



## OPEN SCHOOL AND DISTANCE LEARNING TO EMPOWER RURAL WOMEN IN INDIA



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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims at explaining the scope of using Distance Learning materials for women empowerment in the rural areas through enhancing literacy, business skill and social awareness. The paper also identifies possible barriers in using Distance Learning tools to enhance women literacy and business skill and recommends some possible corrective measures. In this case, the possibility of partnership with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), role of technologies has been verified. Experience of IOU's (India Open University) Secondary



School Certificate (SSC) programme and Open University project on entrepreneurship skill training for poverty alleviation to rural women in India have also been explained in the paper. Although around half of rural manpower is female, they are in backward condition economically, socially and politically as they cannot participate in income generating activities due to several constraints like lack of literacy, lack of business skill, social and religious restrictions, dependency on males, responsibility of bearing children, etc. In past, the rural women didn't have access to business credit because they didn't have resource endowment and thus they couldn't provide anything as collateral. However, credit sourcing is no longer difficult as recently several micro-credit programmes have been initiated by some Government Organizations (GOs) and also by a number of NGOs where the rural women can get funds without any collateral and can enhance their economic condition by utilizing these funds properly. However, getting capital is not all. They need to know how to utilize the capital and extract the maximum benefit out of that. Otherwise, they will not be able to continue with their businesses. Since for microcredit, the interest rate is relatively high, the rural women must extract more revenue (at least capital + the interest + a margin) to survive. Therefore, it is the crying need for the rural women to have literacy and proper business skill for their survival. Recently, government undertook several schemes for ending poverty enhancing female education and scholarship. For example, free education for the female students up to higher secondary and Degree level, stipend for the female students up to secondary and degree, PG and research level, etc. These initiatives certainly had significant impacts on female education and thus widely appreciated; however, a large section of rural

female, especially the adults, cannot be included in those programmes. Due to the socio-cultural and family specific constraints, the rural adult females are unable to participate in the conventional on-campus literacy schemes. Also, there is no management skill training programmes offered by the government for them. Although some NGOs have some skill training programme for the rural women, these are very limited as compared to that required. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) tools can be used successfully to provide literacy and business skill training to a wide range of rural women.

**Keywords:** Rural women empowerment, literacy, business skill, opens and distance learning, GO-NGO's partnership, Indian Open University (IOU), Secondary School Certificate (SSC).

### INTRODUCTION :

Development is a process of structural change in the economic, political, social and cultural domains. It starts with people as they are the primary and ultimate focus of all development. It empowers rural women through Distance Learning in India, historically explores the causes and reasons for long denial of formal education to women. In recent times, Distance Education has emerged as a boon to women of all ages to equip themselves intellectually through acquisition of knowledge, leading them to new radical methods of thinking, and alternative, lateral perspectives on existing information thus rendering them more autonomous and liberated. It reviews aspects of Gender and distance learning, participatory trends of women in Distance Learning in India, barriers affecting women's advancement in academia, impact of Distance Learning on women learners, gender technology and distance learning, technologies for improving distance learning, limitations of distance education technologies, the Indian experience of distance learning. It also relates the success story of Distance Learning programmes for women run by the Open School and Distance Education in the country. It also outlines a few important issues for policy action to increase the participation of women in Distance Learning for their empowerment.

The broader goal of development is to bring the entire population into the mainstream of the national development process, both as contributors and beneficiaries. Development is the development of an individual, each according to his or her potential and in this sense education is a crucial aspect of development. The concept of development and the role of educational systems (both formal and non-formal) are determined by the socio-political economic feature and cultural patterns of each nation. 'Education is no longer limited to either schooling, college, or the production of entrepreneurs, capable of increasing the gross national products, but rather aims at the development of human resources for a wide range of purposes (Motilal Sharma)<sup>7</sup>.

Large increase in population coupled with a growing awareness of the benefits of education are leading governments to explore the possibility of using alternative means to provide education on a large scale, particularly as conventional educational methods are becoming increasingly expensive. One such alternative that countries in the region are considering is Distance Education. Distance Education is a global and rapidly growing phenomenon which offers formal learning opportunities to people who would not otherwise have access to schooling or college education. Teachers and students are separated by physical distance and the means by which they communicate range from basic print material and the use of postal services to highly sophisticated communication technologies.

