

Empowerment of Women through ODL - NIOS a Case Study

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'You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women'

- Jawaharlal Nehru

This quote by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is so relevant in today's time. The nation where women are progressive, the nation is able to progress more. This is so evident in countries like United States of America, and most European countries, where status of women is second to none and they are very actively involved in all spheres of life. Women education plays a very important role in the overall development of a family and subsequently the development of any country. In India, the situation of girls in terms of education is extensively limited as it is dependent on various socio-cultural factors.

Challenges to Women Education in India

The main barriers to girls gaining an education seem to be economically or socio-culturally rooted. Even after almost 70 years of independence, gender discrimination is still prevalent in India. This can be seen from the literacy rates of both the genders. While the male literacy rate was more than 75% according to the 2001 Census, the female literacy rate was 54.16% and according to the 2011 Census, the male literacy rate is 82.14 while female literacy rate is 65.46 only. **Some of the barriers to women's education are:**

1. Reluctance of parents to invest in the education of the girl child due to socio-cultural reasons is one of the main factors barring women's education.
2. India being one of the biggest sources of agricultural produce in the world and women are actively involved in various agricultural activities. Girls are a valuable resource for

household and agricultural work and cannot be spared for going to school. This is one of the reasons that despite being enrolled in schools, girls often miss schools and eventually dropout.

3. Lack of basic amenities like separate toilet facilities for girls in the school is also one of the factors which prevent girls from coming to school.
4. Shortage of female teachers, also sometimes limits female participation in schools. With female teachers, girls not only feel comfortable, they also see them as their role models.
5. Lack of financial resources to fund for education.
6. It is commonly perceived that the role of women is limited to bear children, look after the husband and children and undertake domestic work.
7. In some communities, some men don't want to see women on the same pedestal as them.

Steps taken to promote women education and their reach:

The government of India has initiated a lot of schemes to encourage women education as:

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao with focus on ensuring education and participation for the girl child
Sakshar Bharat Mission for female literacy to promote adult education especially among woman.

SABLA - Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for empowerment of adolescent girls to provide nutrition for growing adolescent girls by provision of food grains.

Right to Education: RTE considers education as a fundamental right which will provide free and compulsory education to every child aged between 6 to 14.

Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalyaya (KGBV): Establishment of residential upper primary schools for girl.

National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level(NPEGEL): It is for reduction in the school dropouts by giving special attention to weak girls. In villages, women's groups are formed. These groups follow up/supervision on girl's enrollment, attendance.

Mahila Sangha: Under this scheme women's forums (Mahila Sangha) were created. It provides space for rural women to meet, discuss issues, ask questions, and make informed choices. It is implemented in ten states.

Rahstriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan: With focus on appointment of more female teachers in the school and separate toilet blocks for girls.

The situation of women education is definitely improving with a lot of steps taken by the government to support women's education in the country. As per census 2011, the growth of female literacy rate is 14.87% as compared to 11.72 % that of male literacy rate, which an indicator of the efforts is being made in the direction of women's education by the government.

Despite the focused efforts of the government in this direction, the results are not very encouraging. According to a report on *Evaluation of the Government run Schemes to educate the girl child* by Ruchira Sen, 2007-08, one of the troubles with the Centrally Sponsored Schemes including those for the education of girls and women is their system of disbursement of funds. This process is highly complicated and involves a step by step transfer of funds and release orders. This causes funds to be 'parked' or delayed at various levels and the benefits does not reach to the beneficiaries.

It is interesting to observe that although women constitute a major chunk of the workforce in rural areas especially with respect to agriculture, the percentage of women in skilled, technical and professional level in agricultural machinery, production, and marketing and extension services is just around 4% according to the UNESCO report. Here is a massive segment of working women badly in need of training through non-formal modes to help them adopt scientific and technological devices and practices to improve their work and productivity; however, their education for the same seems to be hugely lacking. (Nair Nisha, Women's education in India: A situational analysis, 2010)

Distance Education – The need of the hour

Given its flexibility and mode of delivery, the above barriers to access to higher education make distance education as one of the best option for women. The Open Distance Education can play an important role in educating the women in developing countries.

