | 1,492,465 | 1,396,501 | 2,888,966 |
| 10  | Delta       | 2,074,306 | 2,024,085 | 4,098,391 |
| 11  | Ebonyi      | 1,040,984 | 1,132,517 | 2,173,501 |
| 12  | Edo         | 1,640,461 | 1,577,871 | 3,218,332 |
| 13  | Ekiti       | 1,212,609 | 1,171,603 | 2,384,212 |
| 14  | Enugu       | 1,624,202 | 1,633,096 | 3,257,298 |
| 15  | Gombe       | 1,230,722 | 1,123,157 | 2,353,879 |
| 16  | Imo         | 2,032,286 | 1,902,613 | 3,934,899 |
| 17  | Jigawa      | 2,215,907 | 2,132,742 | 4,348,649 |
| 18  | Kaduna      | 3,112,028 | 2,954,534 | 6,066,562 |
| 19  | Kano        | 4,844,128 | 4,539,554 | 9,383,682 |

| S/N | States    | Male       | Female     | Total       |
|-----|-----------|------------|------------|-------------|
| 20  | Katsina   | 2,978,682  | 2,813,896  | 5,792,578   |
| 21  | Kebbi     | 1,617,498  | 1,621,130  | 3,278,487   |
| 22  | Kogi      | 1,691,737  | 1,586,750  | 3,278,487   |
| 23  | Kwara     | 1,220,581  | 1,150,508  | 2,371,089   |
| 24  | Lagos     | 4,678,020  | 4,335,514  | 9,013,534   |
| 25  | Nassarawa | 945,556    | 917,719    | 1,863,275   |
| 26  | Niger     | 2,032,725  | 1,917,524  | 3,950,249   |
| 27  | Ogun      | 1,847,243  | 1,880,855  | 3,728,098   |
| 28  | Ondo      | 1,761,619  | 1,679,761  | 3,441,024   |
| 29  | Osun      | 1,740,619  | 1,682,916  | 3,423,535   |
| 30  | Oyo       | 2,809,840  | 2,781,749  | 5,591,589   |
| 31  | Plateau   | 1,593,033  | 1,585,679  | 3,178,712   |
| 32  | Rivers    | 2,710,665  | 2,474,735  | 5,185,400   |
| 33  | Sokoto    | 1,872,069  | 1,824,930  | 3,696,999   |
| 34  | Taraba    | 1,199,849  | 1,100,887  | 2,300,736   |
| 35  | Yobe      | 1,206,003  | 1,115,588  | 2,321,591   |
| 36  | Zamfara   | 1,630,344  | 1,629,502  | 3,259,846   |
| 37  | FCT       | 740,489    | 664,712    | 1,405,201   |
|     | Total     | 71,709,859 | 68,293,712 | 140,003,542 |

Table 1: Total Population of Nigeria as at 2006 by States

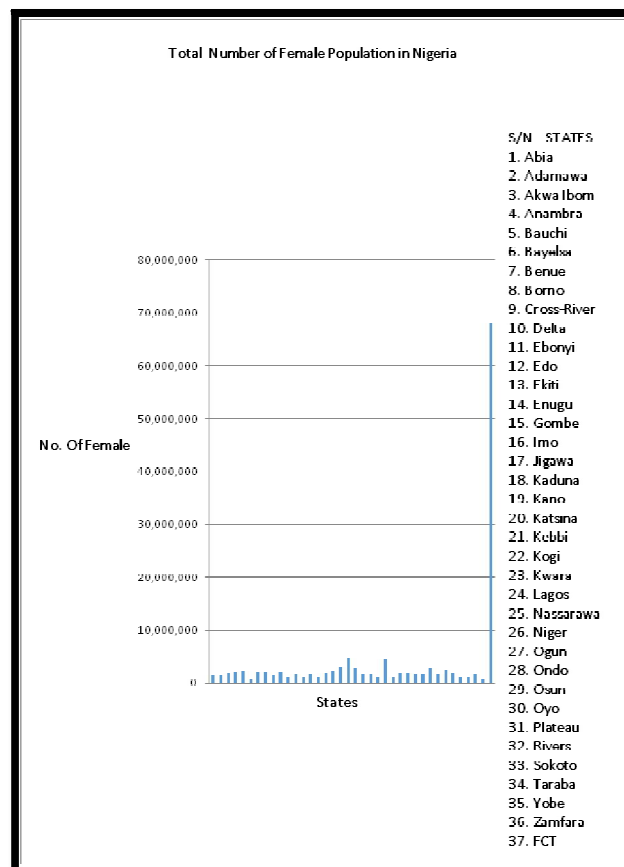


Figure 1

The Population Crises Committee (2000) found out that the smallest percentage of women in the official labour force is in Africa – Nigeria inclusive. Work outside the household in Nigerian is constrained by many factors; mainly the status of women in Nigeria society is determined by the level of education. The level of education of women in purdah is low compared to those who are not and those in purdah do not take up paid appointment or any white collar jobs with any organization, they have been restricted to their husbands, immediate family and their close environment and relied on their husbands for the provision of all their needs.

