

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

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“No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you; we are victims of evil customs. It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners.”

***Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah** (Founder of Pakistan)*

ABSTRACT

This study was to evaluate the role of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) in women empowerment by engendering female disparity in higher education in Pakistan. Problems and issues pertaining to female higher education were also assessed in this study. The study was conducted in Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Sargodha regions in 2012. Survey approach was considered appropriate for data collection. 1000 female students of B.Ed, M.Ed and MA Education were selected randomly and data were collected through a questionnaire on five points Lickert Scale. Reports of Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan, World Bank, UNDP, UNESCO and World Economic Forum were also analyzed. Main findings of the study revealed that after the inception of HEC there was significant growth in higher education enrolment which approached to 316278 in 2008 from 135123 in 2002 with 168% increase and 17.9% average annual growth rate (excluding Distance Education). Out of 316278 male students were 170252 (53.83%) while 146026 (46.17%) were female students. Interestingly, 1170379 was student enrolment only in AIOU in 2011 with 508423 (43.44%) male and 661956 (56.56%) female students that was more than total students of all Pakistani universities. It was found that AIOU alone has provided access to more students than all of the Pakistani universities. AIOU is playing vital in women empowerment and the national development as well. AIOU has demoted female disparity by enrolling more female students than male learners. Further, regarding female access to higher education, restricted culture, poverty, insecurity, marriage, unimportance of education, negative attitude of parents and unawareness about distance education system were found major problems. Therefore, an incentive package for female students may be launched countrywide especially for culturally restricted female learners of remote areas. Appointment of female tutors in rural areas may be encouraged. A media campaign for awareness and importance of distance and lifelong education may be launched through electronic and the print media.

Key words: Gender Equality, Women Empowerment, Distance Education

INTRODUCTION

United Nations' (2013) "The Millennium Development Goals Report 2013" indicates that although the world community has made significant progress in achieving many MDG targets, still there are some areas where "accelerated progress and bolder action are needed" (United Nation, 2013, p. 4). Achieving gender equality is among these areas where we need intensive efforts, particularly in developing countries, for making required level of progress within deadline. Gender equality stands for ensuring same rights, responsibilities, and prospects for the men and women. According to United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA] (2012) gender equity exists;

When both sexes are able to share equally in the distribution of power and influence; have equal opportunities for financial independence through work or through setting up businesses; enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity to develop personal ambitions.

Empowerment of women is a vital aspect of gender equity. A woman is said to be empowered if she is provided free access to; (a) material resources, (b) decent employment, (c) political decision making, (d) free choices, (e) enjoy her legal rights, (f) health facilities, and (g) quality education (Saigol, 2011, p. V). Pakistan was placed at 134th out of 135 countries in a global gender gap survey; even behind Ghana and Ethiopia at 71 and 118 respectively. In tertiary education Pakistan is ranked at 105 even behind Vietnam at 90. However, Pakistan was ahead of India at 110 and Bangladesh at 119 (Global Gender Gap Report 2009). Pakistan is spending less than 2.9% of its GDP on education which is very low as compared to its regional partners; Nepal (3.2%), India (3.3%), Indonesia (3.5%), Thailand (4.5%), Malaysia (4.7%), Iran (5.2%) and Vietnam (5.3%). Gender discrimination is prevailing in every type of public sector institution as there are 562 female out of 1268 Arts & Science Colleges. Similarly, there are five female universities in 65 universities

and only 23 female professional colleges in the total 428 professional colleges” (COMPENDIUM ON GENDER STATISTICS IN PAKISTAN 2009). Regarding enrolment in the public sector professional colleges and public sector universities, according to the reports of Economic Survey of Pakistan 2009-10, total number of students in public sector professional colleges was 246757 with 30% female students and 70% male students. In 2007-08 total numbers of students in public sector universities were 311383 with 38% female and 62% male students. It is notable that in all HEIs (both public and private sectors) total number of students was 423236 in 2003-04 which reached to 868641 in 2009-10 with an increase of more than 100%.

Table 1: Gender Wise Distribution of enrolment in HEIs

Sr. No	Years	Male		Female	
		N (Thousands)	%	N (Thousands)	%
1	2001-02	174	63.16	102	36.84
2	2002-03	204	61.40	128	38.60
3	2003-04	244	57.77	179	42.23
4	2004-05	263	58.57	195	41.43
5	2005-06	308	59.15	213	40.85
6	2006-07	345	53.91	295	46.09
7	2007-08	399	53.83	342	46.17
8	2008-09	447	55.67	356	44.33
9	2009-10	477	55	391	45

Source: HEC Annual Report (2004-05) and HEC Report 2002-08

It is evident from table: 1 that there was a big gap (63% and 37%) in male and female students in 2001-02 which gradually decreased due to judicious plans and policies of HEC to enhance the women enrolment and remained 55% and 45% in 2009-10. This is perhaps the most significant of all of HEIs remarkable achievements during the last years. (HEC, 2009)

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

Distance Education is a cheaper way of getting education at all levels especially at higher level, so this system is indispensable for the developing countries in getting their educational targets.

