



## **GENDER EQUALITY IN RURAL INDIA THROUGH OPEN LEARNING**

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### **Abstract:**

Education starts with people as they are the primary and ultimate focus of all development. It empowers women and explores the causes and reasons for long denial of formal education to women. Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women, to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, and at all levels of education is necessary to reach the overall aim of universal education for girl children. In the light of this, the paper recognises that education for girl children in India is facing unique challenges, which are particularly related to low funding and in turn translated into inaccessibility of higher education to the women folk, low quality educational programmes and marginalization. In recent times, Distance Education has emerged as helpful to women of all ages to equip themselves intellectually through acquisition of knowledge, leading them to new radical methods of thinking thus rendering them more self-directed and free thinking. It can meet the promise to deliver classes to a geographically broad and diverse population. This paper crucially examines the distance education reforms in relation to the concept of empowerment of women. Gender patterns will be assessed to sketch conclusions and make recommendations.

**Key Words:** Gender Equality, Empower Women, Distance Education & Open Learning

### **Introduction:**

The unrelenting dilemma of girl children in India who grow up without receiving the most basic education has attracted increased civic attention. This crisis is severe in rural areas that keep larger extent of girls in India out of school. Amartya Sen argues that "the changing agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change. Nothing arguably is as important today in the political economy of development as adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women". The United Nations Millennium Declaration emphasise the need for promoting gender equality, empowerment of women and guaranteeing a basic education for everyone. In this instance, the place of open and distance learning methodologies in providing mass functional literacy skills becomes inevitable. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which is a set of eight time-bound, concrete and specific targets are listed as follows:

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women.

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality.

Goal 5: Improve maternal health.

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability (Roseline, E. Tawo, Arikpo, B. Arikpo, et.al. 2010).

### **Women Empowerment:**

Empowerment is the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. The goals of women's empowerment are to challenge patriarchal ideology to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate (B. Suguna, 2006, p.10.). Marxists Theorists assign class differences in the world of labour. They try to establish the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. The exploitation, subordination, and oppression exist on the part of dominant class (the men) and revolutionary trends are seen on the part of the oppressed class, the women. By empowerment women would be able to develop self-esteem, confidence, realise their potential and enhance their collective power. Gender studies in tribal societies show that it is social conditioning, and not biology that accounts for gender differences between 'masculine' and 'feminine' (Hajira, Kumar & Jaimon, Varghese, 2005, p.24.).

Friedmann (1992) presents a model of rural women's empowerment. It explains the interrelationships between the four forms of empowerment. There is clearly many interrelationships and overlaps between them. These factors include Community empowerment, Organizational empowerment, Political empowerment and Psychological empowerment. Community empowerment refers to access to new and useful knowledge and awareness, developing new skills, abilities, confidence and competence obtaining the friendship and support of other women, participating in various activities with other women. Organizational empowerment emphasises new knowledge and awareness about new benefits of technology for rural development through development

of agricultural cooperatives. Political empowerment influences other governmental policies and decisions that affect rural communities, changing town-based people's beliefs, and other women to discuss issues affecting rural women and rural communities. Psychological empowerment influences an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem, greater motivation, inspiration, enthusiasm and interest to develop new services for rural people.

Thus empowerment could be recognized as an ability to undertake a number of tasks either individually or in groups, so that they have further access to and control of society resources. It is recognised as an essential strategy to strengthen the well-being of individuals, families and communities, government and non governmental agencies (Fatemeh, Allaudadi, 2011, p.40.). For Meenaz, Kassam & Femida, Handy (2004) education has been argued as one of the indicators of empowerment. Many of the variables that have traditionally been used as proxies for empowerment, such as education and employment, are better described as "enabling factors" or "sources of empowerment". Empowerment requires an understanding the self and the cultural and social expectations, which may be enabled by education.

**Objective of the Study:**

To examine the distance education reforms in relation to the concept of empowerment of women.

**Methodology:**

The paper is based on secondary data. Secondary data is collected from various published sources like internet, newspaper, magazines, journals and annual reports.

