

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH DISTANCE LEARNING IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

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 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 School of Distance Education of Mother Teresa Women's University Kodaikanal South India. It also outlines a few important issues for policy action to increase the participation of women in distance learning for their empowerment.

Development is a process of structural change in the economic, political, social and cultural domains. It starts with people, their education and their capabilities because people are the primary and ultimate focus of all development. 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).

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 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).

GENDER AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

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.

While the Indian data is so dismal, the scene in Tamil Nadu where the university is located is slightly better, the female literacy rate was 21.06 in 1961 and it increased to 30.92 in 1971, 40.43 in 1981, to 51.33 in 1991 and 64.55 in 2001 while the literacy rate of males in Tamil Nadu was 82.33 in 2001.

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

DISTANCE EDUCATION LEARNERS

State-wise enrollment and Teacher in correspondence courses Institutions in India (2001-2002) reveal that for India as a whole, about 11,23,344 have been enrolled of which 4,04,105 are women. Further 1,120 male teachers were involved in Distance Education teaching while female teachers constituted only 241 for the years 2001-2002. Barriers affecting 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.

There are several socio-economic-cultural factors which hinder women's enrollment in higher education. The attitude of parents, especially the uneducated and very conservative parents is such that they do not see any value or necessity for educating girls. In fact, there is resistance and hesitation for investment in girls' education as the parents do not expect to get returns from this. Parents also hesitate to send girls to colleges, if no exclusive women's college is available in their vicinity. If the girls have to be sent out, availability of hostel accommodation in a women's college is an important consideration.

However, it is interesting to note that more and more women are not satisfied with their current levels of educational attainment and have aspirations to further their qualifications. In many countries, a trend is being noticed of women returning to higher education to enhance their qualifications to be able to enter job market after they have 'completed' their 'reproductive role'. Economic necessity of having to supplement the family income is also becoming a reality.

In this context, distance education has an important role to play in providing opportunities for women to participate in higher education. (Jaya Indiresan). The other barriers can be listed as follows:

- Psychological barriers includes Limited career aspirations, Low self-esteem/under valuing of their skill, Feeling intimidated by male competitors.
- Institutional Barriers includes bias in recruitment and promotion, Limited opportunity for exercising leadership, Women exclusive criteria, Omission of

critical materials on and by women in class rooms, Lack of literate or leadership skills for women.

- **Situational Barriers includes Process of Socialization (Patriarchy), Cultural barriers, Family responsibilities, Lack of support from the family, Not being taken seriously, Campus climate, Lack of network support for coping, Time conflicts, Lack of mobility.**

Other barriers include includes curricula that do not fit to the needs of the job, unfriendly learning environment, Fear of sexual harassment, Inadequate gender awareness training for teachers, Discriminatory approach in education, Lack of Technical education and fear about technologies.

IMPACT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION ON WOMEN LEARNERS

In order to assess the impact of distance education on women, their motivation, persistence and success rate in distance education, a sample of 200 women were taken for study from Mother Teresa Women's University, School of Distance Education distributed mostly 70% among social science and 30% among science and computer sciences.

A Questionnaire containing various aspects of distance education was sent to this sample of 200 women distance education learners. The following are the impact of Distance Education on women learners drawn from responses of the sample.

- **They gained confidence**
- **Improved their career opportunities**
- **Attained more degrees for satisfaction**
- **Updated their skills**
- **Second chance of learning for disadvantaged or compelled dropout**
- **Acquisition of knowledge**
- **Change in socialization pattern of children**
- **Better decision making capacity**
- **Respect in family and community**
- **More opportunities for networking and communicating**
- **Vision broadened**
- **Flexibility in time and space**
- **Gives more freedom to the learner and extends the campus into the people's home and work places.**
- **Assists in facing the challenges in life of women**
- **Increased the literacy rate of the country and State**
- **Leads to empowerment of women.**

As women have gradually become empowered at the individual and collective levels through Distance Education, they have been able to address themselves to problems such as access to drinking water, payment of minimum wages, access to health services, ensuring functions of the village school, children's participation in education and have taken collective action against domestic and social violence.

Women world wide increasingly opt for distance education. The secondary source of data reveals that 40 to 50 percent of the students of the majority of the open and distance education institutions are women. In India, the percentage of women in distance education is 30 to 40%.

It was observed from the sample study that 70% of the women were highly motivated by self interest, friends, members of the family, the changing environment in the society,

media etc., and 30% of the respondents replied that their motivation level was low. The highly motivated group mostly belonged to urban and working sector, while the less motivated group belonged to rural areas and were less educated group with poor socio economic background.

Candidates with high motivation level had the persistence to continue and proved successful in their examinations while the persistence and success rate among the less motivated group was not appreciable.

GENDER TECHNOLOGY AND DISTANCE LEARNING

The concept of distance learning is continually evolving and expanding as new technologies are developed and integrated into the wide spectrum of existing ones.

It helps learners meet their educational needs by overcoming barriers of distance and time, by providing remote communities with instant access to resources, and by actively engaging learners in the learning process. For distance learning to be effective, the presenter must know the target audience and select an appropriate technology for the presentation.