The special characteristic of distance education is that it is endowed with high flexibility and can meet the demands of education for all and 'continuing education' which the conventional education system is unable to meet. Further, distance education takes education to places and people hitherto unreached, transcending social, economic and geographical equality and thereby opens a new vista in

our striving towards breaking the barriers of 'opportunity and equity'. Through distance education it is easier to transport knowledge to people than transport people to the people of knowledge. Because of these special features of distance education, it benefits certain categories of people who for various reasons are unable to avail of the formal education system. These include persons without formal qualifications, persons belonging to different age groups, disadvantages groups, and employed persons. There are large percentages of rural women in all the above categories. Thus women as a category could really take advantage of the provision of distance education in a large measure. (Jaya Indiresan).

The growing social awareness across the globe has brought a number of issues to the fore among which gender equality and empowerment of women are very significant. Discrimination against Rural women in the form of male-female differentiation constitutes the core of the gender-based system. The education is the biggest liberating force and the rise in the levels of education which nourishes progressive outlook and the advent of industrialization and modernization have effected a sea change in the attitudes and thinking pattern of the people. The empowerment is not essentially political alone in fact; political empowerment will not succeed in the absence of economic empowerment. The scheme of micro financing through Self Help Groups (SHGs) has transferred the real economic power in the hands of rural women and has considerably reduced their dependence on men. This has helped in empowerment of women and building self-confidence, but lack of education often comes in the way and many a times they had to seek help from their husbands for day-to-day work viz; bank, accounts, etc. The Open School and Distance Education provides an opportunity to these women to improve their skills. The higher level of learning will help them to learn skill and vocations and play an effective role in the management of SHGs and Ending Poverty

### MEANING OF EMPOWERMENT:

Empowerment is not essentially political alone; it is a process having personal, economic, social and political dimensions with personal empowerment being the core of the empowerment process. In fact political empowerment will not succeed in the absence of economic empowerment. The Scheme of Micro-financing through SHGs create empowerment promoting conditions for women to move from positions of marginalization within household decision making process and exclusion within community, to one of greater centrality, inclusion of voice.

The Social processes of Micro financing programmes strengthens women's self esteem and self worth, instill a greater sense of awareness of social and political issues leading to increased mobility and reduced traditional seclusion of women. Most importantly micro-finance programmes enable women to contribute to the household economy, increasing their intra-household bargaining power. Thus, micro financing through Self-help groups has transferred the real economic power in the hands of women and has considerably reduced their dependence on men. But the lack of education often comes in the way and many a times they had to seek help from their husbands or any other educated man/woman for day-to-day work. The political as well as economic empowerment will not succeed in the absence of women education in skills and vocations they require the most.

The Governments in developing countries therefore must take effective steps to enroll the members of SHGs in the Schemes of open schooling or any other distance mode to impart education. Although it is also true that economic empowerment alone does not always lead to reversal in gender relationship.<sup>8</sup>

### **RURAL WOMEN IN INDIA:**

In the rural areas, women are more disadvantaged than men. The overall situation of rural women is as follows:

**Role-playing in family:** Usually, the head of the family is man. Females are just housewives. Their main responsibilities are bearing and raising children, preparing foods for the family members, working in the family farms, and go to daily wage work for other land or forms etc.

**Resource endowment:** Most of the rural poor families do not have any fixed asset. Even if some families have some fixed assets (land, for example), females do not have much authority on the family assets. That's why they cannot use assets as collateral to get loan from commercial Banks.

**Income earning activities:** Most of the females are not involved in marketable production activities. Their production activities are not counted in monetary terms in family income accounting. They have to depend on the males' income. Even if they have opportunity to engage themselves in production activities outside the family, family structure does not allow them to do that. Their activities are mostly limited at the family level and thus, are not monetized. However, under micro-credit programmes, recently rural women have started undertaking projects by their own.

