Online Distance Learning and its Impact onWomen Empowerment in India

Ms. Ankita Masih
Assistant Professor
Guru Nanak College of Education, New Delhi.
ankitamasih1989@gmail.com

Dr. Niharika Denis
Assistant Professor
Allahabad School of Education
Sam Higginbottom University of Agriculture, Technology and Sciences (SHUATS)

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to outline the role of distance education in upgrading the status of women in India. In a large and developing country like India, distance education is not only cost-effective but can also reach out to all sections of society, including the marginalized and the dispossessed. In spite of the fact that women's participation in all spheres of life has increased in post-independence India, there has been no concomitant change in their status. This is partly because the thrust of our policies has been not to change relations of production which also subsume gender relations, but only to commiserate with the lot of women and to "improve" it with subsidies and other "discriminatory compensation." Indian National Policy on Education (1986) viewed education as a powerful instrument for promoting equality of status and opportunity between genders and between groups divided by class, caste and fall other forms of historic oppression.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Open Learning, E- Learning, Distance Education

INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality is a serious problem in all the developing nations, where majority of women have been subjected to various social, cultural and political stigmas, stereotypes and subjugations. Lack of education is the primary cause behind these inequalities. India is a patriarchal society where it has always been considered right for women to be dominated and supposed to remain inside homes. Things are changing gradually, yet attaining a balanced gender neutral society still remains major goal.Education is considered

as a primary basis for the development of any country. Education for all is one of the main aim through which the developmental goals of any country can be assessed. Open and Distance Learning have been increasingly promoted as a key solution for the historically disadvantaged group i.e. Women. It has emerged as an accessible tool for higher education for women. ODL has been breaking almost all the barriers in the education system based on gender, age, race, space, income, time etc.

The first Open University was established in 1969 in United Kingdom in which first students enrolled in 1971. The idea behind was to bring high quality in learning to the people who had not got the opportunities to study in formally set up universities. Open universities provides diplomas & degrees in education through their open enrolment, distance and internet based education programmes. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University was the first Distance Education University established in 1982 in Hyderabad, India. In the present times, open universities have become an invaluable component of National Educational programmes and policies in both developed and developing countries. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) plays an important role in empowering women in the developing countries of the world. In present times, Distance education has come out as an advantage to women to furnish them through acquisition of knowledge, leading towards new ways of thinking and to be autonomous and liberated.

India is home to a big number of open universities which offer many courses through correspondence like technical, vocational, post graduate, M. Phil, Ph.D, diploma etc. There are at present 13 State Open Universities set up by the respective state grants (as per details below), are single mode institutions, which means they provide education only in the distance mode. There is one central open university-Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). These universities cater to people who are unable to pursue regular courses due to various reasons. These Universities are also instrumental in shaping the career growth of learner who are already employed.

Education is a fundamental right and all the individuals in the society should be benefitted equally without any discrimination. But according to the data based on literacy levels of the whole world, there is a significance difference between men and women. According to UNESCO, literacy rates of women are very lower than the literacy rate of men particularly in South Asia. According to census 2011, India's literacy is 74.04%. There is a wide gender disparity in the literacy rate in India: effective literacy rates (age 7 and above) in 2011 were 80.9% for men and 64.60% for women. Government explores the use of distance education to provide education at large scale because of expensive conventional educational methods. This also results in exclusion of marginalized groups i.e. women who cannot cope up with regular campus based learning because of their productive and reproductive roles (Janki, 2006). According to Malik, Belawati and Baggaley (2005), Distance education has made possible to impact education at all levels particularly tertiary education can be helpful in maximizing the economic wealth. Open universities are powerful instruments for equalizing opportunities for higher education and also for leveling educational imbalances (Plummer, 2000; Satyanarayana and Meduri, 2013). Learning takes place

outside the schools, colleges and university campuses in Distance Education and communication is provided through Radio, Television, Print Media, Internet, Whatsapp, Skype etc. and there is absence of formal lectures (Janaki, 2006). According to Kwapong (2007) Distance mode of study suites women because of their roles as mothers, housewives and moreover the distance mode provides flexible time and prevents them from regular classroom attendances. Kwapong (2007) also observed that distance mode attracted women students as they got second chance to pursue their studies.