Distance education as non-formal method of education has advantages over the conventional learning. Some of these are:

- The materials are detailed, well illustrated.
- It is in self-learning form so need to go to school/college daily.
- They can earn while pursuing a course.
- It uses technology like radio, television for supplementing learning
- It enables people to study while working.
- It gives an opportunity for adult learners to pursue further education.
- Less expensive than the conventional method.

The NIOS

The National Institute of Open schooling has been working incessantly for more than 25 years to provide educational opportunities to a varied clientele particularly the members of less privileged sections like scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and especially women and girls, differently abled etc. In its endeavor for reaching the unreached, the NIOS has been marching ahead steadily to provide education through Open and Distance learning mode up to pre degree level to those who are unable to attend conventional schools for a variety of socio-economic reasons as well as to those who missed opportunities to complete school and developmental education for similar reasons.

Features and Flexibilities in NIOS: *a boon for female learners*

- **Age Limit:** There is no upper age limit for admission. However, the minimum age for enrolment is 14 years for the Secondary course and 15 years for the Senior Secondary course.
- **Choice in Medium of Instructions:** Hindi, English, Urdu, Marathi, Telugu, Gujarati, Malayalam, Tamil and Odia mediums at the Secondary stage. Hindi, English, Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati and Odia mediums at the Senior Secondary stage.
- **Choice of Subjects:** A learner has many subjects both from the Secondary or Senior Secondary to choose from.

- Combination of Academic and Vocational Courses : In order to make the NIOS courses more meaningful, a number of Vocational Courses are also offered in combination with academic subjects at the Secondary and the Senior Secondary level
- Continuous Assessment: During course of study, internal assessment will be done to inform progress through Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) and Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs).
- Flexible Scheme of Examination: Public examinations are conducted by NIOS twice in a year. On Demand Examination System (ODES) is an innovative step by NIOS in providing any time flexibility to appear for the exam.
- Credit Accumulation: You can choose to appear in anyone or more subjects in any examination and earn credit which will be accumulated till all five subjects required for certification are successfully completed within a period of 5 years of registration.
- Transfer of Credit: Learner can avail the facility of Transfer of Credit (TOC) to a maximum of two subjects passed from the recognized Boards.
- Part Admission: Under this scheme, you may take admission in one or more subjects but not more than four subjects. On passing, learner will be issued only the Mark sheet.
- Education of Disadvantaged Group: To cater to the special needs of people who are physically, mentally challenged, socially and geographically isolated marginalized and are from disadvantaged sections of the society such as street children, working children, rural women, the NIOS has special accredited institutions called Special Accredited Institutions for Education of the Disadvantaged (SAIED).

Women enrolment – Current Scenario

Vocational education is a separate stream of higher education aimed at providing opportunities to students to choose programmes of study towards gainful employment (Nisha Nair, 2010, Women's Education in India: A Situational Analysis, 2010).

The total enrolment in over 8000 institutions spread across the country catering to technical vocational Training, such as the Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) is of the order of 1.4 million, of which women constitute less than 28% (UNESCO report, 1991). Of the 950 or so ITIs including both government and private, 104 were set up exclusively for women giving training in

areas such as receptionists, electronics, book binding and the like. Even considering technical education imparted through polytechnics, 35 of the 450 recognized ones have been exclusively set up for women, providing training in areas such as pharmacy, food technology, textile design, commercial art etc. Although the rate of participation is gradually increasing, women constitute, on an average, only about 10 percent of total enrolment in technical and vocational education at post-secondary level, and about 28 percent at secondary and post-secondary levels, taken together.

However, NIOS has gone a step ahead and has come up with number of vocational courses which are not only employment oriented but also women centric. They are very popular with female learners.