**Women literacy in India:**

Women, mostly in rural areas represent more than two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults. The national female literacy rate is 8.9 percent. Close to 245 million Indian women lack the basic capability to read and write. Adult female literacy rates for ages 15 and above for the year 2000 is 46.4 percent (male 69 percent) (The Status of Women: A Reality Check). The trends in total literacy rates by sex in India between the years 1981 and 2001 are as follows:

Table 1: Literacy rates by sex in India (1981-2001)

Particulars	1981	1991	2001
Male	56.37	64.13	75.85
Female	29.75	39.29	54.16
Total	43.56	52.20	65.38
Divergence (Male- Female)	26.62	24.84	21.69

Source: Census of India, Various years

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GE R) for girls was 24.8 percent at primary level and 4.6 percent at the upper primary level (in the 11 to 14 years age group. Girl's enrolment at the primary stage is 46.7 percent in 2004-05. At the upper primary stage, girl's enrolment is 44.4 percent in 2004-05. The overall enrolment clearly shows that there is gap and challenge exists at primary stage. Enrolment of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe girls poses a greater challenge to India's education administrators. G.E.R. for SC girls at primary level have climbed up from 64.8 percent in 1986-87 to 106.6 percent in 2004-05 while at upper primary stage, it is as low as 26.6 percent in 1986-87 and 61.5 percent in 2004-05. In the case of ST girls, the GE R at primary level it is 68 percent 1986-87 to 115.5 percent by 2004-05 and at upper primary levels it is 21.9 percent in 1986- 87 to 59.5 percent in 2004-05. The number of out of school children is 32 million in 2001-02. Of the total age cohort of girls in the 6-14 years age group, 3.9 percent are reportedly out of school. In the 6-11 years age group, out of school girls are 3.34 percent and in the 11-14 years age group they are 5.3 percent. There is a strong need for the inclusion of these 'hard to reach' and older girls, who have remained from the education net addressed through context specific strategies and interventions presently (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, 2008). There is also wide disparity in the female literacy rates in rural and urban regions in India. In the year 1951, the rural female literacy was 12 percent and urban literacy 34.59 percent. Table 2 below indicates the trends in the literacy rates in India by rural and urban areas.

Table 2: Female literacy rates in India Rural/urban (1951-2001)

Year	Female Literacy Rate	
	Rural	Urban
1951	12.00	34.59
1961	22.46	54.43
1971	27.89	60.22
1981	36.09	67.34
1991	44.69	73.09
2001	59.40	80.30

Source: Census of India, Various Years

**Barriers in Achieving Education:**

Several factors influence the women literacy in India. Social and economic factors determine their education. In rural areas both men and women slot in agriculture, but women are the key producers of food for

household utilization. Women’s labour produces 70-80 percent of the food crops grown in India. Increasing reliance on the labour of girls may jeopardize their education or even result in their complete withdrawal from school. Other factors that contribute to reduced enrolment rates and increased dropout rates for girls include gender sensitive teaching methods, transport, sanitation facilities etc. (Report of the Secretary-General, United Nations General Assembly, 2005, p.9). Sharmila and Dhas(2010) points out that infrastructural barriers are responsible for lagging of women literacy in India.

