

**OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING; PROMOTING GENDER LACUNA: A PERSPECTIVE**

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“If you want to plan for a year, plant wheat, if you wish to plane for ten years, grows trees but if you want to plane for hundred years, educate your women. “ – Chinese Proverb.

Abstract

Education is the key which opens the door of life, develops humanity and promotes national development. Education can be an effective tool for women's empowerment. It enables women to acquire new knowledge and technology required for improving and developing their tasks in all fields. Therefore, at least one Functional Literacy Center should be opened in each Gram Panchayat area with a view to make all and rural farm women functionally literate and adult education necessary.

A woman should have the right of free choice, the state of life, equal access to education and training. They can work in all areas of life, preferably in accordance with their talents. They can perform all the functions and hold a variety, including primates, position irrespective of their cultures. The unrelenting dilemma of girl children in India who grow up without receiving the most basic education has attracted increased civic attention. This crisis is severe in rural areas that keep larger extent of girls in India out of school. Amartya Sen argues that “the changing agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change. National arguably is an important today in the political economy of development as adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women”. The United Nations

Millennium declarations emphasize the need for promoting gender equality, empowerment of women a guaranteeing and basic education for everyone. In this instance, the place of open and distance learning methodologies in providing mass functional literacy skills becomes inevitable.

Key Words: *Open Distance Learning, Gender Gap, Lacuna and Perspective.*



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Introduction

A woman comprises half of the population of India. Women's participation in development is very essential not only for achieving social justice but also reducing poverty. Various experiences shows clearly that supporting a stronger role for women contributes to economic growth and it develops child survival and over all family health and it reduces fertility, thus helping to slow population growth rate. Investing in women are still facing many barriers in contributing to and benefiting from developing. The barriers being with comparatively low investment in women education and health, they continue with restricted access to services and assets, and they are made worst by legal and regulatory constraints on women's opportunities.

Thus empowerment could be recognized as an ability to undertake a number of tasks either individually or in groups, so that they have further access to and control of society resources. It is recognized as an essential strategy to strengthen the well-being of individuals, families and communities, government and non-governmental agencies (Fatemeh, Allaudadi, 2011, p.40.). For Meenaz, Kassam & Femida, Handy (2004) education has been argued as one of the indicators of empowerment. Many of the variables that have traditionally been used as proxies for empowerment, such as education and empowerment are better described as "enabling factors" or "sources of empowerment". Empowerment requires an understanding the self and the cultural and social expectations, which many be enabled by education.

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which is a set of eight time-bound, concrete and specific targets are listed as follows.

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women.

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality.

Goal 5: Improve maternal health.

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability (Roseeline, E.Taawo, Arikpo, B.Arikpr, et.al. 2010).

Women empowerment:

Education is the key factor for women empowerment, prosperity, development and welfare. Discrimination of women from womb to tomb is well known. There is continued inequality and vulnerability of women in all sectors like Education, Economic, Social, Political, Health Care, Nutrition, Right and Legal ect., women oppressed in all spheres of life, they need to be empowered in all walk of life.

Education as means of women empowerment can bring about a positive attitudinal change; it is therefore for the socio-economic and political progress of India. At this moment, participation of women in sustainable development of the society has become vastly essential without which all-round development of the community is difficult.

Empowerment is the process of challenging exiting power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. The goals of women's empowerment are to challenge patriarchal ideology to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate (B.Suguna, 2006, p. 10.). Marxists Theorists assign class differences in the world of labour. They try to establish the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. The exploitation, subordination, and oppression exist on the part of dominant class (the men) and revolutionary trends are seen on the part of the oppressed class, the women. By empowerment women would be able to develop self-esteem, confidence, realize their potential and enhance their collective power. Gender studies in tribal societies show that it is social conditioning, and not biology that accounts for gender differences between 'masculine' and 'feminine' (Hajira, Kumar & Jaimon, Varghese,2005,p.24.).