| S/N | States    | Female     |
|-----|-----------|------------|
| 1   | Adamawa   | 1,561,978  |
| 2   | Bauchi    | 2,250,186  |
| 3   | Benue     | 2,055,186  |
| 4   | Borno     | 1,990,036  |
| 5   | Gombe     | 1,123,157  |
| 6   | Jigawa    | 2,132,742  |
| 7   | Kaduna    | 2,954,534  |
| 8   | Kano      | 4,539,554  |
| 9   | Katsina   | 2,813,896  |
| 10  | Kebbi     | 1,621,130  |
| 11  | Kogi      | 1,586,750  |
| 12  | Kwara     | 1,150,508  |
| 13  | Nassarawa | 917,719    |
| 14  | Niger     | 1,917,524  |
| 15  | Plateau   | 1,585,679  |
| 16  | Sokoto    | 1,824,930  |
| 17  | Taraba    | 1,100,887  |
| 18  | Yobe      | 1,115,588  |
| 19  | Zamfara   | 1,629,502  |
| 20  | FCT       | 664,712    |
|     | Total     | 33,959,448 |

Table 2: Total Population of Female in the Northern Nigerian as at 2006  
Source: National Population Commission, 2007

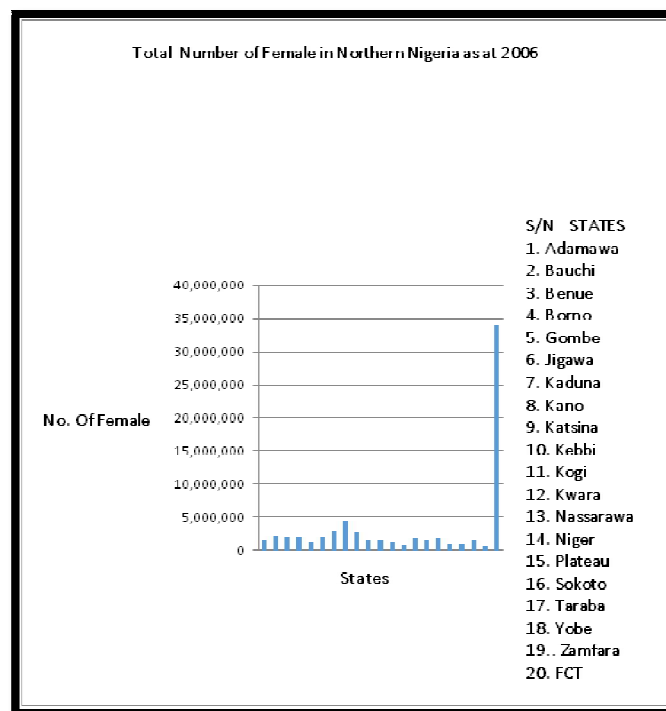


Figure 2

Table 2 reveals that there are more states in the Northern Nigeria, out of the 36 states and the federal capital that made up the country, nineteen (19) states and the Federal Capital Territory are in the Northern zone, while seventeen (17) states are in the Southern and Eastern zones. The table also showed that the population of female in the Northern zone comprises of thirty-three million, nine hundred and fifty-nine thousand, four hundred and forty-eight (33,959,448) out of the total female population of sixty-eight million, two hundred and ninety-three thousand, six hundred and eighty-three (68,293,683). This implies that there are more women in the Northern than both the Southern and Eastern part of the country. Women education particularly those in purdah deserves special attention.

### 3. The Right of Women to Education

The fundamental objectives and directives of states policy by section 13 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states:

It shall be the duty and responsibility of all organs of government and of all authorities and person, exercising legislative, executive or judicial powers, to confirm, observe and apply the provision of this chapter of the constitution.

Section 18 (1) of the 1999 constitution also provides that:

Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels;

Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy; and to this end government shall as and when practicable provide:

- Free, compulsory and universal primary education;
- Free secondary education;
- Free university education; and
- Free adult literacy programme.

Women education has also found expression in many international instruments and treaties i.e. The convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter of Human and People Right, and all their international instruments has been adopted by the Federal Republic of Nigeria, thereby making it part of the Nigeria Law. Hence, the right of women in Nigeria is a constitutional right.

#### 4. Legislation

The importance of legislation on any subject matter cannot be overemphasized. It is envisaged that the National Policy on Education will stimulate government to reinforce all relevant laws to protect women education.

