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WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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Abstract

Women empowerment is a global issue which receives global attention. UN included gender equality and women empowerment in its developmental goals.. Since Open and Distance learning provides and facilitates flexible and adoptable in bringing learning opportunities which are compatible with the cultural and other responsibilities that often restrict women continuing education and their empowerment. It is a multidimensional process that enables women to participate fully in social, economic, political and educational spheres of life. Education is universally recognized as one of the most effective instruments of empowerment. However, millions of women in India continue to face barriers to accessing higher education due to poverty, geographical isolation, social restrictions, early marriage and domestic responsibilities. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has surfaced as an innovative educational approach that addresses these challenges by providing flexible, affordable and accessible learning opportunities. This paper examines the role of Open and Distance Learning in promoting women's empowerment in India, highlighting its contribution to inclusive education, economic independence, skill development and social transformation. It also discusses recent trends in women's participation in higher education and identifies the contributions of various institutions in facilitating the women's education through strengthening ODL as a tool for women empowerment.

Keywords: *Women Empowerment, Open and Distance Learning, Higher Education, Gender Equality, Distance Education, Women's Development, Inclusive Education.*

INTRODUCTION:-

The significant impact that education left on women and their lives is well documented. It has been shown that educated mothers are able to contribute more efficiently to enhance the quality of their children education. (Raj- 1982), Chowdary -1985) Poverty and illiteracy are positively correlated. The poor feel very uncomfortable for sharing their earnings in favor of education. Another factor which goes against the education is the dominant social code in the subcontinent of India.The impact of cultural norms on women's education is clearly notable.

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Though India has adopted education as an instrument for social and economic transformation but the efforts of Indian government has not yielded significant positive results about girls and women education as it is still moving at low pace as records reveal. Despite significant improvements in literacy and educational participation, women in India continue to experience limited access to the higher education. Socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, family responsibilities and geographical barriers avert women from pursuing formal education. In this context, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as an effective alternative to conventional education

Women's empowerment is a precondition for the sustainable social and economic development. It involves enhancing women's access to education, employment, healthcare, decision-making and leadership opportunities. And education plays an essential role as it empowers women with knowledge, skills, confidence to actively participate in building a sustainable society. The scenario of girls' education, the situation is not an encouraging with fewer girls visiting school compared to boys. The increasing and ever growing expenditure of schooling is another major reason. Parent's affordability of educating children is an issue in itself, they rather prefer to engage their daughters as domestic help which keep many young brilliant girls away from schools.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a powerful instrument for advancing women's education in India, especially for those who face barriers related to geography, socio-economic conditions, family responsibilities or early marriage. Institutions such as Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), State Open Universities, Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU) and other online learning platforms have significantly expanded educational opportunities for women.

THE ROLE OF OPEN AND DISTANCES LEARNING IN WOMENS' EDUCATION

Open and Distance Learning or Open Educational Resources (OER) is a relatively new concept which is gaining attention of the policy makers on global scale. Quin Tang, Assistant Director General for education at UNESCO stated "By formulating, developing and applying policies that explicitly address equity and inclusion in education, governments are taking critical step to build stronger, more harmonious solutions". ODL allows learners to study independently through self-learning materials, online resources, audio-visual content, and learner support services. Its flexibility in terms of admission, location, pace, and mode of learning makes it particularly beneficial for women. Studies indicate that ODL has become an important mechanism for extending educational opportunities to women who have traditionally been excluded from the mainstream education. Women empowerment is also about the development of mental ,economical and physical capacity, power , self confidence and skills to operate meaningfully in their social set up with which they experience more favorable level of social recognition and an enhanced economic status.

Women can be regarded as an unreached group when the issue to access education is considered world over .The culture in India supports boys' education compared to girls' which substantially reduced the number of women in higher positions today. General data on education show that their male counter parts women have attained better level of education.