**Literacy:** Most of the adult rural women cannot even write their names, though government's recent initiatives such as 'free education for females', 'food for education programme', etc. have enhanced the literacy rate among the young, primary, secondary school females.

**Access to capital:** Since the rural women do not have free access to the family assets, before they couldn't source liquid or physical capital because the financial institutions asked collateral. However, recently a number of NGOs and some government specialized/non-specialized financial institutions have initiated micro-credit programmes from which the rural poor women can get financial support without any collateral to undertake their own or family enterprises.

**Entrepreneurial skill:** The rural women can now undertake their own micro projects with the financial support provided by NGOs and GOs. Already a large number of women are running their businesses under various micro-credit programmes. However, they have to frequently face uncertainty with their businesses, which may emerge as a great threat to the viability and sustainability of the micro-credit programmes in the long run. The major deficiency of the rural poor women is the lack of entrepreneurial skill. They suffer a lot for this deficiency when they run their business. In most cases, the rural women move by 'learning by- doing' principle, which is sometimes costly for them and also for the funding agencies.

**Access to technologies:** The rural poor women do not have access to modern technologies due to the lack of affordability and accessibility. However, they have little access to radio and T.V. broadcasts.

### **GENDER IN OPEN SCHOOL AND DISTANCE EDUCATION:**

Rural women constitute about fifty percent of the total population, but they form only nine percent 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 there by 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.

Women form the pivotal point around whom family life and living revolves. When economic level of a family goes down, women are the worst sufferers. The poorer the family the greater is its dependence on women's economic productivity. Also illiteracy among women often leads to a poor self-image, lack of knowledge and self-worth, making them susceptible to being deprived of their rights and playing an active role in the society and restricts their economic productivity. Literacy among women opens the possibility of unlimited exposure to new information and more importantly to new ways of thinking and new perspectives on existing information. 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.

Women's Development since 1901 shows the slow growth of female literacy. It was 0.60% in 1901 and grew slowly to 1.05 in 1911, to 1.81 in 1921, 2.93 in 1931, 7.30 in 1941, 7.93 in 1951, to 12.95 in 1961, 18.69 in 1971, to 24.82 in 1981 39.29 in 1991 and to 53.67 in 2001. 67.6 in 2011. While the Indian data is so dismal, the rural female literacy rate was 1.06 in 1961 and it increased to 3.92 in 1971, 4.43 in 1981, to 5.33 in 1991 and 6.55 in 2001, 10.33 in 2011 while the literacy rate of males in India was 80.63 in 2001. 82.14 in 2011.

These data clearly shows that there is a gendered imbalance in the acquisition of education.

### EDUCATION EMPOWERS FOR RURAL WOMEN:

It is also observed that open education, distance education at present is mainly catering to the needs of elites in the urban areas and it has to make in road in rural areas where India lives. In rural areas women are totally dependent on men, as they do not have economic power to spend. The historical relationships with their husbands can be seen as influenced by historical factors that shape the social structures of how they are subordinated. It has been observed in several research studies that women do experience a double day, as they return to study combined with their domestic roles. The Policy planners must think to integrate the economic benefits with education. I suggest the Differential Rate of Interest (DIR) for women doing any Course through Open schools or any other mode of Open and Flexible learning.

Women Education is sometimes also perceived as a threat by their husbands. Studying is seen as changing the identity of the partner from being subservient and domesticated (Morgan 1995: 321)9 It has been noted that education as such serves to empower women. This may be on the most basic level through literacy programmes or on more advance levels through university study and even Ph. D. programmes. A UNICEF study (1998) on Violence against women in South East Asia concluded that compulsory schooling for all girls would be a long-term measure to reduce violence against women by providing them qualifications as the basis for getting a job which in turn will enable them to earn a their own income and improve their status. Thus the SHGs should in-fact also be converted in to Self Help Study Groups that will give them not only enhanced income but also enhanced esteem and self confidence to do something meaningful for the society as a whole. They should realize that they are not the isolated unproductive but important wheel for the smooth running of the society. The economic incentives and effective NGOs participation will definitely make the women empowerment a reality from a distant dream at present.