The legal; framework of a nation is perhaps the most direct measure of its commitment to new policy initiatives writing. A national policy on education of women in purdah will be an incomplete exercise without the necessary legal backing. Proposal for legal reform or and legislative protection in this context are a means of enforcing existing laws (if they exist), initiating the enactment of new ones to protect new policy guidelines in consonance with the call in the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. The Nigeria constitution is explicit on the government aspiration that all citizens are treated as equals under the law.

However, the challenges of education for women in purdah has made us to examine existing legislations for education of women in purdah and the National Policy of Education for women in purdah. It was discovered that there are inadequate or practically no law or policy on education for women in purdah.

#### 5. Purdah and the Universal Act

The various laws which establish universities provide for the control of their programmes by the university's authorities. Wide powers are conferred on the Vice-Chancellors and governing council of the universities. These are designed to maintain peace, order and good conduct in these institutions and to enable them achieve the objectives for which they are established. The relevant provision in all universities in Nigeria is substantially similar. Our reference will be mainly to the University of Lagos.

A close examination of all provisions in the university act indicated that there is no provision specifically for women in purdah.

#### 6. Education and Women Empowerment

Women's educational status in any nation correlates with its level of development, consequently, the higher the level of women's educational status the more developed the nation. For Nigerian women and women in purdah, the full benefit of contemporary living and contribute meaningfully to the development of the country, they require education.

#### 7. Women in Purdah and the Challenges of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

NOUN is the only ODL institution in Nigeria; its establishment brought a new concept in Nigeria educational system. Apart from the fact that NOUN provides affordable, accessible and economical and convenience education, NOUN is to mop-up the excess left over by the conventional universities because it has been designed to be a mega university. This is evident from the student populace. NOUN has over ninety thousand (90,000) students from just three (3) admission exercises conducted so far.

| 1 <sup>st</sup> Set | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Set | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Set | Total  |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------|
| 10,027              | 24,017              | 47,254              | 91,288 |

*Table 3: Total Number of Admitted Students by NOUN since inception*

*Source: ICT Unit NOUN, May, 2008*

Apart from the general challenge in the Nigerian environment, e.g. electricity, low level of technology advancement, poor road network etc. NOUN is able to cope with size of the students and by next admission exercise; student's population in NOUN will be over one hundred and fifty thousand (150,000) considering the rate at which it is growing.

| S/N | STATES   | 2003/2004 |     |      | 2005/2006 |      |      | 2007/2008 |      |       |
|-----|----------|-----------|-----|------|-----------|------|------|-----------|------|-------|
|     |          | M         | F   | T    | M         | F    | T    | M         | F    | T     |
| 1   | Adamawa  | 47        | 20  | 67   | 105       | 54   | 159  | 343       | 110  | 453   |
| 2   | Bauchi   | 25        | 6   | 31   | 199       | 47   | 246  | 390       | 94   | 484   |
| 3   | Benue    | 192       | 63  | 255  | 389       | 176  | 565  | 1103      | 496  | 1599  |
| 4   | Borno    | 29        | 7   | 36   | 159       | 67   | 226  | 345       | 133  | 478   |
| 5   | FCT      | 16        | 6   | 22   | 39        | 21   | 60   | 56        | 18   | 74    |
| 6   | Gombe    | 18        | 10  | 28   | 62        | 29   | 91   | 290       | 99   | 389   |
| 7   | Jigawa   | 18        | 4   | 22   | 24        | 3    | 27   | 198       | 23   | 221   |
| 8   | Kaduna   | 145       | 63  | 208  | 291       | 141  | 432  | 569       | 205  | 774   |
| 9   | Kano     | 36        | 16  | 52   | 169       | 41   | 210  | 489       | 110  | 599   |
| 10  | Katsina  | 63        | 10  | 73   | 149       | 47   | 196  | 397       | 61   | 458   |
| 11  | Kogi     | 376       | 156 | 532  | 521       | 341  | 862  | 1312      | 792  | 2104  |
| 12  | Kwara    | 173       | 73  | 246  | 329       | 274  | 603  | 864       | 683  | 1547  |
| 13  | Nasarawa | 39        | 6   | 45   | 78        | 28   | 106  | 678       | 150  | 828   |
| 14  | Niger    | 63        | 27  | 90   | 295       | 115  | 410  | 789       | 284  | 1073  |
| 15  | Plateau  | 90        | 23  | 113  | 159       | 87   | 246  | 482       | 296  | 778   |
| 16  | Sokoto   | 4         | 4   | 8    | 54        | 10   | 64   | 91        | 23   | 114   |
| 17  | Taraba   | 43        | 9   | 52   | 82        | 27   | 109  | 167       | 57   | 224   |
| 18  | Yobe     | 11        | 5   | 16   | 81        | 31   | 112  | 182       | 55   | 237   |
| 19  | Zamfara  | 3         | 3   | 6    | 31        | 5    | 36   | 114       | 15   | 129   |
|     | Total    | 1575      | 357 | 1932 | 3254      | 1557 | 4811 | 8957      | 3729 | 12686 |

