

The Role Of Open And Distance Learning In Gender Equality And Women Empowerment In India

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Abstract

Gender inequality is the severe problem for entirely the developing countries, where majority of women have been fatalities of social, cultural, political and environmental impacts of development. Lack of education is the most vigorous cause behind these inequalities. India is moving towards 21st century with a vision to be a part of economic superpowers. Education is the basis for the growth of any nation. Education for totally is one of the criteria through which the developmental aims of any country might be measured and evaluated. Open and Distance Learning have been gradually endorsed as a key elucidation for the historically disadvantaged group i.e. Women. It has emerged as a tool for retrieving higher education for women. ODL has been breaking virtually all divisions in the education system centred on gender, age, race, space, income, time etc. This paper explores the nature of open and distance learning approach for widening access of education to women. Further it evaluates the impact of ODL in women empowerment. The paper also explores the role of open and distance learning in empowering women and a beginning of speculation to conquer gender equality. Distance education has given women an opportunity to realise their independence and to live an honourable and respected life. No thriving nation can be imagined without justifiable development of both men and women. Though both men and women have equitable rights to develop themselves yet envisaging a nation where both men and women play same and spirited role in the prosperity is still a hallucination because the same situation has not been attained yet. In spite of the makers of India had thought of creating an egalitarian society based upon equal right and privileges; no such nation has been grasped yet. But in a patriarchal country like India which is primarily an agricultural based economy the women are suppose to play major role from managing the household to help their male equivalent in the manual work. Thus education exclusively the higher becomes just a dream and results into higher rate of dropout among the girl students. The increasing dropout among the girls and lack of higher is a national apprehension. In the light of such observation the states initiatives in this context needs to be assessed and investigated.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, gender equality, Patriarchy, Open Learning, Distance Learning

INTRODUCTION

Education is the medium and a multi-dimensional process through which women emancipation and empowerment can be made a reality. It can lead women towards progress and prosperity and enjoying an independent status with the gaining of knowledge. It is only through education that a woman can have a better decision-making power, can have information and resources to take better decision and can have self-confidence which is most important. Women emancipation and empowerment is utmost important for the progress of any society. A society is a conglomeration of both the male and female sexes. So to ensure the progress of the society, both the sexes are supposed to play the equitable role. Education is the only mean through which both the sexes can make equal progress. In a society like India which is patriarchal in nature, women enjoy a degradable status since centuries ago. A woman is not considered as much important as men. Women have faced discrimination since ancient time. So many obstacles blocked the way of women emancipation during ancient and medieval periods like practice of polygamy and child marriage. Indian society does not allow women to go out of home to get education. So it is only with the initiation of education through distance mode that women status in India got a major boon. But there is always a major difference between theory and practice. Even India like any other society is two-wheeler with one as male and another as female. We cannot aspire two wheeler running on a single wheel. What status women enjoy through the mechanisation of distance education is different from what women exactly have being a one wheel of the society which is a two wheeler. Developed and developing Countries were insisted to ensure that gender equality and women's empowerment are full realized for sustainable development and well-being of their people (UNICEF, 2011). Gender equality in education is understood to mean equal treatment and equal opportunities on one hand, and equality of outcomes on the other" (EACEA, 2010).

It implies that girls and boys are ensured and actually offered the same chances and treatment in access, process and outcome of an education of good quality and which is free from any stereotypes (UNESCO, 2009). Thus, achieving gender equality in education implies equality of opportunities for males in relation to females, equality in learning process, equality in outcomes as well as equality in external results after leaving education (UNESCO, 2004). Over the past 25 years the movement towards gender equality gained momentum in countries throughout the world (Elson, 2002). Worldwide commitment to gender equality in education was reflected in Dakar Framework of Action on Education for All (EFA) 2000 and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 2000). The two development frameworks under their

gender and educational specific related goals insisted on elimination of gender disparities in all levels of education by 2015.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand and discuss the issues related to Gender equality and women empowerment in India
- To discuss the role of various stockholders in reinforcing gender equality.
- To access the root causes of gender disparities in education in India.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

1. Gender equality Gender equality defined as the situation where women and men, girls and boys enjoy the same rights, opportunities and protections (UNICEF, 2011). It is a core human rights principal and valuable end in itself. It implies that that women and men have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity and for contribution and or benefiting from economic social cultural and political development (UNESCO, 2009). Gender equality is essential for protecting universal human rights and fundamental freedoms (UNESCO, 2012). It is also a powerful development accelerator.
2. Gender equality in education Gender equality in education imply that girls and boys are ensured and actually offered the same chance and treatment in access, process, and outcome of an education of good quality and which is free from any stereotypes (UNESCO, 2009).
3. Women empowerment Women empowerment is (a result of) a process of women identifying their inner strength, opportunities for growth, and their role in reshaping their own destiny (Saraswathy, et al. 2008). According to Malhotra, et al., (2002) women empowerment has frequently been termed as a process of women gaining more access to a steady income and economic power or security.
4. UN WOMEN (2014) defined women empowerment as a bottom up process of transforming gender power relations through individuals or groups developing awareness of women's subordination and building their capacity to challenge it.
5. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Open and Distance Learning is an approach to learning that focuses on freeing learners from constraints of the time space and place while offering flexible learning opportunities (SADC, 2012).