According to Rashid (2000, p.13) Urhobo said, “The only reasonable prospect for any developing country in achieving its manpower targets is through distance education”. In Pakistan, formal system of education did not expand with the increased growth of population. Moreover the dropout rate and gender disparity have been very high. In order to meet such challenges, The Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) was established in 1974. Within a modest period the University has been able to offer courses from literacy to PhD level.

The AIOU, a Mega University, is a unique institution in many ways, affording educational facility to all children from ‘nine to ninety’... AIOU has come up as the largest University of Pakistan in terms of course enrolment and course programmes as it is offering more than 135 programmes and imparting education to students exceeding 1170379 in number. (Vice Chancellor’s Report, 2004-05 & 2010-11) Due to flexible system AIOU is playing vital role in women development and the national development as well by promoting female access to education and demoting gender disparity (Safdar, Hussain & Hafeez, nd). AIOU Vice Chancellor Dr. Nazir Sangi rightly claims;

As a distance education institution, we encourage women to get admission in a wide variety of educational programmes we offer. Many of these programmes are designed for women. As a result of these incentives, female students are in majority in almost all our programmes. This is indicative of the women’s trust in us and the high standard of our education. (Achakzai, 2013)

AIOU is continuously planning to enhance its capability to empower women. Recently, AIOU signed MoU with five-big Iranian Universities to prepare and launch academic programmes for promoting women education and family studies in Pakistan (Pakistan News Network, 2013).

Table 2: Province wise Student Enrolment in 2011

Sr. No	Region/Province	2011				
		Male		Female		Total
		N	%	N	%	Total
1	Punjab	351835	41.42	497565	58.57	849400
2	Sindh	28705	64.40	15863	35.59	44568
3	Khyber Pakhtoonkah	57094	48.48	60670	51.52	117764
4	Balochistan	14764	67.19	7209	32.81	21973
5	Azad Kashmir	27400	42.75	49338	57.25	76738
6	Gilgit baltistan	6094	35.70	8164	64.30	14258
7	Federal Capital	22531	49.34	23147	50.66	45678
8	Pakistan (Grand Total)	508423	43.44	661956	56.56	1170379

Source: Vice Chancellor's Annual Report 2010-11

Table: 2 depicts that total 1170379 students were enrolled in 2011 and majority of them were female students (661956). Ratio of female students exceeded with 57% from their male counterparts which were 43% of the total number of students. However, there is region wise variation in female enrolment i.e. female ratio is higher in Punjab (59), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (52%), Gilgit Baltistan (64.30%), Azad Kashmir (57.25%) and Federal Capital (51%). There are more male students in Sindh (64.40%) and Balochistan (67%). Anyhow, overall ratio of female students (56.56) is ahead of male students (43.44). Interestingly, newly made province Gilgit Baltistan exceeds from other four provinces (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan) Azad Kashmir and Federal Area in female enrolment. Maximum female parity is witnessed in Balochistan province (35% female and 64.70% male). Sequence wise provincial female enrolment is; 1) Gilgit Baltistan, 2) Punjab, 3) Azad Kashmir, 4) Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 5) Federal area, 6) Sindh and 7) Balochistan.

Table 3: Overall Student Enrolment in 2011

Sr. No	Year	Male		Female		Total
		N	%	N	%	
1	2011	508423	43.44	661956	56.56	1170379
2	2010	486253	43.38	634785	56.62	1121038
3	2009	494110	44.98	604341	55.02	1098451
4	2008	484984	48	532906	52	1017890
5	2007	481803	50	480417	50	962220
6	2006	328341	51	319036	49	647377
7	2004	272479	48	294120	52	566599
8	2003	217973	48	238578	52	456551
9	2002	172319	47	194668	53	366987
10	2001	161198	48	174867	52	336065

Source: Vice Chancellor's Annual Reports 2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04, 2004-05, 2005-06, 2006-07, 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11

It is evident from the table: 3 that in 2001, total number of students was 336065 with 174867 female (52%) and 161198 male (48%) students. In this decade female students' enrolment remained ahead of their male colleagues except of 2006 where male students (51%) exceeded from female students (49%). Interestingly, in 2007 enrolment, both male and female students were almost equal (Male=481803, Female=480417 with total=962220). In the last three years female ratio (55 and 56) is ahead of male ratio (45 44).