Table 4: Total Population of NOUN Students by Sex Distribution from the Northern Nigeria  
Source: ICT Unit NOUN, May, 2018

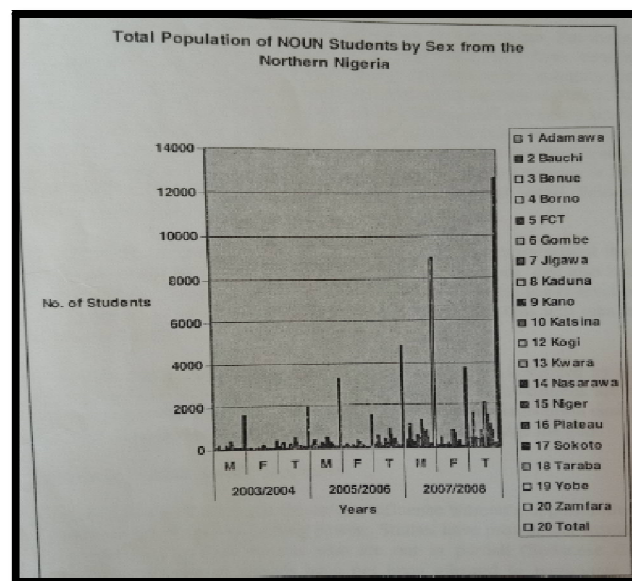


Figure 3

Table 4 reveals that there is a wide gap between the total number of male and female learners admitted by the National Open Universities of Nigeria since inception. In 2003/2004, 357, out of 1932 admitted from the Northern zone are female, in 2005/2006, 1556 out of the 4811 admitted are female and out of 12,686 admitted in 2007/2008, only 3,729 are female. Presently, out of 19,429 learners admitted by NOUN from the Northern part, only 5,639 of them are female. This signifies that there are female learners that have not been reached.

NOUN is to serve as a vehicle to reach unreached, example of the unreached are women in purdah. NOUN is to provide education that transcends all barriers; NOUN provides education to all intending learners from across the country at either Certificate, Diploma, Degree, Postgraduate or Graduate levels depending on the entry qualification. Students are admitted into various programmes based on educational qualifications, age and work experience.

However, NOUN can only provide education to only those that have passed through secondary education, who are desirous of improving their lives educationally, socially, politically, economically, and even spiritually. Students in this category can be admitted for Certificate, Diploma or Degree programmes depending on their qualification at the secondary school. Those who are already a graduate of a recognized university anywhere in the world recognized by the senate of NOUN and holder of Higher National Diploma before graduating into purdah can also benefit from NOUN by been admitted for Certificate, Diploma, Degree (if such a learner wants a new environment) Post Graduate Diploma or Masters Programme from either CCE & WT, Schools of: Education, Art and Social Sciences, Business and Human Resources, Law as well as Science and Technology.

Those that are practically uneducated i.e. purdah with primary school leaving certificate or those who do not have any access to education in their lives can also benefit from ODL if the government can put in place a supporting structure at the lower level of education as we have in India i.e. Open primary and secondary education. This will take care of the need of students at this level.

The discriminatory practices against women in purdah are sustained by attitudes that define and restrict them to a secondary role in the society. These attitudes are reinforced through their religion and constitute a major obstacle to action and legislation designed to remedy the education inequalities they experienced. NOUN should bridge the gap.

### 8. Women in Purdah and Development

Education is one of the major forces that influences women's opportunities regarding; social, political, employment and earning power. Studies have proven that women in purdah have a lower literacy rate than women who are not in purdah (Sudanese Government, 1999). Historically, women in purdah have not been allowed to participate fully in economic activities. They have been held back by religious belief and practice that limited their access to education and training and thus limit their chances of production and employment as well. National Open University of Nigeria was established to bridge all gaps and inequalities occasioned by any form of barriers to education by bringing education to the door steps of all Nigeria citizens at affordable cost.

Women in purdah if educated through ODL can gainfully gain functional employment. They can also participate in online activities which are now the order of the day in business world; they can apply for jobs or apply her fully without destroying the culture of purdah. She can earn wages to support the family, improve the basis and shake up the boredom associated with purdah. There will also be improvement in the management of environmental hygiene to reduce communicable diseases. They also access to the internet and make right choice where there is need.

### 9. Conclusion

Women constitute the majority of the world's population; there is still no society in the world where women enjoy full equality with men. The full and equal participation of women in education, political, civil, economic, social and cultural life at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination based on gender or sex remain priority of the National Open University of Nigeria.'

The only window/access to education of the purdah is education provided by NOUN, i.e. ODL without destroying the practice of purdah. ODL can take care of the uneducated married women in purdah, but, if ODL short out the door to women in purdah, this means women in purdah will be deprived of their educational right which is against the basis of

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