Technologies for Distance Education

Changes in the types of technologies available for delivering distance education, including changes in the capabilities of networking technology and the rise of the Internet, have played a role in the adoption of distance education by post secondary institutions. The following are the common technologies available for the instructional delivery of distance education courses.

- **Video technologies:** Two-way video with two-way audio (also referred to as two-way interactive video).
- **Audio technologies:** Two-way audio transmission
- **Internet-based technologies:** Internet courses using synchronous (i.e. simultaneous or 'real time') computer-based instruction (e.g. interactive computer conferencing or Interactive Relay Chat), and Internet course using asynchronous (i.e. not simultaneous) computer-based instruction (e.g. email, list-serves, and most World Wide Web-based courses).
- **Other technologies:** CD-ROM, mixed mode packages (i.e. a mix of technologies that cannot be assigned to a primary mode) and an open-ended 'other, specify' category.

Resource persons pointed out that more powerful satellite, improved designs, innovations and advancements in ground reception technology are likely to lead to a considerable reduction in the overall cost of satellite technology; it is simple to install direct reception community sets for the benefit of schools and colleges.

Technology has come to stay as the backbone of communication in distance teaching methodology. Communication technology has found a client in the distance education system.

That is, distance education represents the transformations of education from stage of craft to the stage of technology, thereby making room for increased productivity.

Limitations of Distance Education Technologies

- While there is a very wide range of media and interfaces available, their effectiveness in terms of educational communication, compatibility with the subject have to be considered.

- **Good domestic facilities in terms of power supply, maintenance, availability of whichever medium is selected, software production and trained personnel are very important to the success of a distance education project.**
- **There are, in many minds, questions regarding the pedagogical implication of using distance methods which depend so greatly on the media. Passive learning is still something of a problem in Asia and may be reinforced by excessive dependence on the media.**
- **Many countries may need to opt for higher technology in communication out of sheer logistical and geographical problems. These technologies may include satellites and computers. Ways can be found in which they become cost-effective.**
- **It is important to familiarize Asian countries with the language of the new technology, and it is important not to be left behind in gaining access to the most advanced technology.**

To sum up, lack of coordination, one-way lecture, changes in schedule, lack of preparation on the part of the resource persons, power failure, badly maintained equipment, lack of awareness, poor economic conditions, duplication of work, costly nature of technologies etc., are the limitations of distance education technologies.

Technology is a tool that enhances a person's capacity to act and achieve. It is making rapid progress and finding application in several domains. Distance education is an area which is getting revolutionized with the availability of emerging technologies. Distance education has also been perceived as a critical strategy that could enhance the participation of women in higher education.

There is a common feeling and a fear that as technology progresses it replaces women and pushes them out of many sectors which had been originally their domain.

In current Indian context, the distance education is still dependent largely on the print media. Radio and T.V are also in use of some extent. Techniques like tele conferencing, computers and interactive video for distance education are only being experimental in a limited way in Tamil Nadu. As long as distance education is confined to print media, women would face no problems Radio and T.V should also pose no problems. In fact a survey conducted shows that the `class programme' broadcast by UGC is being watched by a larger section of housewives than students for whom it is meant.

DISTANCE EDUCATION: THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE

India is the seventh largest and the second most popular country in the world. About three-quarters of the 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.

MOTHER TERESA WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY, SCHOOL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN

The need and demands of society coupled with the technological advancement created the necessary conditions for establishment of distance education in India. Mother Teresa Women's University is one which offers opportunities for empowerment of women through regular and distance education with a gender perspective.

PROFILE OF MOTHER TERESA WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY

Origin and Location

Mother Teresa Women's University in Kodaikanal - the Princess of Hills - was founded by a Special Act of Tamil Nadu in 1984, India with the noble vision of empowering women through the potent equalizer education. A unique feature of the University is that it caters exclusively to women in pursuit of higher learning with the major focus being Women's issues. It seeks to enable women to redress the gender imbalance that is prevalent in many dimensions in the world and to create an egalitarian society.

Name and Motto

The University is named after the renowned humanitarian and Nobel Laureate Mother Teresa. Like this true savant, who cut across all barriers of religion, race, region, and language, to serve suffering humanity, this University caters to women belonging to all sections and strata of life in their quest for knowledge, search for redressal, appeal for patronage and demand for equality.

The University's clarion call is an adaptation of the vision of the Tamil poet Bharathi's "rhpēfh; rkhzk;" - "Towards Equal Status". This message is etched in its monogram with a balance, a female and male on either side, and supported by a vertical beam of books, with a lamp on top, symbolic of the light of knowledge, dispelling the darkness of ignorance.

School of Distance Education

The School of Distance Education of Mother Teresa Women's University was started in 1988 at Kodaikanal. Its mission is to empower women through education, especially women who for some reason are deprived of studying through the regular mode. The School of Distance Education and the Open University Scheme seeks to break the boundaries which block women from pursuing higher education by taking education to the homes of women who cannot go to regular colleges. We aim to extend not only equal but equitable opportunities of education to women who desire the privilege of higher education, to be pursued at their own pace and time, simultaneously with the demand of a job or domestic commitments.