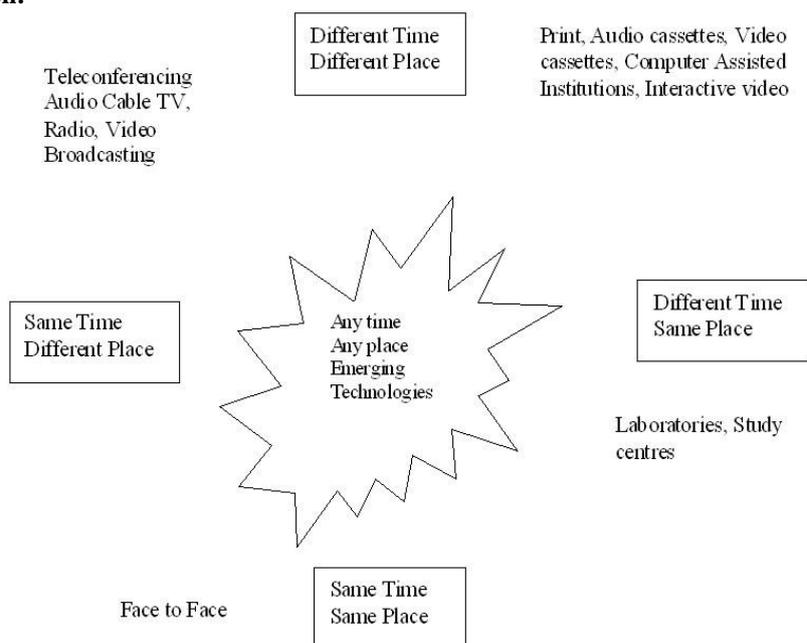
Parental and social attitudes are major demand-side sources of gender inequality in India, but other factors are also important like- the child’s motivation, the household’s ability to bear the costs of schooling, and the demand for the child’s labour raising the opportunity cost. Household chores, particularly sibling care in poor families, area significant factor in girl’s non-enrolment, frequent absence, and dropout, overt and subtle discrimination etc also have contributed to the non-enrolment and dropout of children from scheduled castes. The Scheduled Tribes, often in dispersed groupings in remote areas, the distance to school is the key supply constraint. Language adds to the problem, as the language of instruction is often not that spoken at home (Kin, Bing, Wu, and others).

A successful agenda for the empowerment of rural women requires the dismantling of values, structures and processes that maintain women’s subordination and that are used to justify inequality in access to political, social and economic resources. Education plays an important role in this process. But gender inequalities in access to education are well documented in rural areas in India. This gender inequality refers to that stage of human, social development at which “the rights, responsibilities and opportunities” of individuals will not be determined by the fact of being born male or female, in other words, a stage when both men and women realize their full potential. This realization of full potential, the most fundamental prerequisite for women empowerment could be attained only through education. Amartya Sen also agrees with the above and makes a compelling case for the notion that societies need to see women less as passive recipients of help, and more as dynamic promoters of social transformation, a view strongly buttressed by a body of evidence suggesting that the education, employment and ownership rights of women have a powerful influence on their ability to control their environment and contribute to economic development (Augusto, Lopez-Claros, 2005).

Improving overall educational provisions accessible to poor women involves reprioritizing expenditure patterns in the education sector. This can be made possible by increased allocations to basic education through non-formal adult education and literacy programmes. Spending at higher levels should be earmarked for encouraging greater female enrolment. From a poverty perspective, strategies which reduce the direct and opportunity costs of girls’ schooling are most relevant. Strategies to increase female education by reducing opportunity costs may particularly benefit girls from poor households (Zoe, Oxaal, 1997, p.18.). Introducing non-formal education provision is one way of reducing the opportunity cost of girls schooling by enabling them to combine work in the household with schooling.

Education for rural women and girls has a leveraging effect on social and economic development and democratization. It requires a holistic approach that recognizes the close interdependence of education and other livelihood factors. It is important to adopt a flexible approach which builds on their needs and given due attention to the intersection of gender, poverty and economic well being.

**Distance Education:**



The term Distance Education has been applied to a tremendous variety of programmes serving numerous audiences via a wide variety of media. American Council of Education (ACE) defines Distance Education as a system and a process of connecting learners with distributed learning resources<sup>1</sup>. Distance learners enjoy flexibility in terms of choosing the place and time of study. However, the degree of flexibility the students are able to enjoy depends on the availability of the media and learner’s access to them (Sadia, Afroz, Sultana & others). The Distance Education is different from traditional on-campus education system. This can be explained with the help of the following 4-square map of Groupware Options.