Friedmann (1992) presents a model of rural women's empowerment. It explains the interrelationships between the four forms of empowerment. There is clearly many interrelationships and overlaps between them. These factors include Community empowerment, Organizational empowerment, Political empowerment and Psychological empowerment. Community empowerment refers to access to new and useful knowledge and awareness, developing new skills, abilities, confidence and competence obtaining the friendship and support

of other women, participating in various activities with other women. Organizational empowerment emphasizes new knowledge and awareness about new benefits of technology for rural development through development of agricultural cooperatives. Political empowerment influences other governmental policies and decisions that affect rural communities, changing town-based people's beliefs, and other women to discuss issues affecting rural women and rural communities. Psychological empowerment influences an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem, greater motivation, inspiration, enthusiasm and interest to develop new services for rural people.

Women literacy in India:

Women, mostly in rural areas represent more than two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults. The national female literacy rate is 8.9 percent. Close to 245 million Indians women lack the basic capability to read and write. Adult female literacy rates for ages 15 and above for the year 2000 is 46.4 percent (male 69 percent)(The Status of Women: A Reality Check). The trends in total literacy rates by sex in India between the years 1981 and 2014 are as follows:

Table1: Literacy rates of male and female in India from 1981-2014

Particulars	1981	1991	2001	2014
Male	56.37	64.13	75.85	82.14
Female	29.75	39.29	54.16	65.46
Total	43.56	52.20	65.38	74.04
Divergence (Male – Female)	26.62	24.84	21.69	16.68

Source: Census of India, Various years.

Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for girls was 24.8 percent at primary level and 4.6 percent at the upper primary level (in the 11 to 14 years age group. Girl's enrolment at the primary stage is 46.7 percent in 2004-05. At the upper primary stage, girls' enrolment is 44.4 percent in 2004-05. The overall enrolment clearly shows that there is gap and challenge exists at primary stage.

Enrolment of Scheduled Caste and scheduled Tribe girls poses a greater Challenge to India's education Administrators. G.E.R for SC girls at primary level have climbed up from 64.8 percent

in 1986-87 to 106.6 percent in 2004-05 while at upper primary stage, it is as low as 26.6 percent in 1986-87 and 61.5 percent in 2004-05. In case of ST girls, the GER at primary level it is 68 percent 1986-87 to 115.5 percent by 2004-05 and at upper primary levels it is 21.9 percent in 1986-87 to 59.5 percent in 2004-05. The number of out of school children is 32 million in 2001-02. Of the total age cohort of girls in the 6-14 years age group, out of school girls are 3.34 percent and in the 11-14 years age group they are 5.3 percent

There is a strong need for the inclusion of these ‘hand to reach’ and older girls, who have remained from the education net addressed through context specific strategies and interventions presently (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, 2008). There is also wide disparity in the female literacy rates in rural and urban regions in India. In the year 1951, the rural female literacy was 12 percent and urban literacy 34.59 percent. Table 2 below indicates the trends in the literacy rates in India by rural and urban areas.

Table 2: Female Literacy rates in India Rural/urban from 1951-2011

Year	Female Literacy Rate	
	Rural	Urban
1951	12.00	34.59
1961	22.46	54.43
1971	27.89	60.22
1981	36.09	67.34
1991	44.69	73.09
2001	46.01	72.09
2014	58.08	79.09

Source: Census of India, Various years.

Barriers in achieving education:

Women education in India has also been a major preoccupation of both the government and civil society as educated women can play important role in the development of the country.

Several factors influence the women literacy in India. Social and economic factors determine their education. In rural areas both men and women slot in agriculture, but women are the key producers of food household utilization. Women’s labour produces 70-80 percent of the food crops grown in India. Increasing reliance on the labour of girls may jeopardize their education or even result in their complete withdrawal from school.