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.

The School of Distance Education now functions from Kodaikanal and has also many study centres in major cities and towns to reach out to more women and to offer more academic support to them.

Keeping in mind the changing needs of our society, the School of Distance Education offers courses to equip women to enter new arenas in the world of Management, Business Administration, Information Technology in addition to offering research programmes in

traditional disciplines. It has also extended its frontiers by offering Diploma and Certificate courses to those who work, among the women at the grass root level in NGO Management, Self Help Groups, Community Health Workers and Women Leaders in Political and Civic Administration.

Thus, the School of Distance Education is committed to provide access to affordable, supportive, flexible but quality education, to all women seekers of knowledge from all walks of life.

Course Structure

Mother Teresa Women's University, School of Distance Education 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 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 & Counselling, Music, Mass Communication, Psychology, Sociology, Tamil, Management Studies, Women's Studies. The PG Courses includes English, Tamil, Guidance & Counselling, MBA, Music, Women's Studies, M.Com, Master of Computer Applications. The undergraduate courses will lead to BBA, B.Com, BCA, B.A. English, Tamil, Music, Sociology, Psychology and History.

Apart from formal graduate and post graduate degrees, PG Diploma courses are introduced like PG DCA, PG Diploma in NGO Management, PG Diploma in Herbal Studies and 1 year Diploma Course in Self Help Groups, Food and Beverage Service, Food Production, House Keeping Management, NGO Management, Career and Educational Counselling and Certificate Courses includes Bridge Course in English for Rural Students, English for Official and Business Communication, Spoken English-Basic Course, Herbal Cosmetology, Music.

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.

Preparation of Course Materials

Once the identified programme for distance learners is approved in the academic council of the university, the course material is prepared with a help of selected resource person. Lesson writing for Distance Education training programmes are organized by the School of Distance Education to enhance the capability of the lesson writers to suit to the needs of the learners. The written lessons are examined by editors before being sent for printing. The printing work of the course material is done by external commercial printing presses.

Instructional Method

Different methods of instruction depending upon needs and requirement are used. School of Distance Education makes use of communication technology to impart quality education to its distance learners. Audio-visual media is used for distance learners. The

All India Radio is used to broadcast the details of the courses. The School of Distance Education is also planning for video cassette lessons on selected topics.

The School of Distance Education organizes contact programmes for all the courses once in a year at different centres with experts in each subject to benefit the distance learners. Telephonic and tele-text services are also planned.

Admission Policy

The admission policy of Mother Teresa Women's University, School of Distance Education is not similar to other universities. Admissions are opened only to women candidates. The admission policy prescribes no restrictions based on age, residential situation or any other that are obtained in formal universities.

The filled in application should be submitted on or before the last date specified, after the scrutiny of application, the eligible candidates will be permitted to attend the preparatory course. The students will have to undergo an entrance test after the completion of preparatory course. The entrance test will be of objective type and of two hours duration. Candidates have to secure a minimum of 35 percent in the entrance to become eligible for admission. The successful candidates of the preparatory course will be admitted on payment of the prescribed fees.

Staffing

Academic staffs for the teaching programmes and evaluation are drawn from the university resources and from other educational institutions.

The technical and non-academic staffs are recruited on regular and part time basis for lesson writing, coordinating counselling, editing, organizing contact seminars in the distance education unit.

Students Enrollment and Performance

The enrollment of students shows an upward trend. There is a gradual increase from 1988-89 onwards. The number of students from 1989 to 97 was below 100 in number while in 1997-98 it was 104, from 1988 to 2003 the strength of the students were below 300, from 2003 onwards the enrollment of students increased to more than 1,500. This indicates that the diversification in course offered by School of Distance Education is encouraging. There are about 166 Ph.D. scholars in Distance Education.

The performance of the students are also satisfying where nearly 50% of the students who appeared in Distance Education came out successfully. The other 50% either lacked motivation, or academic and financial support.

Evaluation System

The distance education learners are assessed at two levels. Assignments are carried out by the students in each paper and are evaluated by the concerned subject experts. This makes for continuous assessment to the students comprehension of the subject which is necessary in the case of an independent learner or distance learner. Further the scholars undertake a regular university examination in all the papers and are evaluated externally by examiners.

Finances of the University for Distance Education

The university receives an annual grant of Rs. 10 lakhs from IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University). The other sources of funds are through students fees and from Off-Campus programmes.

SUGGESTIONS

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 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 distance education should be application oriented so that it will help them in their economic and social empowerment.
- The course materials should be simple, preferably in regional languages to make women more comfortable to use.
- The gender component should be incorporated in the syllabus of all discipline.
- The fee should be affordable to weaker sections of the society especially women.
- Gender sensitization programmes should be organized to sensitize the teachers and learners.
- Confidence building and personally building programmes are essential to help women to overcome resistance in distance learning.
- 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 women.

- Study centres with a library should be opened in each village to facilitate 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

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 women in 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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