

# **Women Empowerment through Open and Distance Learning in India**

Dr. Anjali Shokeen  
Assistant Professor  
University School of Education  
GGSIIP University, New Delhi  
[anjalishokeen9@gmail.com](mailto:anjalishokeen9@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

Gender inequality is the serious problem for all the developing countries, where majority of women have been sufferers of social, cultural, political and environmental impacts of development. Lack of education is the most vital cause behind these inequalities. India is moving towards 21<sup>st</sup> century with a vision to be a part of economic superpowers. Education is the basis for the development of any nation. Education for all is one of the criteria through which the developmental goals of any country could be assessed and evaluated. Open and Distance Learning have been increasingly promoted as a key solution for the historically disadvantaged group i.e. Women. It has emerged as a tool for accessing higher education for women. ODL has been breaking almost all divisions in the education system based on gender, age, race, space, income, time etc. This paper explores the nature of open and distance learning mode 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 venture to attain gender equality

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Open Learning, Distance Learning,

## **Introduction**

Education is the most powerful instrument to enhance capabilities of an individual and to achieve the desired objectives for the social and economic development of a country. Education enables individuals to broaden their horizons and provide opportunities to raise voice in decision making. Unfortunately, since independence, women in India remained marginal beneficiaries of the Education system.

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 enrollment, 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.

Education is a fundamental right for all individuals and all the individuals in the society should be benefitted equally without any discrimination based on sex, creed or religion. 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. Government explores the use of distance education to provide education at large scale because of expensive conventional educational methods. This also results in excluding 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, Whats app, Skype etc. and there is absence of formal lectures (Janaki, 2006). According to Kwamong (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. Kwamong (2007) also observed that distance mode attracted women students as they got second chance to pursue their studies.

### **Open Learning & Distance Learning: Conceptual Clarification**

According to Commonwealth of Learning (COL), an inter-governmental organization, has differentiated Open Learning & Distance Learning. Open Learning is an approach which provides learners flexibility and choice i.e. what they learn, when they learn, how they learn where they learn and at what pace. Distance Learning is one form of Open Learning in which the learners and tutors are separated by geographical distance. Students are not present in person at

site in distance mode of learning. In Distance Learning, various modes like e-learning, video conferencing, e-mail etc. are used to access education whereas in open learning students are provided with study materials for the courses through study centers. It is very economical way to pursue higher education. There are no affiliated colleges to an open university whereas the distance education can be provided by either 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 uses ICT to enhance learning. It is a system of learning which blends

- Students support
- Makes flexibility in learning provisions
- Removes barriers to access
- Provides curriculum and instruction design
- Gives credit to prior learning
- Provides programme delivery
- Meets the diverse needs of the students

### **What is Women Empowerment?**

Women Empowerment means strengthening women to resist community, patriarchal forces, biases which are working with in 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, 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 molding 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**

- 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 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**

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 be regarded as a tool that enables women to access education and to overcome the various obstacles.

## **References**

- Ablodun, Fadeyi Olalekan, (2008). 'Distance Learning and Women Marginalisation: The Gender Orientation perspective' The fifth Plan – Commonwealth Forum on Open and Distance Learning University of London UK 13-17 July.
- Chaudhary, Pratima (1995). Women's Education in India-Myth and reality, Haranand publications, New Delhi.
- [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=18650&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=18650&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)
- <https://www.col.org/about/what-commonwealth-learning>

- Janaki, D. (2006). Empowering Women through Distance Learning in India. Paper presented at Fourth Pan Commonwealth Forum for Open Learning Conference, Sunset Jamaica Grande Resort, Ocho Rios, Jamaica, 30<sup>th</sup>October- 3<sup>rd</sup>November [.http://pcf4.dec.uwi.edu/viewpaper.php?id=329](http://pcf4.dec.uwi.edu/viewpaper.php?id=329) (Accessed on 27 December, 2016)
- Kwapong, O.A.T.F. (2007). Widening access to tertiary education for women in Ghana through distance education. Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, Vol.8,No.4.<http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/yonetim/icerik/makaleler/363-published.pdf>
- Malik, N.A. Belawati, T., and Baggaley, J. (2005). Framework of collaborative research and development on distance learning technology for Asia. Paper presented at the 19th Annual Conference, Association of Asian Open Universities, Jakarta, Indonesia.[http://www.pandora-asia.org/downloads/05-AAOU\\_MalBelBag.pdf](http://www.pandora-asia.org/downloads/05-AAOU_MalBelBag.pdf) (Accessed on 28 December, 2016)
- Msoffe, Rahma.(2016). The Role of Open and Distance Learning in Gender Equality and Women Empowerment - A Case of Diploma in Primary Teacher Education - The Open University of Tanzania, ISSN 2224-607X (P) ISSN 2225-0565 (Online)Vol.6, No.9, 20, pp-86-92. [www.iiste.org](http://www.iiste.org)
- Njaya, T. (2015).Women Empowerment through Open and Distance Learning In Zimbabwe. IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Vol.20, Issue 2, Feb. pp- 83-90. e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845.
- Saroj (2015). Role of Information Technology in Women Empowerment, Lakshya: Journal of Science & Management, vol. I, Issue Jan , pp-44-49. ISSN:2395-0862 (P) 2395-1060(Online).
- Satyanarayana, P. and Meduri, E.D.K. (2013). Advancement and Empowerment of Women through Open and Distance education <http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/2032> (Accessed on 27 December, 2016)