

## **ODL as a Tool for Women Empowerment: Reflections from National Institute of Open Schooling, India.**

By Dr Mamta Srivastava  
Deputy Director (Vocational Education)  
National Institute of Open Schooling  
India

[mamtasrivastava@nios.ac.in](mailto:mamtasrivastava@nios.ac.in) or [mss91ms@gmail.com](mailto:mss91ms@gmail.com)

India is the second most populous country in the whole world. Women comprise 48.5% which is nearly half of the population of India as per the Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, Statistical Year Book India 2015. The world economic forum on India says that 51% of women and 75% of men are literate. However the women participation in job market is quite low. Women's participation in development is very essential not only for achieving social justice but also reducing poverty.

Women participation and empowerment are fundamental women's rights to enable women to have control over their lives and put forth influence in society.

Education has been regarded as the most significant instrument for changing women's position in the society. It not only develops the personality and rationality of individuals, but qualifies them to fulfill certain economic, political and cultural functions and thereby improves their socio-economic status. Education can be an effective tool for women's empowerment.

Open and Distance Education (ODE) mode of learning has emerged as a powerful instrument for augmenting opportunities in the field of education and vocational education, especially for women in developing countries.

Skills development is a key to improving household productivity, employability and income-earning opportunities for all but especially for the women it leads to improvement of self esteem leading to sustainable development and livelihoods.

National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) an autonomous organisation under Ministry of Human Resource Development caters to the need of school dropouts and offers wide variety of programmes from academic to vocational and skill development.

The popularity of NIOS Vocational Education Programmes can be gauged from its impressive growth in the last five years with a cumulative student strength of about 1, 44,871 of which nearly 60 % are women .

Distance education institutions have the potential to convert Vocational Education in to reality, especially for women and other disadvantaged learners. Such institutions are, therefore, a boon for the unemployed and women in India. Through this paper the ODL as a tool for empowerment will be highlighted and NIOS initiatives towards women empowerment.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, Skills development, Vocational Education, Open and Distance Education.

Women empowerment is a global issue and is often discussed at various platforms. The issue of women empowerment was introduced at the International Women conference at Nairobi in 1985. Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life.

Women empowerment is an essential element in national development. Since women constitute half of the population there can be no development unless the needs and interest of women are fully taken into account. In fact, empowered women are a nation's strength. Since development means improvement in the living conditions of the society, as a whole, it is logical to expect that this also mean improved status for women.

Accordingly empowerment has become the key solution to many social problems. Empowerment of women is empowerment of family/household and in turn development of a nation of a country. Empowerment of women leads to benefit not only to the individual woman and to women groups.

Education is considered as one of the most important means to empower women with the knowledge skill and self confidence necessary to participate fully in development process.

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Literacy and level of education are considered as basic indicators of the level of development achieved by any society. Literacy is an important means of overall development of individuals enabling them to comprehend their social, political and cultural environment better and respond to it appropriately. Higher levels of education and literacy lead to a greater awareness and also contributes in improvement of economic and social conditions. It acts as a catalyst for social upliftment enhancing the returns on investment made in almost every aspect of development effort, be it population control, health, hygiene, environmental degradation control, employment of weaker sections of the society etc.

While the overall literacy rate works out to be 64.8 %, the male literacy rate is 75.3% and that for females is 53.7%, showing a gap of 21.6 percentage points between the sexes at the national level. The gap is more in the rural areas. In the urban areas, higher literacy rate has been recorded both for males and females.

Though education is important for every individual living on this earth, but it is more significant for women. Educating girls is not only important because it gives them an opportunity to earn but the most important reason of educating women is because they are the one who develop the whole family. No doubt, an educated woman can support her family in managing the budget as well as helping them save some money for future.

Thus educating a woman is actually providing her with a weapon to live up her customary part, fight with the challenges and bring positive change in her life. It is said that no nation can be a great nation unless and until they have educated and healthy mothers. Therefore it is utmost important to educate a woman because being a mother she is the one who will decide how the future generations will be. The future of a nation is dependent on well-groomed mothers.

In the words of Pt Jawaharlal Nehru the first Prime Minister of India “if you educate a man you educate an individual ,if you educate a woman you educate a whole family.”

About NIOS

India's National Open School (NOS) was established in 1989 by the Government to reach those who had dropped out of school or never been to school and who wished to study but ,for a variety of reasons not studying in regular schools. Over the years, the role of NOS expanded . In 2002, NOS was re-mandated to act as the national apex body for open schooling, and re-designated as the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). NIOS is both a teaching, and an examining and accrediting organization.

NIOS can be described as offering an alternative system to formal schooling and is termed as Mega School (Daniel, 2010) with the cumulative enrolment of 2.71 million students. Every year nearly 5 lakh (0 .50 million )students take admission in various programmes of NIOS. The vast majority of NIOS's secondary school students are out-of-formal-school learners and school drop-outs, working adults, housewives, sports personalities, learners from disadvantaged sectors of society and learners living in remote areas of India. NIOS operates through a network of 20 regional centres, 5 sub-centres, five departments at Head Quarter and more than 6000 accredited Institutions (AIs) and about 1425 Accredited Vocational Institutions (AVIs) in India, Nepal and the Middle East.

In NIOS the Academic and Vocational departments serves as the bedrock for all the educational and skill or vocational initiatives that are instrumental in playing and realising the institute's motto of qualitative learning. Both the departments carry forward the vision and mission of NIOS in letter and spirit.