Other factors that contribute to reduce enrolment rates and increased dropout rates for girls include gender sensitive teaching methods, transport, sanitation facilities etc. (Report of the

Secretary-General. United Nations General Assembly, 2005, p.9). Sharmila and Dhas (2010) points out that infrastructural barrier are responsible for lagging of women literacy in India.

Parental and social attitudes are major demand-side sources of gender inequality in India, but other factors are also important like- the child's demand for the child's labour raising the opportunity cost. Household chores, particularly sibling care in poor families, area significant factor in girl's non-enrolment frequent absence, and dropout, overt and subtle discrimination etc also have contributed to the non-enrolment and dropout of children from scheduled castes. The Scheduled Tribes, often in dispersed groupings in remote areas, the distance to school is the key supply constraint. Language adds to the problem, as the language of instruction is often not that spoken at home (Kin, Bing, Wu, and others).

A successful agenda for the empowerment of rural women requires the dismantling of values, structures and processes that maintain women's subordination and that are used to justify inequality in access to political, social and economic resources, Education plays an important role in this process. But gender inequalities in access to education are well documented in rural areas in India. This gender inequality refers to that stage of human, social development at which "the rights, responsibilities and opportunities" of individuals will not be determined by the fact of being born male or female, in other words, a stage when both men and women realize their full potential.

The realization of full potential, the most fundamental prerequisite for women empowerment could b attained only through education. Amartya Sen also agrees with the above and makes a compelling case for the notion that societies need to see women less as passive receipts of help, and more as dynamic promoters of social transformation, a view strongly buttressed by a body of evidence suggesting that the education, employment and ownership rights of women have a powerful influence on their ability to control their environment and contribute to economic development (Augusto, Lopez-Claros, 2005).

Improving overall education provisions accessible to poor women involves reprioritizing expenditure patterns in the education sector. This can be made possible by increased allocations to basic education through non-formal adult education and literacy programmes. Spending at higher levels should be earmarked for encouraging greater female enrolment. Form a poverty

perspective; strategies which reduce the direct and opportunity costs of girls' schooling are most relevant.

Strategies to increase female education by reducing opportunity costs may particularly benefit girls from poor households (Zoe, Oxaal, 1997, p. 18) Introducing non-formal education provision is one way of reducing the opportunity cost of girls schooling by enabling them to combine work in the household with schooling.

Education for rural women and girls has a leveraging effect on social and economic development and democratization. It requires a holistic approach that recognizes the close inter-dependence of education and other livelihood factors. It is important to adopt a flexible approach which builds on their needs and given due attention to the intersection of gender, poverty and economic well being.

Distance Education:

Education significantly makes difference in the lives of women. Now a day, education has emerged as a matter of increasingly strategic importance in the information technology enabled globalized economy.

The term Distance Education has been applied to a tremendous variety of programmes serving numerous audiences via a wide variety of media. American Council of Education (ACE) defines Distance Education as a system and a process of connecting learners with distributed learning resources. Distance learners enjoy flexibility in terms of choosing the place and time of study. However, the degree of flexibility the students are able to enjoy depends on the availability of the media and learner's access to them (Sadia, Afroze, Sultana & others).

In India Open and Distance Learning has proved to be an effective tool to impact education for disadvantaged groups, to the neo-literate class of society, to people living in remote or rural areas, and to section of society which could not avail themselves of conventional education. The ODL system succeeded through building a wide network of students support services and flexible admission criteria (Sunil Kumar & others, 2008).

Distance Education in the rural context:

In rural areas elementary education is available but this cannot be said of higher level of education. Moreover India has poor secondary education infrastructure facilities. This is particularly one reason for low literacy rates among woman in rural areas. In this context

government of India have emphasized the open learning system and in particular, the distance education provided by the National open school. Government of India has taken special initiatives to enhance access and equity in higher education through distance learning mode particularly to persons from disadvantaged groups and those living in remote areas. The Indira Gandhi National Open University determines standards for open learning and distance education, and provides innovative and need-based general and continuing education through an integrated strategy consisting of print material, audio-video programmes, teleconferencing and personal counseling (Mala, Dutt, 2010).