### OPEN SCHOOL & DISTANCE EDUCATION LEARNERS:

State-wise enrollment and Teachers and others in all correspondence PG, UG, Diploma and

Certificate courses Institutions in India (2001-2002) reveal that for India as a whole, about 11,23,344, 18,70,554 in 2010, 20,09,709 in 2013-14 have been enrolled of which 10,04,105 are women. Further 21,120 male teachers were involved in Distance Education teaching while female teachers constituted only 2,241 for the years 2001-2002. In 2013-14 3,542 Barriers affecting rural women's advancement in Academia.

Conventionally, the historical exclusion of women from the respected ranks of the academy is blamed on women. Women are deficient in natural intellectual ability, women are temperamentally unstable, they lack motivation and women's domestic preoccupations preclude public life and so on.

Throughout history, women have vigorously challenged the concept of preordained female subservience. Not until the twentieth century, however, have women been able to organize world-wide initiatives toward rectifying the imbalances. The issue of women's lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem is well known through various research studies. The lack of self confidence however is endemic to women and cuts across class, caste and even national boundaries. Coupled with the confidence issue is 'finding their voices'. This is a positive reinforcement and an assurance that women are intelligent and that they are capable of learning. According to a few research studies, it was found that to their low self esteem, some women stopped attending study centres because they were intimidated by their male colleagues or by the tutor. Most women think within the parameters of their traditional social conditioning and this is reflected in their choice of courses of study.

To sum up the barriers for the low percentage of enrollment of women in higher education, there are two distinct aspects to women's participation in higher education. One is access and the other is continuation.

### **DISTANCE EDUCATION: THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE:**

India is the seventh largest and the second most popular country in the world. About three-quarters of the poor population live in villages and their main occupation is agriculture. India achieved Independence in 1947 and has adopted a parliamentary form of government based on universal adult franchise and a mixed economy. India had made notable advances in various sectors, but still is a developing country. Distance Education in India has a history of nearly three decades. Persistent efforts have been made by both government and voluntary organizations to achieve universal literacy and expand opportunities for female education.

### **THE SCHOOL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IS A BORN:**

- ❖ to career women who aspire to enhance their personal and professional competence
- ❖ to home bound women who wish to profitably use their time and resources to satisfy their deferred academic aspirations
- ❖ to the rural girls who have no access to the mainline educational system.
- ❖ Further the Open University Scheme seeks to open the avenues of education to school dropouts, women entrepreneurs and artists, among others, who wish to enhance their natural expertise and aptitudes through formal learning.

### **OPEN SCHOOL AND DISTANCE EDUCATION AND COURSE STRUCTURE IN INDIA:**

In Indian School of Distance Education and open universities helps in overcoming the rigidity generally encountered in the courses of study offered by conventional universities. The various courses offered are Ph. D. programme in all disciplines Arts, Commerce & Management and selected Science subjects with a gender perspective.

The M.Phil courses will include Computer Science, English, Economics, Education, Family Life Management with specialization, Guidance & Counseling, Music, Mass Communication, Psychology, Sociology, Tamil, Kannada, Sanskrit, Urdu Hindi, Telugu, Malayalam, Hotel Management Studies, Women's Studies. The PG Courses includes English, Tamil, Guidance & Counseling, MBA, Music, Women's Studies, M.Com, Master of Computer Applications. More than 60 to 62 Post Graduate subjects. The undergraduate courses will lead to BBA, B.Com, BCA, B.A. English, Tamil, Kannada, Sanskrit, Urdu Hindi, Telugu, Malayalam Music, Sociology, Psychology and History. More than 80-85 under-graduate subjects.

Apart from formal graduate and post graduate degrees, PG Diploma courses are introduced like PGDCA, PGDGS, PGDAS, PG Diploma in linguistic, PG Diploma in Basava, PG Diploma in Swamy Vivekananda Studies, PG Diploma in Kanaka Studies, PG Diploma in Foreign languages, PG Diploma in NGO Management, PG Diploma in Herbal Studies and one year Diploma Course in Self Help Groups, Food and Beverage Service, Food Production, House Keeping Management, NGO Management, Career and Educational Counseling and Certificate Courses includes Bridge Course in English for Rural Students, English for Official and Business Communication, Spoken English-Basic Course, Herbal Cosmetology, Music, etc.