Table 4: Course wise Student Enrolment in 2011

Sr. No	Course	Male		Female		Total
		N	%	N	%	
1	PhD Education (Teacher Education)	72	49.65	76	51.35	148
2	MS leading to PhD (Teacher Education)	07	33.33	14	66.67	21
3	MS Leading to PhD (DNFE)	08	47	09	53	17
4	MS Leading to PhD (Special Education)	07	42.67	08	53.33	15
5	M.Phil Education (EPM)	60	42	83	58	143
6	M.Phil Food & Nutrition	---	---	36	100	36
7	M.Phil Education (DNFCE)	65	32	138	68	203

8	MSc Chemistry	218	43.17	287	56.83	505
9	MSc Economics	6833	48.45	7271	51.55	14104
10	M.Sc Pakistan Studies	13143	45.90	15496	54.10	28639
11	M.Sc Gender and Women Studies	2833	42.81	3785	57.19	6618
12	MA English (TEFL)	730	40.42	1076	59.58	1806
13	MA Urdu	6052	46.28	7024	53.72	13076
14	MA Islamic Studies	18146	33.54	35963	66.46	54109
15	MA Teacher Education	26634	29.66	63155	70.34	89789
16	MA Special Education	1556	27.33	4137	72.67	5693
17	MA Education (DNFCE)	2536	26	7221	74	9757
18	MA Education (EPM)	1130	42.11	1554	57.89	2684
19	M.Ed (Science Education)	7128	40	10727	60	17855
20	M.Ed (DNFCE)	981	27.2	2620	72.8	3601
21	M.Ed (Teacher Education)	53917	28	138352	72	192269
22	MEd (Special Education)	780	20.6	3002	79.4	3782
23	PGD English (TEFL)	518	39.3	799	60.7	1317
24	BA (Library & Information Science)	11248	42.5	15213	57.5	26461
25	B.Ed (General)	98159	16.4	499120	83.6	597279
26	BA (general)	395805	43.26	519264	56.74	915069
27	Certificate of Teaching (CT)	35192	39.74	53369	60.26	88561
28	Primary Teaching Certificate (PTC)	60590	42.75	81109	57.25	141699
29	Arabic Teacher's Teaching Course (ATTC)	1345	40.15	2005	59.85	3350
30	SSC (Darse-e-Nizami)	4226	46.46	4871	53.54	9097
31	SSC (Home Economics)	101	17.20	486	82.80	587
32	Certificate in Library & Information Science	897	35.25	1648	64.75	2545
33	Total	750917	33.66	1479918	66.34	2230835

Source: Vice Chancellor's Annual Report 2007-08

It is evident from the above table that overall ratio of female is more than 66% while males are rather less than females(37%) and out of 2230635 female are 1479918 while 750917 are male students. In the above listed 33 programmes/courses, in all the courses female students are ahead of their male colleagues. Their majority ranges from 51.35% to 100% in different programmes.

MAIN PURPOSE

Main purpose of the study was to evaluate the role of AIOU in women empowerment by engendering female disparity in higher education in Pakistan. Problems and issues pertaining to female access to higher education were also assessed in this study.

METHODOLOGY

First of all, various reports such as, reports of HEC, Government of Pakistan, Ministry of education, UNESCO, UNFPA and World Economic Forum were analyzed. Then the data were collected from female students, their tutors, parents and academicians by using questionnaire as research instrument. The study was conducted in Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Sargodha regions. Survey approach was considered appropriate for data collection. 1000 female students, 100 tutors, 50 parents and 25 academicians were selected randomly. To elicit the valuable opinion of the respondents, a questionnaire on five point Lickert scale was used and its reliability was .86 (*Chronbach's Alpha*). Focus of the questionnaire was on system of distance education, AIOU role in enhancing female enrolment, conduciveness of AIOU learning environment, student support services of AIOU, tutors' attitude towards female learners, cultural barriers in female education, awareness through distance education, awareness about women' legal rights, sense of responsibility, enhancement of social adjustment, provision of women studies, career opportunity, family attitude towards female education in rural areas of Pakistan and role of AIOU in women development through distance education. Collected data were analyzed through SPSS XVII software. For the analysis of the data; each category was allotted numerical value from -2 to +2. The response Strongly agree was allotted +2, Agree +1, Undecided 0, Disagree -1 and Strongly Disagree -2. For the calculation of average the numerical values of undecided were excluded.