The importance of women's education was first realized in the 18th C. UNESCO has underlined the importance of access to technical and vocational education of the girls for the

economic and social development. Particularly [MDG's] Millennium Development Goal were set at the Millennium Summit of World's Heads of State in New York.-2000 that included MDG-3 to promote gender equality and empowering women- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005 and at all levels by 2015.

According to 2011 census data of India, women account for 50% of the Indian population and as per the 2011census, overall literacy rate in India is- males:-70% and females;-6.1%, urban males;-86.3% and females 72.92% , rural males:-70.7% and females 46.1%. It is clear therefore that a large number of women in India are still outside the existing higher education system. As mentioned that women in India represent 50% adult population but only 33% of the labor force. Involvement in the political exercise influencing the decision making process is still far away from women largely.

The role of women's education effects not only lives of women but also the lives of children and other dependents. Professional and technical education is also likely to enhance women's economic independence by equipping them with required skills. The concept of development and the role of educational system, both formal and informal are determined by socio- political, economic features and cultural patterns. Large increase in population coupled with a growing awareness of the benefit of the education are compelling governments to explore the possibility of using alternative means to educate masses at large. And there can be no better alternative than open and distance learning system since conventional method of education being very expensive in becoming out of reach for a lay man.

FINDINGS OF VARIOUS SURVEYES AND RESEARCHES DONE ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ODL

These Case Studies selected from women who made their dreams come true and opted to break the shackles of ignorance and poverty, came out with their experiences and journeys towards education.

Study- I:- MCA; Mauritius College of Arts-2011

This result is based on the findings of a survey initiated by ICDE member institution which wa aimed to uncover demographic and socio economic details and reasons for opting ODL system. Women institute a substantial proportion of those facing problems to attend education due to various restrictive socio-economic factors. **Findings** indicate that a significant no of respondents are married working women with children who find ODL a flexible learning frame work adjustable with various other duties. They acknowledge ODL role in opening the doors of learning for women.

The survey which was conducted in January 2000 aimed at gathering demographic and socio-economic details of along with the reasons for opting ODL. Respondents who constituted mature age working women highlighted appropriateness and convenience of ODL as a mode of learning. They opted ODL for the following reason: (a) Self learning materials (b) Classes planned on holidays (c) ODL reduces the cost of learning and makes the higher education reachable (ICTE, 2009). ODL has the potential to lift socio-economic barriers limiting women excess to higher education thereby contributing significantly to their empowerment.

Study-II:- Women Empowerment And Open Learning ; Case Studies From Bangladesh

The results from the above Case Studies show how women became able to overcome social and religious barriers by their own willingness and enlightened support from different sides.

Findings show the encouraging realities that through distance education women are becoming an asset of the family and country in urban as well as rural areas with wider contacts, the growing necessity both the spouses to earn and other contemporary changes occurring in people's lives are making urban and rural women aware of their need of becoming independent.

Study- III:- Empowerment of Women Through Distance Learning in India

Women empowerment is an active multidimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. This study carried out a survey through which it tried to find out the state wise enrollment of men and women in the correspondence courses institutions in India (2001-2002).

The survey reveals that State Wise enrollment and Teachers in correspondence courses that for India as a whole, out of 11, 23, 344 enrolled students the numbers of women was only 4, 04, 105. Further 1, 120 male teachers were involved in Distance Education teaching while female teachers were only 241 for the year 2001-02. Throughout history, women have powerfully challenged the concept of female subservience. The pathetic tale of women's lack of confidence and low self esteem is exposed through various research studies. **Findings** however are interesting to note that many women now a days are not satisfied with their current status of educational attainment and have aspirations to enhance their qualification besides the emerging economic necessity to increase the family income.

Study IV:- Women Empowerment Through Professional and Technical Progress- A Case Study of IGNOU in India.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said "To awaken the people, it is women who must be awaken; once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves" (Pillai 1995) "At the national level educating women has resulted in improved productivity, improved income and economic development as well as a better quality of life, leading to a notable healthier and better nourished population" (World Bank 2001.)