Concept of Open Learning

Open learning is an innovative movement in education that emerged within the 1970s and evolved into fields of practice and study. The term refers generally to activities that either enhance learning opportunities within formal education systems or broaden learning opportunities beyond formal education systems. Open learning involves but isn't limited to: classroom teaching methods, approaches to interactive learning, formats in work-related education and training, the cultures and ecologies of learning communities, and the development and use of open educational resources. While there's no agreed-upon, comprehensive definition of open learning, central focus is usually placed on the "needs of the learner as perceived by the learner." Case studies illustrate open learning as an innovation both within and across academic disciplines, professions, social sectors and national boundaries, and in business and industry, education institutions, collaborative initiatives between institutions, and schooling for young learners.

Open learning as a pedagogics is founded on the work of CélestinFreinet in France and Maria Montessori in Italy, among others. Open learning is meant to permit pupils self-determined, independent and interest-guided learning. A prominent example is that the language experience approach to teaching initial literacy (cf. Brügelmann/ Brinkmann 2011). More recent work on open learning has been conducted by the German pedagogues Hans Brügelmann (1975; 1999), FalkoPeschel (2002), JörgRamseger (1977) and WulfWallrabenstein (1991). The approach is meant to confront to 3 challenges (cf. in more detail Brügelmann/ Brinkmann 2008, chap. 1):

• The vast differences in experiences, interests, and competencies between children of the same age;

• The constructivist nature of learning demanding active problem-solving by the learner him- and herself;

• The legal requirement of student participation in decisions stipulated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). of 1989.

Concept of Distance Education

Distance education or distance learning is the education for learners who may not always be physically present at a school. Traditionally, this involved correspondence courses wherein the learner corresponded with the school via post. Today, it involves online education (e-learning). A distance learning program can be completely distance learning, or a combination of distance learning and traditional classroom instruction (called hybrid or blended). Massive open online courses (MOOCs), offering large-scale interactive participation and open access through the World Wide Web or other network technologies, are recent educational modes in distance education. A number of other terms (distributed learning, e-learning,

m-learning, online learning, virtual classroom etc.) are used roughly synonymously with distance education.

Open Learning & Distance Learning: Conceptual Clarification

Commonwealth of Learning (COL), an inter-governmental organization, has differentiated Open Learning & Distance Learning. Open Learning is an approach which provides learners elasticity and choice of what they learn, when they learn, how they learn, where they learn and at what pace. Distance Learning is a form of Open Learning in which the learners and teachers/tutors are separated by a geographical distance. Students are not present physically at site in this mode of learning. Various modes like e-learning, video conferencing, e-mail, webinars etc. are used to access education whereas in open learning students are provided with study materials for the courses through study centres. It is an economical way to pursue higher or some other form of education. An open university does not have any affiliated colleges whereas the distance education can be provided by both- an open university or a traditional university. Open learning permits learning with minimum barriers related to age, gender and time constraints. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a term used to describe learning that often uses ICT to enhance learning. Some important features are:

- Students support
- Flexible learning
- Easy access
- Provides both curriculum and instruction design
- Gives credit to prior learning (previous knowledge)
- Considers individual differences

Women Empowerment

The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is very important. It is also important for the achievement of sustainable development. The full participation and partnership of both the genders is required in society, including shared responsibilities for the care and nurturing of children, maintenance of the household and socio-economic status. In all parts of the world, women are discriminated, they are facing threats to their lives, compromised health and well- being as a result of being overburdened with work, subjugation and of their lack of power and influence. In most regions of the world, it is common to see women receiving less formal education than men, and at the same time, women's own knowledge, abilities and coping mechanisms often go unrecognized. Achieving any change requires policies, programmes and actions that may improve women's access to secure livelihoods, economic resources, alleviate their extreme responsibilities with regard to housework, remove legal impediments to their participation in public life, and raise social awareness through effective programmes of education and mass communication. In

addition, improving the status of women also enhances their decision-making capacity at all levels in all spheres of life, especially in the area of sexuality and reproduction. This is essential for the long- term success of population programmes. Studies shows that population and development programmes are most effective when steps have simultaneously been taken to improve the status of women.

Education is a powerful weapon which can be used to empower women with the knowledge, skills and self-respect necessary to participate in the development process. More than 40 years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted that "everyone has the right to education". In 1990, Governments meeting at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, committed themselves to the goal of universal access to basic education. But despite many efforts by countries around the globe that have appreciably expanded access to basic education, there are still approximately 960 million illiterate adults in the world, of whom two thirds are women. More than one third of the world's adults, most of them women, have no access to printed knowledge, to new skills or to technologies that would improve the quality of their lives and help them shape and adapt to social and economic change. There are 130 million children who are not enrolled in primary school and 70 per cent of them are girls.