SCOPE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance Education serves the persons living in the isolated areas with inadequate facilities of formal education system as presented by Rai, N.A (2000) "Distance education has taken systematic teaching -learning process to persons living in isolated areas where facilities for the traditional form of class room teaching cannot be developed. Further, as distance learning addresses the needs of specific target groups, there is a great variation in the range of programmes offered." Distance education also serves the dropouts, older students and disadvantaged groups. Distance system also serves the persons involve in the community commitments as indicated by S.Manjulika and Reddy V.V (2000) "The open Universities have also increased access for other disadvantaged groups including older students, who may be geographically isolated or excluded from regular classes because of shift patterns, seasonal or other kind of work and family and community commitments." Distance system of education utilizes printed material and non-print media support as reflected by Rao,K.V (2003) "Distance education is the form of indirect instruction. It is imparted by technical media such as correspondence, printed material, teaching and learning aids, audio visual aids, radio, television and computers." Distance education provides the desired education as highlighted by Ramaiah.R.Y (2001).

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN INDIA

Distance or Open Learning is a methodology of imparting education wherein the direct physical interface of teacher and student does not transpire at a predetermined time and place but is flexible as regards to time, place and method of admission without diluting the qualitative content. Various terminologies are used to describe this mode of education viz., correspondence, open and virtual.

This procedure of dissemination of education is gaining popularity as it allows the unhindered continuation of the education process, skill updating and up-gradation of the working class, thereby imparting quality education to the needy residing at educationally disadvantageous locale. For the co-ordination, promotion and determination of the standards of Distance Education and Open University, Distance Education Council (DEC) was constituted under "The Indira Gandhi National Open University Act 1985" [11]. The duty of this institution was to set the parameters for the education standards, co-ordination, evaluation and research, besides encouraging greater diversity, mobility, flexibility and accessibility in the process and exploiting the latest scientific knowledge and technology in synchronization with existing universities for the education of the needy. University Grants Commission in 2013 took over Distance Education Council by establishing Distance Education Bureau which shall henceforth oversee distance education in India. There are two types of distance education methodologies currently prevalent - correspondence courses and open universities. Though both systems are currently in but the latter has gained much popularity as it has radically improved

upon the shortcomings of the former. One of the reasons for the expansion of this education system is also the shortage of resources and qualified teaching personnel available to the state. In the open or non-formal education process the key component is the existence of flexibility, in the domain of admission, place of instruction, mode of instruction, duration and curriculum. Distance education in India has become so popular that the student enrolment has crossed the 10 million mark. Much stress is being laid on this mode for increasing the enrolment in higher education to 30% by 2020. As on 16th September 2016 a total of 112 institutions Universities/Institutions were approved by the Distance Education Council with an estimated student enrolment of 36.6 lakh. At present close to 10 per cent of all enrolments are in the open distance learning mode. The contribution of distance learning to gross enrolment ratio in the higher education sector has risen to 22 per cent. The distance education market of India was to be of the value of Rs 8700 crores in 2015 – 2016. The general aversion towards open distance learning has started to wane, which some experts believe to be the main factor contributing to the growth of skilled labour force in the country. The fee structure of the courses offered by the Open Distance Learning institutions are guided by various factors viz., cost recovery, cross subsidising, social causes, professional orientation and occupational orientation. However the main consideration remains the recovery of the delivery cost of the programmes through tuition fee.

GENDER AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN INDIA

In India women have a lower literacy rate than men. A small number of girls are enrolled in the schools, and many of them drop out. In the Indian family, girls have lower status and fewer privileges than boy children. A conservative cultural attitude prevents some girls from attending school. The number of literate women among the female population of India was between 2–6% from the British Raj onwards to the formation of the Republic of India in 1947. Concerted efforts led to improvement from 15.3% in 1961 to 28.5% in 1981. By 2001 literacy for women had exceeded 50% of the overall female population, though these statistics were still very low compared to world standards and even male literacy within India. Literacy rate of India in 2011 is 74.04%. The Male literacy rate is 82.14% and Female literacy rate is 65.46% according to Census 2011. The Indian government has launched Saakshar Bharat Mission in 2009 for Female Literacy. This mission aims to bring down female illiteracy by half of its present level. In India, it was found that there is a large disparity between female literacy rates in different states. For example, while Among the Indian states, Kerala has the highest literacy rate 93.91% and then Mizoram 91.58%. Among the Union Territories, Lakshadweep has the highest literacy rate of 92.28%. Bihar has the lowest literacy rate in India with 63.82%. The Male literacy is highest in Lakshadweep 96.11% and Kerala 96.02%. The Female literacy is highest in Kerala 91.98% and Mizoram 89.40%. Lowest male literacy is in Bihar 73.39%. Lowest female literacy is in Rajasthan 52.66%. These values are further correlated with health levels of the Indians, where it was found that Kerala was the state with the lowest infant mortality rate while Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are the states with the lowest life expectancies in India. In India, higher education is defined as the education of an age group between 18 and 24, and is largely funded by the government. Despite women making up 24-50% of higher education enrolment, there is still a gender imbalance within higher education. Only one third of science students and 7% of engineering students are women. Women constitute about 50% of the total population, but they form only 9% of the total productive work force. The main reason for this poor share is low literacy level among women. When this major chunk is educated, no doubt, they can contribute significantly for the development of the country and can thereby empower themselves. Women empowerment is a global issue. Empowerment is an active multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. Also literate women are able to constructively express their talents and give direction to their aptitude. This enables them to lead a life which is fulfilling and satisfying.