When the present study reviewed few other studies, there appeared a general **finding** that more women have recently achieved their first job, mostly in education as teaching faculty and most of them were married (Mclntosh-1973), Kanwar (1995) stressed the need for increasing the upward mobility of women in distance education institutions. But women students continue to face problems while studying through ODL system. Rathore et al. (1996) revel that lack of student support system creates problems for women learners in ODL system. (Bhalalusesa-2001) found that there are factors like the far away localities of the study centre that makes studying difficult for women. Sharma (1996) argues for empowerment of women through increased effective use of distance education system. **Findings:-** It is concluded that to understand the development of improved status of women through ODL, we need to develop, find and gather data about the performance of women pursuing academic progress through the ODL system and determine the real changes and achievements in their social and economic status. This can be done by various open and dual mode universities (Ex.. MANUU) across the country. The Case Studies selected from women who made their dreams come true, who opted to break the shackles of ignorance and poverty came out with their experiences and journeys towards education. A survey conducted by IGNOU show that most of the female learners were benefitted after graduating from the MBA and MCA programs of IGNOU. Most of them were

employed making it possible that advanced education might lead to desirable jobs with good pay, job satisfaction and improved status etc. Several studies show that when women earn more, then their status and power in the family improves (Swamy 2004).

Cultural constraints.

The studies conducted so far (a few mentioned in this paper) on women empowerment through Distance Education in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Africa, Mauritius, Ghana and India enlighten us that: Women gained confidence, Improved their career opportunity, Attained more degrees for satisfaction, Got a second chance of learning, Developed a better decision making capacity, Their vision was broadened, Became economically independent, Living with enhanced status in the families, Became morally economically socially strong ,Could fight against domestic violence and other odds

ODL has helped democratize higher education by reducing barriers related to age, gender, income, and location. Women who had previously discontinued their studies are able to re-enter the education system through flexible learning opportunities, Economic Empowerment, Education obtained through ODL enhances women's employability, professional competence, and entrepreneurial skills. Programs in education, management, healthcare, information technology, and vocational disciplines enable women to improve their income-generating capacities, Many women use ODL to acquire job-oriented skills while continuing employment or managing households. ODL facilitates lifelong learning and contributes to greater awareness of legal rights, health, financial literacy, and social participation. Though the percentage of women in Distance Education in India is between less presently but the achievements made through ODL are not worthy. Recent data indicate considerable progress in women's participation in higher education in India.

According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2023-24:

•Female enrolment increased from 1.57 crore in 2014-15 to 2.24 crore in 2023-24, representing a growth of 42.2%. •The Female Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) increased from 22.9 in 2014-15 to 31.2 in 2023-24. •The Gender Parity Index (GPI) reached 1.08 in 2023-24, demonstrating higher participation of women than men in higher education. •Female participation in STEM disciplines increased, with women accounting for 44% of STEM enrolment in 2023-24.

In the ODL sector, women's participation has also shown encouraging trends. At IGNOU, women constituted 55% of degree recipients at the 36th Convocation, and female enrolment reached approximately 49% in 2021-22, (education times). These statistics highlight the growing significance of flexible educational systems in improving women's access to higher education.

CONCLUSION:-Hence the paper strongly advocates exclusive use of distance learning for promotion of women education at all levels. The Government and other agencies should constantly remind women through multimedia to excess ODL system to elevate their existing position and status and overcome the atrocities related to them.Open and Distance Learning has emerged as a transformative force in promoting women's empowerment in India. By providing flexible, affordable, and inclusive educational opportunities, ODL has enabled millions of women to pursue higher education despite socio-economic and geographical constraints. The continuous rise in female enrolment, Gross Enrolment Ratio, and Gender Parity Index demonstrates the growing contribution of flexible learning systems to gender equality. While challenges such as the digital divide and socio-cultural barriers remain,

strategic policy interventions and technological advancements can further strengthen the role of ODL in empowering women. Therefore, Open and Distance Learning should be regarded as a vital instrument for achieving educational inclusion, gender justice, and sustainable national development.

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