The central Board of secondary Education by targeting working adults, woman and disadvantaged groups stated distance education at the secondary level in 1970s. In 2011-12 there were 519888 enrolments in the Open school.

The Open School Project and National Policy on Education were culminated to establish National Open School (NOS). It was established in 1989 under the Central Board of Secondary Education. The major objective has been to provide secondary and senior secondary education mainly to the dropouts. The courses offered and profile of the students enrolled in this are as follows:

- It is reaching all corners of the country including very remote areas through its almost 800 study centers.
- The enrolment has been increasing steadily with an annual growth rate of about 20% in the last two years.
- It remains to be predominantly urban with Delhi accounting for about one third of the enrolment.
- The enrolment of women and girls (about 32%), from socially weaker sections, disabled and those from geographically weaker sections of the community are to be considerably improved.

The NOS experience clearly shows that distance education is one of the most cost-effective models for providing access to secondary education in rural and sparsely populated areas. NOS are increasingly targeting its efforts of learning in rural areas and the proportion of rural students has increased to 60 percent of the total enrolment. The proportion of girls in NOS enrolment is, on average, 35 percent (Michael, Ward). The details are given in the table 3 on the text page:

IGNOU has a cumulative enrolment of about 15 lakhs. It has a network of 53 regional centers and 1400 study centers with 25000 counselors. The Distance Education Council an authority of IGNOU is coordinating the activities of 13 State Open Universities (Report of the 11th Five Year Plan, Government of India).

Table 3: Gender-wise Enrolment in Nos. 2007-2012

Year	Male	Female	Total
2009-10	247207	116809	364016
2010-11	271513	123892	395405
2011-12	305669	133235	438904
2012-13	328458	152376	480834
2013-14	353950	165938	519888

Source: NIOS, 2015

At present IGNOU have downlink facilities of video programmes. Hundred and forty centers at IGNOU Regional Centre and Study Centers and 151 under Women Empowerment Project of IGNOU is to organize women into effective self help Groups through the medium of training Certificate programme “Empowering Women through Self Help Groups”. Through the medium of training certificate programme “Empowering woman through self help Groups” Regular face-to-face counseling is also provide at the programme centers. The learners can also benefit from the other educational programmes telecast regularly over “Gyan Darshan”. The objectives of certificate programme include:

1. To strength ongoing efforts to train facilitators/master trainers of SHGs.
2. To evolve an effective and sustainable training network and resource of such trainers.
3. Empower the change agents to function more effectively as trainers and community organizers in helping set up SHGs and to address gender issues.
4. Provide guidelines for the establishment of micro-enterprises.
5. Provide basic legal literacy (IGNOU: The people’s University).

The Tamil Nadu Open University (TNOU) established by Act 27 of 2002 has benefited those who have been deprived of access to higher education, especially women and those who have dropped out of various reasons. The competency and skills of women learners after completion of TNOU programmes has increased as per the feedback given by the women learners.

The study of Thyagarajan (2009) points out that ninety percent of women learners have benefited and their status in the family and society got improved by their involvement with Distance Education. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) formerly known as Andhra Pradesh Open University was established in August 1982 by the state legislature of Andhra Pradesh. It is expected to play a 'complimentary role' in democratizing higher education in the state by providing education opportunities to the hitherto neglected sections. Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) was established in July 1989 to serve the state of Maharashtra in the Union of India. It is to promote the Open University and distance education system to achieve decentralization and reorganization of university education in the state (Kulandai, Swamy, V.C., 1995). It is worth mentioning that collaborating locally has greater chances of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as a collaborative forum for South Asia where possibilities for cooperation abound. Cultures, technological development, geographical conditions are not very different in this region and joint efforts in curriculum design favorable results. Such area specific collaboration in Asian region may also succeed in finding large learner segments (Chandra Bhushan Sharma, 2001, p.313.).