Some barriers have reduced in present times because of open & distance learning provided by various universities. Open and Distance Learning has flexible system and mode of delivery has facilitated a lot in continuing women's education. It has become an ultimate choice for women and also an alternative mode to widen access to higher education. Open and Distance Learning model provided a conducive learning environment to women learners. Delivery of content is also user friendly and self-learning materials are available in printed and electronic modules.

Benefits of Open and Distance Learning

- Improvement in women's social esteem by earning degree.
- Provided second chance to continue their education.
- No requirement to stay on campus to earn degrees.
- Allowed women to study at their own place, time and pace.
- Enhanced the means of empowering women.
- Enabled women to pursue education along with household task.
- Provided flexible system to complete their education.
- Enabled women to earn income.
- Enabled women more educated and financially independent.
- Gained more respect in the family and in the community.
- Increased career opportunities.
- Increased confidence in dealing with the community.
- Enlightened legal literacy and women's rights and entitlements.
- Developed ability to think critically.

How Open and Distance Learning (ODL) enhanced Accessible Education for women in India ?

ODL has really empowered women by enhancing accessible education to them. The conventional structure of Education was notable to meet the demands of female education, ODL has filled this void. This mode of delivery has provided various opportunities in benefiting the education for

women. According to Chaudhary (1995) educated mothers are able to contribute the quality education to their children more efficiently.

There are many groups of women who have not been able to attain formal education because of constraints. Open and Distance Learning mode has allowed them to learn at the distant without going regularly. They were able to study from their homes and because of Open and Distance Learning mode they can contribute in economic development as well. Another group is of women who are housewives. They never had the access of formal education or they gave up schooling at early stages. These women find it very difficult to go to conventional schools and colleges by leaving their homes. But Open and Distance Learning mode has empowered these women by allowing them to sit at home and pursue their education without putting risk in their marriages. Other group is of working women. These women were intended to further study after bachelor's degree but due to the marital life and child rearing, they were restricted to continue their study. This hindrance is also covered by Open and Distance Learning mode. The various groups of women have been able to achieve their educational goals due to Open and Distance Learning. Open and Distance Learning mode of education is an opportunity for discriminating educational benefits to all the citizens of nations more efficiently and economically.

The ODL Potential for Women

A number of Vocational Education Programmes have been designed by various open universities to enhance and impart the knowledge and skills to students for their immediate employment or career hike. These 'need based' programmes are delivered or executed through Vocational Programmes Centres. These programmes are primarily helpful for the under disadvantaged group of the country as they have to shoulder many domestic responsibilities and they have several social as well as financial constraints. These days Internet has also become a tool of empowerment of women. 'Feminism' is on rise and disseminated to masses through internet these days which has resulted in empowering women by using various tools on the internet. Various social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter etc. are playing an important role by creating a platform to raise voices. Online Activism has empowered women to organize campaigns and also in voicing their opinions for equality of rights. Blogging has also become a powerful tool in recent years for the educational empowerment of women. Electronic Learning (e-learning) has made easy accessibility and affordability for women as they can study from their homes.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has been a most important tool for bridging the gaps in the society. Computer based instruction is one of the important distance education approach. Its

helps in providing individualizing instruction and in providing learning opportunities for imparting educational programs. The use of ICTs in Distance Education has been useful for women because of uniqueness of their multiple roles and their different learning styles. Distance Education mode has improved women's access to education, reduced time and cost in education. Msoffe (2016) concluded that Open and Distance learning provides flexibility of studying while working to the students and also in handling family matters. Information Technology (IT) has been playing a great role in empowering women as 33.4% women are employed in Infosys, 30% in TCS and 29% in Wipro (Saroj, 2015). MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are also changing the paradigm of education that enabled women with adequate skills and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Open and Distance Learning mode of Education has enabled and empowered women to have access of formal education, made them self-reliant. Distance Education has a great potential to equalize opportunities for women and it is an important feature in the development of Higher Education. Open and Distance Learning is a way of meeting women's educational aspirations to meet obligations of the career and the society. It is therefore, be regarded as a tool that enables women to access education and to overcome the various obstacles and fly high. It has provided wings to women.

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