WHAT IS WOMEN EMPOWERMENT?

Women Empowerment means strengthening women to resist community, patriarchal forces, biases which are working within the society. This ensures their full participation in all aspects of national development. Empowerment helps women in gaining self-confidence and gives strength to confront gender inequalities in the house, community, and national and at international levels. Empowerment is a process of changing the nature and direction of individuals in favour of the marginalized sectors of the society. It is a process to develop autonomy, confidence and self-control in the individuals. Empowerment means enabling an individual to think, to decide and to take action in an autonomous way. Women Empowerment is process of identifying their strength, their opportunities and their role in moulding their own destiny. Now the question arises, how universities can empower marginalized group i.e. women? What can be done to improve women access to education for empowering them? These are the major questions needs to be answered. Women empowerment is a global issue which needs to be addressed. Women are lagging behind men in university education due to various factors like lack of financial resources, household responsibilities, lack of formal primary or secondary education, poverty, low self-esteem which causes inferiority complex, cultural & religious restrictions, lack of empowerment, preference of male children than female children, fear & misconceptions that financially independent educated women threatens men's dominant status, early marriages etc. These 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

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

NEED OF WOMEN EDUCATION AND EMANCIPATION

Both men and women are the two wheels of the same chariot which is society. So we cannot imagine a society to go on the path of progress without the two wheels running at the same speed. Women education and emancipation is needed not only for the wellbeing and progress of the women but also for the entire society. Educating the women is educating women is educating the coming generations. The women education and emancipation is needed for the following purposes:

1. It would empower them to know and ask for their rights to education, health, shelter, food clothing etc.
2. It would empower them to fight against every form of discrimination against their folk, assert themselves about their right to equal treatment with their men counterpart as confide citizens of this nation.
3. It would enable the women take decisions and accept responsibilities for taking such decisions concerning themselves.
4. It would give economic power to the women and there by enable them to contribute their quota to the economic growth of the nation.
5. It would empower the women scientifically through exposure to science and technological education for the challenges of the present technological age and information computer technology break through unfolding worldwide.
6. It would help women to reduce maternal and infant mortality through improved nutrition, improved child rearing practice, health care and prevention against killer diseases.
7. It would avail women with the opportunity of participating keenly in the world of sophisticated politics and governance as enlightened citizens.

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 access formal education because of many reasons e.g. women who adhere the religion practice of purdah were not able to access formal education. 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 nation building. 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 the knowledge and skills of students for their immediate employment. These need based programmes are delivered through Vocational Programmes Centres. These programmes primarily helpful for the under privileged section of the country as they have to shoulder many domestic responsibilities. These days Internet has also become a tool of empowerment of women. There is also growing access of Web these days which has resulted in empowering women by using various tools on the internet. Women have begun to use various social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter etc. for Online Activism which has empowered them to organize campaigns and also in voicing their opinions for equality 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

Women have struggled longed for higher learning to emancipate themselves. DE has proved as a sure way of making women to meet their educational aspirations as they meet the obligations of society and career. The study styles of women in DE have implications for administering DE in a women-friendly manner. By nature women learn best in groups and interaction. Their confidence increase when they are in constant interaction with their tutors and co-students. Most DE institutions provide intensive support systems which could help meet the learning styles of DE students, most especially women. Much as the support systems are what women need to survive on DE programmes, their socio-economic roles make it challenging to make the best of the support systems. Indian Government along with other western power opted for very nice action for making the education of women a national plan. And for this, government not only trying to work for the presence of girl child in the schools, colleges, and universities but also for making education to their door steps like Distance Education. Open and Distance Learning mode of Education has enabled the women to have access of functional training, made them self-reliant and prepared them for the demand of the social system. Distance Education has great potential to equalize opportunities for women and it is an important milestone 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 being regarded as a tool that enables women to access education and to overcome the various obstacles.

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