Table 5

Opinion of students, parents, tutors and academicians about AIOU's contribution towards women empowerment

S. No.	Statement	Average of Response by			
		Students	Parents	Tutors	Academicians
1	System of Education in AIOU is conducive for females	+1.4	+1.3	+1.7	+1.6
2	Culture barriers are hindrance in female higher education	+0.9	+1.6	+1.5	+1.1
3	Domestic engagements do not affect much in learning through AIOU	+1.2	+1.7	+1.6	+1.6
4	Official engagements do not affect much in learning through AIOU	+1.3	+1.5	+1.7	+1.6
5	The student support provided by AIOU is satisfactory	+0.6	+0.7	+1.5	+0.5
6	Tutors' attitude towards female learners is non-discriminatory	+1.6	+1.6	+1.9	+1.4
7	Learning through AIOU has increased awareness of women's legal rights	+1.1	+1.0	+0.8	+0.6
8	Learning through AIOU increases awareness about society and the world as well	+1.4	+1.5	+1.3	+1.1
9	Learning through AIOU increases sense of responsibility	+1.4	+1.2	+1.8	+1.8
10	Learning through AIOU enhances adjustments in one's family	+1.2	+1.5	+1.0	+0.9
11	AIOU provides comparatively more courses for women than any other university in Pakistan.	+0.9	+0.9	+1.4	+1.7
12	After getting degree from AIOU, there are reasonable chances of getting employment for women	+1.3	+1.6	+1.6	+0.6
13	In rural areas, female learners face lack of family support in getting higher education	+1.8	+1.5	+1.9	+1.6
14	AIOU is engendering female disparity in HE	+1.2	+1.6	+1.8	+1.7
15	AIOU is boosting up the status of women in Pakistan	+1.3	+1.2	+1.7	+1.1

Table: 5 shows the Opinion of students, parents, tutors and academicians about AIOU's contribution towards women empowerment. It is clear from the table that students, tutors, parents and academicians agreed about unawareness of rural areas' people about the services of AIOU and flexibility of distance education system. Most of the participants (students, tutors, and parents) strongly agree that AIOU is imparting education non-discriminatingly. The learned academicians and tutors strongly agree with the views that AIOU's system of imparting education is conducive for females; official/domestic engagements do not prove hurdles in getting education and that learning through AIOU increases sense of responsibility in the women. Unfortunately, female of rural areas face more problems and cultural barriers in getting education especially, the higher education. Adult female learners are liked to be busy in their

household work instead of engaging in higher education. In the rural areas of Pakistan, many females could not get higher education due to poverty. Higher education is rather costly as compared to the financial conditions of the rural commonality. Parents give priority to their male children whereas females are neglected in pursuing higher education. Unfortunately, males' earning is considered increase in the family income. Hence, their income is considered stability for the family. Whereas, there is also misconception that females' income will go to their in-laws. Therefore, their income will ultimately strengthen their in-laws. Majority of the students opined that study centers are located at a long distance from their homes. After attempting paper, return to home is a big panic for female students due to poor and unreliable transport system and infrastructure. Religious misconception about female contemporary education is also a dilemma for rural inhabitants of Pakistan. Majority of the respondents opined that early marriage is another hindrance in female higher education. Despite of all these problems, AIOU has no parallel in women empowerment through distance education especially for females of culturally restricted rural areas, married and job holder females. Teachers' attitude towards female HE was positive. Though students are satisfied regarding student support services (SSS) of AIOU yet they displayed dissatisfaction about return of assignments. Some students suffered failure and dropout due to misplacement of assignments by tutors.

CONCLUSION

Role of AIOU in empowering women is remarkable and distance education seems to be a blessing for females of rural areas, married and job holders. Distance system of education has paved a way for getting higher education for culturally restricted females. Regarding awareness about importance of education and suitability of distance education, an uninterrupted media campaign may be launched. Religious misconception about female higher education may also be

eliminated from the society through media campaign. Priority may be given on leveling female institutions and staff with male institutions and staff. More distance universities, an open and distance learning university in each province (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Gilgit Baltistan) may be established as early as possible. Study centers and examination centers may be arranged at possible nearest places to the learners' homes. Misplacement of assignments by tutors may be checked and an online complaint cell may be established and launched at earliest. An especial fee concession package for all female learners especially for rural areas may be launched. Appointment of female tutors may be encouraged in rural areas. Gender and women's studies programmes and courses may be revamped and increased according to needs of the society. In spite of various impediments such as established attitude of traditional people, long-established social taboos, Pakistan is struggling from many corners to ensure gender equity and empower women. It is result of these efforts that gender discrimination in HEIs of Pakistan has reduced to the minimum. AIOU is playing its role most significantly in bridging the gender gap and creating awareness in women through its educational programmes. With ever-passing day, there is increase in ratio of women in AIOU. Consequently, women are taking more active role in boosting the economy of Pakistan through employments. The gap between the constitution of Pakistan, which does not allow any discrimination, and ground realities is reducing gradually. Although we have not reached the destination of women empowerment, it is not far away.

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