The Academic Department encompasses within its operational preview an array of school education segments from pre primary to pre- degree levels. At present it offers secondary and Senior Secondary courses besides the open Basic Education at level A,B,C corresponding to 3, 5 & 8<sup>th</sup> level of formal system.

Whereas the Vocational Department is working in tandem with the National Agenda of Skilling the Youths. It is following the National Skills Qualification framework in implementing the vocational education.

## **NIOS Efforts in empowering women and girls**

### **1.Courses supporting girls and women**

NIOS has wide variety of vocational or skill development courses for girls and women leading to employment opportunities.

The few of the courses are Cutting Tailoring, Beauty Culture, Early Childhood Education, Indian Embroidery, Vermicomposting, Bakery and confectionary etc. amongst many.

The enrollment send in vocational education is women centre, is 60% of total enrolment is women. The data for the last 5 yrs is presented in the table below.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
2015 – 16	30,990	11299 (36.0 %)	19691 (64.0 %)
2014 – 15	32472	11840 (36.46%)	20362 (63.54 %)
2013 – 14	27020	9888 (34.74 %)	17632 (65.26 %)
2012 – 13	28035	11158 (39.80 %)	16877 (60.20 %)
2011 – 12	26354	9972 (39.08%)	16382 (60.92%)

Table: Enrollment in Vocational Courses ([www.nios.ac.in](http://www.nios.ac.in) /statistical report )

Amongst the learners enrolled, the most preferred age group is 14-25 yrs. The young learners came to NIOS for certification which helps in providing skills for self or wage employment. Skills development improves output, quality, diversity and occupational safety and improves health, thereby increasing incomes and livelihoods . Amongst many certified learners are engaged in the wage ,or self employment and supporting their families.

Similarly there are numerous sucessful girls/women from the academic stream of NIOS who are shining bright ,few of them are ;

- I. Ms Athrua Krishna an International accalaimed violinist
- II. MC Mary Com accomplished boxer
- III. Kavya Medhavan leading actress of Kerala
- IV. Ms Dipika Rebecca Pillakal professional squash player
- V. Ms Muktha Elsa George – film and T V serial actress

- VI. Leena Babu –film artist
- VII. Ms Jai Quehaeni R – professional Bharatyam Dancer and Tamil film actress

## **2 HUNAR Project for Muslim Girls for skill development in Bihar and Delhi .**

HUNAR is a unique project conceived by NIOS in collaboration with Bihar Education Project Council (BEPC) during the year 2008-09. This project had far reaching ramifications in terms of creation of education delivery mechanism, which is entirely community based and directed towards all round empowerment of Muslim girls in the state of Bihar. Under the project, skill training was provided to young Muslim girls in the age group 11-16. This Project was a unique and novel attempt, as it involved collaboration at various levels including grassroots level institutions like Madarsas and Maktabas. These institutions were selected in the neighborhood keeping in view of the residential locations of these young girls. The implementation of the programme was done in close collaboration with the community/religious groups. The financing of this programme was done by the BEPC, Bihar.

The Project had coverage of 13,768 girls from 37 districts of Bihar. The skill training was given in the 7 trades of NIOS. During the year 2010-11, Hunar Phase-II was implemented in Bihar in which 12,257 Muslim girls were admitted in 09 vocational courses.

HUNAR was also replicated in Delhi during the year 2011-12. The programme has strong bondage of education and skill training. The course materials are designed as per the level of the learners. The difficulty level of understanding the course materials and subsequently the training design as part of practicing a set of skills and those are well synchronized as per the basic learning needs of the learners. The programme was implemented with the following objectives:

- To empower, girls both socially and economically, and enhance their self esteem by providing vocational training in different trades;
- To motivate the school leavers to rejoin an educational stream;

In total 3664 Muslim girls were admitted in 10 vocational courses which were selected by the girls. In total 29,689 girls were provided skill training, and the impact study has been initiated.

**3. Collaboration between Government of Rajasthan through Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) project .**

The Rajasthan Council of Elementary Education, Jaipur (Rajasthan) year marked specific Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, Raj (KGBVs) the residential schools under Sarva Shiksha Abhyan (SSA) for girls, where these girls were imparted skill training free of cost to the girls enrolled with them. Nearly 150 KGBVs are accredited to NIOS for the trades Cutting, Tailoring & Dress Designing and Beauty Culture. Nearly 8000 girls are enrolled in this programme every year and are receiving the skill training under this programme. An independent study has been initiated to see the impact of skill training on the lives of these girls.

#### 4. Project ASHA Certification

The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) along with the National Health System Resource Centre, a technical wing under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), Gov. of India signed a MOU for certifying Nine Lakh (0.90 million) Accredited Social health Activists (ASHA) workers in five years. These ASHA workers are normally the woman of the village and are present in every villages of India.

The certification of ASHAs and accreditation of training institutes will contribute in improving the quality of training imparted to ASHA in addition to enhancing the competency and professional credibility of ASHAs in providing quality health care services in the community. The project was initiated in the year 2015 and is being implemented in phased manner in the entire country.

#### **Conclusion**

Through education women can be independent, self-reliant and powerful in the society. Education made them empowered and self-reliant to live better and respective life. Indeed, education is an important instrument for changing and empowerment of women. Indeed, education can play a significant and vital role in development of empowerment of women.

While every effort is being made by NIOS to ensure that individuals from all segments have access to quality learning and skilling opportunities through alternative learning pathways. Open schooling provides scope for individuals to complete their schooling anytime in life- with its in-built flexibilities of place and pace. Used judiciously, open and distance learning (ODL) can make a strong contribution to strategic planning and improvements of life.

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