India has one of the largest Open Learning and Distance Education systems at tertiary education level in the world including one of the world's ten mega universities. However, their efforts have to be more open and flexible in this functioning; the courses offered and designing of materials should make a difference in learning for the students. The education offered should have the potential and provide possibilities for creating certain levels of empowerment.

Distance Education and gender goals:

The challenge of women empowerment potential of ODL clearly lies on its structure base on flexibility, learner-centeredness open ended strategies for utility and quality of education. ODL's empowering potentials are not above what the conventional systems do. But it is definitely supplementary or complementary to it. ODL has its own meaning and persona largely emanating from a list of missions which it can only perform- the positive ground of self-evaluation.

Flexibility, learner-centeredness, open alliance strategies to improve utility of education in terms of its spread effects and response quality may take ODL to unimagined heights. Less engagement with national social missions can make it complacent and force it in a direction of gloss, easy money and sporadic fame (Pandav, Nayak, 2001, p.281-82).

Chandra, Bhushan, Sharma (2001) points out that in some places universities and institutions of higher learning have not developed academic programs in certain areas of studies. Students wishing to take such courses have to travel abroad, often after quitting jobs. Such ventures cost high in terms of 'opportunity cost' and family dislocations. Such courses if made available through Distance Learning can help women, especially from rural areas satisfactory results. Distance Learning also has the potential to alleviate or remove some of the barriers or constraints that prevents women and girls from accessing educational opportunities such as illiteracy, poverty, time scarcity, socio cultural factors, mobility and relevancy. This can help in leading to women empowerment and gender equality. Easy access to learning can end the inferior position of women in society. It can also help in promoting improved health and employment opportunity. ODL provides various types and levels of education to be acquired by the women. Flexibility of access and study times and the potential to reach women in rural areas or women facing social barriers that limit their access to schools, make distance learning a promising educational approach for women (Farha, Mazhar, 2011).

Conclusion:

Distance education is more accessible for rural women. Women can study what they want and also from where they want. Moreover distance Education is advantageous because it is flexible. Women can study when they want, completing course work on their schedule, rather than that of college. Participating of women in Distance Learning is directly related to political and social changes in women's position within the family and society, technological changes in the work place, and the economic necessity of participation, and the job market and new job opportunities. Strategies to increase female education by reducing opportunity costs may particularly benefit girls from poor households, so, introducing non-formal education provision is one way of reducing the opportunity cost of girls schooling by enabling them to combine work in the household with schooling.

In rural situations where attending traditional schools is difficult or almost impossible, ODL can be used to bring education to the doorsteps. ODL if used in the right format will surely help in overcoming poverty and making the women financially independent. A lacuna in this field leading to lack of participating of women are the restricted access to the technology, basically lack of skills in using computers and lack of information. Hence more efforts are required to promote distance education using ICT, particularly to cover remote rural areas. Initiatives also have to be designed specifically for women and awareness need to be generated among women on the advantages of ODL and their potential to address specific problems faced by them. Choices of the courses made by the institutions must be an informed one. It should be guided by an understanding of women's issues and the needs of women in that region.

Finally, let the men of our country be changed and stop drug and drag the women on 'PYRE', be stop slaughtering of the 'SHAKUNTHALA'S, be fire of the 'ROOPA'S, and be stop rape and murder of the 'NIRBHAYA'S', as ours is the land of 'THE VEDAS', 'THE GEETHA', 'KALIDAS'S'. Let our society stop 'KILLING', 'YELLING', and doing blatant crimes against the women.

Let all of us viewing NOT the past, peeping into the future, acting rightly at present, the Governments, the non-governmental organization and the men living in the country encourage women for their empowerment in all the areas to strengthen our country economically achieving global significance through education.

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