

Gender, Skill Development and Employability: The Context of Open and Distance Learning Perspective in India

Bijaylaxmi Mohapatra
KIIT University, Odisha, India
shivagouri1982@gmail.com

Sukanta Kumar Mahapatra
National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), India
sukantamahapatra@nios.ac.in

Abstract: Skilled human resource is pivotal to social and national development. However, access to skill development opportunities is unequal across caste, gender and different socio-geographical locations. No doubt, various policies and five year plans in India emphasized upon expansion of skill development opportunities. However, the design and implementation of these programmes do not match completely to the needs of these groups and even the training provided to these clientele groups do not help them to avail relevant opportunities in the job market. The lack of gender focus in these schemes and programmes has resulted in lower participation of women in labour market and it has impacted in wide gender gap in various social and economic indicators. Stereotyped mindset with regard to education and employability of women and further unwillingness of the parents to invest on women's education has led to gender disparity in education and employment. It is often assumed that education; particularly in the area of skill development is a means of achieving gender equality or improving women's wellbeing. This paper reviews the policies and practices existing in National institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) in India and how it has influenced in the improved enrolment of women in comparison to male in India in vocational education system. It also examines under what conditions women's education directly impacted employment pattern and improved their life pattern.

Introduction

The skilled human resource is key to social and national development. Therefore, various policies and five-year plans in India emphasized upon expansion of skill development opportunities for the socio-economic development of people, particularly for women. However, access to skill development opportunities is unequal across caste, gender, and different socio-geographical locations. The very low participation of women in Indian labour market is one of the striking features of gender inequality in India. In 2012, only 33% of the total 380 million working-age Indian females were employed, which is one of the lowest female labour Participation Rate globally. In the same year, there was around 50 per cent of the female labour participation rate globally while in East Asia, it is around 63 per cent (Das et. al, 2015). No doubt, India has undertaken various steps for rapid economic growth and stability. However, it needs to be stressed that strong measures for higher female labor force participation can boost growth by mitigating the impact of a shrinking workforce. Various studies have pointed out that better opportunities for women to earn and control income offers various microeconomic benefits such as better education of children and also act as one of the major poverty-reducing factors in developing economies (Heintz, 2006). The low Female Labour Participation Rate (FLPR) is also mainly attributed to the low educational level of women along with other social and economic reasons. There is not only low enrolment of women in School and Professional education and even among those, who enter school education, most of them also fail to complete the minimum of secondary level of education, which would benefit the women to get skilled employment.

Women Skill Development in India: Issues and Challenges

Limited employment creation, particularly for women and skill challenge despite high growth, has slowed India's poverty reduction. Towards the goal of achieving sustainable and inclusive growth of the country and further for providing decent employment opportunity to the growing population, Government of India has set the target of achieving skill training by 500 million people by 2022. However, it needs to be recognized that women, who constitute nearly half of Indian population, needs to be provided with the opportunity for skill development to earn decent employment and gain economic independence.

In India, Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) in the case of the female is very low compared to male both in rural and urban areas. The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for the male was 55.6 in rural areas, while LFPR for the female was 26.5 percent, a gap of 29.1 percent, while there is a gap of 41.3 percent in LFPR between male and female population. Similarly, there is also the wide gap in Work Participation Rate (WPR) between male and female in both rural and urban area. The gender gap in Work Participation Rate is also more pronounced in urban areas than rural areas. (Table-1)

Table 1
Labour and Employment in Rural and urban areas

Indicators	RURAL (%)			URBAN (%)			
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Persons
Labour Force Participation Rate	55.6	26.5	41.4	55.9	14.6	36.2	40.0
Work Participation Rate	54.7	26.1	40.8	54.3	13.8	35.0	39.2

(Source: NSSO 2009-10)

Table-2
LFPR by Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status, 1993–94, 2004–05 and 2009–10 (%) by Gender

Sector	Male			Female		
	1993–94	2004–05	2009–10	1993–94	2004–05	2009–10
Rural	87.6	85.9	82.5	49	49.4	37.8
Urban	80.1	79.2	76.2	23.8	24.4	19.4

Source: NSSO, (1993–94, 2004–05 and 2009–10)

The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) in India has also been decreased year by year. The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) by Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status in 1993–94 in rural areas was 49 per cent; it decreased to 37.8 percent in 2009-10. The decline in LFPR was marked more in the case of female than male, particularly in rural areas. Most of the women are engaged in the informal sector, vocations characterized by low earning, low productivity, poor working conditions and lack of social protection and thus need skill education for high productivity and recognition of their work.

Table 3: Young Population with Vocational Training by Gender (%)

Nature of Skill Training	Male	Female
Formally Skilled	4.3	3.0
Non-formally Skilled	9.5	5.9
Unskilled	86.2	91.1

Source: NSSO, 61st Round, 2004-05

Quality Vocational training is pre-requisite to the higher prospect of employment and improves job mobility and efficiency of labour. However, only a few of the young population among the labour force have received vocational training. Female youth are more vulnerable in the aspect of vocational training. In 2004-05, 91.1 per cent of female as compared to 86.2 per cent of the male in the age group of 15-29 have not received any form of vocational training.