### OFF-CAMPUS COURSES:

This is an interesting and more accessible method of reaching the learners through Distance Education. The study centres will be in selected areas of the State or country. The following courses are offered through Off-Campus programme. Humanities will include BBA (Hospital Administration), Applied Sciences includes B.Sc. Applied Biochemistry, Microbiology, Lab Technology), Diploma Courses includes Ophthalmic Techniques, Child Care Training, Nursing Assistance, Food Production, Food and Beverage Service, Front Office Management, House Keeping Management, PG Diploma courses includes Special Education for persons with Multiple Disabilities (neurological and physical), Costumes Design and Fashion Technology and Hotel and Catering Management. Include more than 60-62 PG courses and more than 80-82 UG courses run in Open school and distance education in India.

### SUGGESTIONS:

Open School and Distance Education carry educational messages from the humanities to science courses, from elementary to higher education and training and from technical to health curricula. The following suggestions are made to increase the participation of rural women in distance education for their empowerment.

- ❖ Awareness programme regarding the distance education courses for women in urban, rural and tribal areas will provide opportunity for women to gain knowledge about existing educational facilities.
- ❖ The courses for women in Open School and distance education should be application oriented so that it will help them in their economic, social, cultural and political empowerment.
- ❖ The course materials should be simple, preferably in regional languages to make in rural women more comfortable to use.
- ❖ The gender component should be incorporated in the syllabus of all discipline.
- ❖ The fee should be affordable to rural weaker sections of the society especially rural women.
- ❖ Gender sensitization programmes should be organized to sensitize the teachers, learners and others.
- ❖ Confidence building and personally building programmes are essential to help women to overcome resistance in distance learning.

- ❖ Rural women should be motivated and trained to use technology for faster and easier learning.
- ❖ A separate channel for local T.V. and radio must be introduced to promote distance education for rural women.
- ❖ Study centres with a library should be opened in each village to facilitate rural women.
- ❖ A good response is required from the distance education providers for the enquiries of the learner from various places.
- ❖ A recognition is also required for distance education degrees among the educational institutions, employers and in the society.
- ❖ The quality of the study materials should be enhanced and availability should be made in time for the learners.
- ❖ The contact programmes in Distance Education should be flexible to suit to the timing of working women in urban and rural areas.

### CONCLUSION:

The first step for the women empowerment is to enhance their literacy level and uplift their entrepreneurial skill. SSC programme of IOU certainly serves the purpose of enhancing literacy as well as the general level of education for the rural women. The main constraint in the SSC programme is the heavy dependence on the text materials. Since the students don't have much access to other educational media, printed textbooks have become the main vehicle of knowledge transmission in the programme. As a result, if the students face any difficult in understanding the contents, they always depend on tutors and fellow students. That's why, the demand for more and more tutorial sessions are always high in the programme, which is a diverging tendency from Distance Learning system. Therefore, adopting more and more distance education media is very crucial in this case. Only IOU alone will not be able to do that. Government intervention can be very fruitful in this case. For example, government can allow more chunk in TV and Radio for IOU programmes or can allow IOU to use a separate channels for broadcasting its programmes. At the same time, government can provide TV and Radio sets to the rural female groups. This kind of initiative will help the rural women learn from the programme most effectively.

Distance Education is an important milestone in the development of higher education and has great potential to equalize opportunities and take higher education to the door steps of women. It is expected that this school of distance education will lead to empowerment of women especially among rural and tribal women. The presence of rural women in open school distance education is significant not only in the success of women as functionaries in the field but also in the recognition of women's experience as the basis for an adequate theory of distance education. Theories of distance education generated by men cannot speak for the experience of women. Women are necessarily central figures in developing appropriate theory and practice for a growing female learner population.

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