In India Open and Distance Learning has proved to be an effective tool to impact education for disadvantaged groups, to the neo-literate class of society, to people living in remote or rural areas, and to section of society which could not avail them of conventional education. The ODL system succeeded through building a wide network of students support services and flexible admission criteria (Sunil Kumar & others, 2008).

**Distance Education in the Rural Context:**

In rural areas elementary education is available but this cannot be said of higher level of education. Moreover India has poor secondary education infrastructure facilities. This is particularly one reason for low literacy rates among women in rural areas. In this context government of India have emphasized the open learning system and in particular, the distance education provided by the National Open School. Government of India has taken special initiatives to enhance access and equity in higher education through distance learning mode particularly to persons from disadvantaged groups and those living in remote areas. The Indira Gandhi National Open University determines standards for open learning and distance education, and provides innovative and need-based general and continuing education through an integrated strategy consisting of print material, audio-video programmes, teleconferencing and personal counseling (Mala, Dutt, 2010). The Central Board of Secondary Education by targeting working adults, women and disadvantaged groups stated distance education at the secondary level in 1970s. In 2005-06 there were 267000 enrolments in the Open School.

The Open School Project and National Policy on Education were culminated to establish National Open School (NOS). It was established in 1989 under the Central Board of Secondary Education. The major objective has been to provide secondary and senior secondary education mainly to the dropouts. The courses offered and profile of the students enrolled in this are as follows:

- ✓ It is reaching all corners of the country including very remote areas through its almost 800 study centres.
- ✓ The enrolment has been increasing steadily with an annual growth rate of about 20 % in the last two years.
- ✓ It remains to be predominantly urban with Delhi accounting for about one third of the enrolment.
- ✓ The enrolment of women and girls (about 32 %), from socially weaker sections, disabled and those from geographically weaker sections of the community are to be considerably improved.

The NOS experience clearly shows that distance education is one of the most cost effective models for providing access to secondary education in rural and sparsely populated areas. NOS is increasingly targeting its efforts on learning in rural areas and the proportion of rural students has increased to 60 percent of the total enrolment. The proportion of girls in NOS enrolment is, on average, 35 percent (Michael, Ward). The details are given in the table 3 below:

Table 3: Gender-wise Enrolment in Nos. (2001-05)

Year	Male	Female	Total
2001-02	152286	62296	214582
2002-03	164550	113684	278234
2003-04	220103	100907	321010
2004-05	162351	75718	238069
2005-06	182440	84586	267026

Source: NIOS, 2005

IGNOU has a cumulative enrolment of about 15 lakhs. It has a network of 53 regional centres and 1400 study centres with 25000 counsellors. The Distance Education Council an authority of IGNOU is coordinating the activities of 13 State Open Universities (SOU s) and 119 Institutes of Correspondence Courses in the conventional Universities (Report of the 11th Five Year Plan, Government of India). At present IGNOU have downlink facilities of video programmes. Hundred and forty centres at IGNOU Regional Centre and Study Centres and 151 under women empowerment scheme in the country. The main purpose of the Women Empowerment Project of IGNOU is to organize women into effective Self Help Groups through the medium of training Certificate Programme “Empowering Women through Self Help Groups”. Regular face-to-face counselling is also provided at the programme centres. The learners can also benefit from the other educational programmes telecast regularly over “Gyan Darshan” which is a 24 hours channel. Details of all these programmes are sent to all IGNOU learners every month in the form of a booklet called “Gyan Darshan”. The objectives of certificate programme include:

- ✓ To strengthen ongoing efforts to train facilitators/master trainers of SHGs.

- ✓ To evolve an effective and sustainable training network and resource of such trainers.
- ✓ Empower the change agents to function more effectively as trainers and community organizers in helping set up SHGs and to address gender issues.
- ✓ Provide guidelines for the establishment of micro-enterprises.
- ✓ Provide basic legal literacy (IGNOU: The People's University).