The enrolment data of vocational courses reveals that more number of female learners take admissions in the vocational courses than males. This proves the impact of ODL on women's education. During 2014-15, 36.46% of males took admission in vocational courses as compared to 63.4% females which is a success in itself. (Table 1)

Table 1: Total & Gender Wise Vocational Admission 2015-16

Gender	Total	%
Boys	11299	36.00
Girls	19691	64.00
Total	30990	100.00

Table 2: Trade wise gender wise enrolment in selected vocational courses 2015-16.

Sl. No	Trade	Male	Female	Total
1.	Certificate in Basic Computing	603	1207	1810
2.	Certificate in Beauty Culture	28	5052	5080
3.	Certificate in Community Health	2994	975	3969
4.	Certificate in Computer and Office Applications	30	107	137
5.	Certificate in Computer Applications	877	746	1623

6.	Certificate in Cutting and Tailoring	46	5350	5396
7.	Certificate in Data Entry Operations	91	162	253
8.	Certificate in Desk Top Publishing	115	237	352
9.	Certificate in Dress Making	23	362	385
10.	Certificate in Early Childhood Care And Education	51	2111	2162
11.	Certificate in Indian Embroidery	6	48	54
12.	Certificate in Library Science(CLS)	244	255	499
13.	Certificate in Play Centre Management	8	33	41
14.	Certificate in Rural Health For Women (Gramsakhi)	0	64	64
15.	Certificate in Secretarial Practice	4	48	52
16.	Certificate in Stenography (English)	45	48	93
17.	Certificate in Typewriting (English)	28	34	62
18.	Certificate in Typewriting (Hindi)	202	82	284
19.	Certificate in Web Designing	91	84	175
20.	Certificate in Yoga	263	252	515
21.	Cutting, Tailoring and Dress Making	51	1509	1560
22.	Diploma in Secretarial Practice (PA/PS)	118	223	341

It can be seen from Table 2, that the enrolment of women in vocational courses of NIOS is way above their male counterparts. Similarly NIOS started a project namely HUNAR in 2008 under the national programme for education of girls at elementary level to impart job oriented education to minority girls of the age group 10-14 years. Various vocational courses were offered to them like Cutting and Tailoring, Beauty Culture, Basic Computing, Indian Embroidery etc. This was done in two phases and a total of 45,000 female learners were registered. In the year 2011, this project was extended for girls of age group 14-18 years. Total numbers of 5585 students were benefitted.

Strategies to be adopted

A review of research in distance education recommends the following for the women's wider utility of distance education. These suggestions are:

- State Governments should continue efforts to reduce and eliminate barriers that prevent and restrict women participation in learning activities.
- Parent Counseling.
- Increase use of mediums like video tutorials, community radio etc. will act as a supplement to the text material and reduce the requirement of a female learner visiting the centre, so that education reaches to the learner's home.
- Recognize the fact that student learning environments comprise the home as well as the educational institutions from which women study.
- Educators need to be sensitive to women's personal and unique circumstances and develop effective support systems.
- State should formulate policies to attract female learners in distance education learning such as scholarship schemes, incentives like providing laptops, easy loan schemes for further education. Also, parents should be given incentives like concession on various household and other utility items, if they enroll their girl child for an ODL course.
- Increase the number of women studies courses available via distance delivery and ensure that feminist perspectives to be incorporated into curriculum in other disciplines.
- Conduct research and collect data about actual interactions and process that students and tutors experience in distance mode learning.

Conclusion:

Women are keen to learn and earn for a living, we only need to create a conducive environment to support their living and earning. It is very important that women be encouraged to learn either academic or vocational education and enable themselves to sustain on their own without support which will enable them to be confident, independent and fearless.

Distance Education will continue to have an important role in women education and institutions like NIOS will be the first choice for women learners in school education, for gaining education irrespective of place, pace or age of learning. An approach that ensures the schools go to the girls

instead of the girl child having to struggle to reach the school is one possible direction in which NIOS can play a big role.

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