The Tamil Nadu Open University (TNOU) established by Act 27 of 2002 has benefited those who have been deprived of access to higher education, especially women and those who have dropped out for various reasons. The competency and skills of women learners after completion of TNOU programmes has increased as per the feedback given by the women learners. The study of Thyagarajan (2009) points out that ninety percent of women learners have benefited and their status in the family and society got improved by their involvement with Distance Education. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) formerly known as Andhra Pradesh Open University was established in August 1982 by the state legislature of Andhra Pradesh. It is expected to play a 'complimentary role' in democratising higher education in the state by providing educational opportunities to the hitherto neglected sections.

Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) was established in July 1989 to serve the state of Maharashtra in the Union of India. It is to promote the Open University and distance education systems to achieve decentralization and reorganization of university education in the state (Kulandai, Swamy, V.C., 1995). It is worth mentioning that collaborating locally has greater chances of success. As a case one may mention South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAA RC) as a collaborative forum for South Asia where possibilities for cooperation abound. Cultures, technological development, geographical conditions are not very different in this region and joint efforts in curriculum design can bring favourable results. Such area specific collaboration in Asian region may also succeed in finding large learner segments (Chandra Bhushan Sharma, 2001, p.313.).

India has one of the largest Open Learning and Distance Education systems at tertiary education level in the world including one of the world's ten mega universities. However, their efforts have to be more open and flexible in this functioning. The courses offered and designing of materials should make a difference in learning for the students. The education offered should have the potential and provide possibilities for creating certain levels of empowerment.

#### **Distance Education and Gender Goals:**

The challenge of women empowerment potential of ODL clearly lies on its structure base on flexibility, learner-centeredness open ended strategies for utility and quality of education. ODL's empowering potentials are not above what the conventional systems do. But it is definitely supplementary or complementary to it. ODL has its own meaning and persona largely emanating from a list of missions which it can only perform the positive ground of self-evaluation. Flexibility, learner-centeredness, open alliance strategies to improve utility of education in terms of its spread effects and response quality may take ODL to unimagined heights. Less engagement with national social missions can make it complacent and force it in a direction of gloss, easy money and sporadic fame (Pandev, Nayak, 2001, p.281-82).

Distance education is more accessible for rural women. Women can study what they want and also from where they want. Moreover distance Education is advantageous because it is flexible. Women can study when they want, completing course work on their schedule, rather than that of college. Participation of women in Distance Learning is directly related to political and social changes in women's position within the family and society, technological changes in the work place, and the economic necessity of participation, and the job market and new job opportunities (Anie, Paula, Kamara).

Chandra, Bhushan, Sharma (2001) points out that in some places universities and institutions of higher learning have not developed academic programs in certain areas of studies. Students wishing to take such courses have to travel abroad, often after quitting jobs. Such ventures cost high in terms of 'opportunity cost' and family dislocations. Such courses if made available through Distance Learning can help women, especially from rural areas satisfactory results. Distance Learning also has the potential to alleviate or remove some of the barriers or constraints that prevents women and girls from accessing educational opportunities such as illiteracy, poverty, time scarcity, socio cultural factors, mobility and relevancy. This can help in leading to women empowerment and gender equality. Easy access to learning can end the inferior position of women in society. It can also help in promoting improved health and employment opportunity. ODL provides various types and levels of education to be acquired by the women. Flexibility of access and study times and the potential to reach women in rural areas or women facing social barriers that limit their access to schools, make distance learning a promising educational approach for women (Farha, Mazhar, 2011).

#### **Conclusion:**

In rural situations where attending traditional schools is difficult or almost impossible, ODL can be used to bring education to the doorsteps. ODL if used in the right format will surely help in overcoming poverty and making the women financially independent. A lacuna in this field leading to lack of participation of women are the restricted access to the technology, basically lack of skills in using computers and lack of information.

Hence more efforts are required to promote distance education using ICT, particularly to cover remote rural areas. Initiatives also have to be designed specifically for women and awareness needs to be generated among women on the advantages of ODL and their potential to address specific problems faced by them. Choices of the courses made by the institutions must be an informed one. It should be guided by an understanding of women's issues and the needs of women in that region.

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