The low visibility of skill training among female is mainly because of a vast number of girls drop-out before their complete school education. Further, social and gender stereotype prevents the entry of the females into vocational education. Many families with low income were also unable to bear the cost of vocational training charged by training institutes located in urban areas.

Open Schooling as way forward for addressing Skill Gap

Education through Open Schooling in India has been started two decades back. With the goal of providing learning opportunities for all segments of population through ODL mode, particularly the children-at-risk, those who are

socially and geographically isolated, disabled and Girls and women in challenging situation, The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), formerly National Open School(NOS), has played a catalytic role since 1989. NIOS offers courses at Secondary and Senior Secondary level through open and distance learning (ODL) mode. The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) also provides the Open Basic Education (OBE) Programme, as an alternative educational programme, equivalent to the Elementary Education Programme of the formal education system. Apart from NIOS at the national level in India, the Open Schooling System is also being operationalized through the State Open Schools (SOSs) at the State level. So far 20 states have set up State Open Schools. NIOS offers 101 vocational courses in different areas such as Agriculture, Business and Commerce, Engineering and Technology, Health and Paramedical, Home Science and Hospitality Management, Teacher Training, Computer and IT related sectors. The objectives of NIOS Open Vocational Programme are (i) to meet the need for skilled and middle-level human resource for growing sector of economy, both organized and unorganized, (ii) to prepare learners for self-reliance and gainful self-employment, (iii) to attract sizeable segments of population to varied Vocational Education Courses, and (iv) to enhance individual employability by providing professional skills in various vocations.

With a motto to reach out reach all and also the aim to provide the pathway for world of work and for further studies, NIOS has certified 2,01,528 learners in different Vocational Education Courses since May 1993. NIOS approach of gender sensitivity has also encouraged many female learners to take admission in NIOS. Unlike the formal system of vocational education, NIOS has more female learners than male learners. The proportion of female learners to total enrolment is increasing year by year from 60.92 per cent in 2010-11 to 63.5 per cent in 2014. There were 13877 learners enrolled in 2010-11, and it has increased to 20,632 in 2014-15. (Table-4).

Table-4: Enrolment of learners in Vocational Education by Gender

Gender	2014-15(%)	2012-13(%)	2011-12(%)	2010-11(%)
Boys	11840(36.46)	11158(39.8)	9972(39.08)	8902(39.08)
Girls	20632(63.5)	16877(60.8)	16382(60.02)	13877(60.92)
Total	32472(100)	28035(100)	26354(100)	22779(100)

Source: NIOS Statistical Report

**Table-5
Enrolment of Female Learners in Vocational Courses**

Age - Range	2014-15(%)	2012-13(%)	2011-12(%)	2010-11(%)
14 - 20	10961(53.13)	7188(42.59)	9747(59.5)	7787(56.11)
21 - 25	3868(18.75)	3287(9.48)	3127(19.09)	3185(22.95)
26 - 30	1628(7.89)	1479(8.76)	1346(8.21)	1297(9.34)
31 - 35	1090(5.28)	855(5.06)	802(4.89)	817(5.88)
36 - 40	551(2.67)	478(2.83)	450(2.74)	447(3.22)
41 - 45	212(1.02)	174(1.03)	147(0.89)	126(0.9)
46 - 50	90(0.43)	91(0.53)	58(0.35)	47(0.33)
Above 50	2232(10.82)	3325(19.7)	705(4.30)	171(1.23)
Total	20632(100)	16877(100)	16382((100)	13877(100)

Source: NIOS Statistical Report, 2010-11, 2011-12, 2012-13, 2014-15

The formal vocational education system being rigid in terms of entry, pace, place of study, etc., many potential learners find it complex to fit them due to their individual and social constraints, arising from their family and culture. On the other hand, NIOS system of vocational education, being flexible and learner friendly, addressing the social and individual needs, has been the choice of many female learners. Female learners in the age group of 14-20 are larger than female learners in other age groups. The female learners in the age group of 14-20 increased

from 7787 in 2010-11 to 109611 in 2014-15(Table-5). As per the 66th NSSO survey, 2009-10, the education level of more than half of the India's labour force in the age group 15–59 remains extremely low. Among the total labour force of 431 million on UPSS basis about 29 per cent are illiterate, and another about 24 per cent was having education up to primary level. Of the balance, about 12.15 percent had education level up to secondary level, and 17.6 per cent with middle-level education. This means 82.41 per cent of the labour force, which included 29 percent illiterate, need to be up scaled for the meeting the challenges of skill development. While formal education system does not have adequate capacity to accommodate such large scale of potential labour force, open schooling can help in skill building of these massive numbers. Even adults above the age group of 40 can also be enrolled in open schooling and benefit from skill development programmes. The positive result is that the female learners above the age of 50 are also benefitting from the vocational education of NIOS. In 2014-15 and 2012-13, more than 10.82 per cent and 19.7 per cent of the total female learners respectively are in the above 50 years of age.

12th five-year plan in India has emphasized on making secondary education much more job relevant through skill training with in the schools. In most of the developed countries such as South Korea and Australia, 25-40 percent of students those who complete high schools choose for vocational courses, preparing them for the job once they finish senior secondary. The Kothari Commission (1964-66) had recommended that 25 per cent of the students at the secondary stage would go for the vocational stream. However, there is only about 5 percent of the children between the age group of 16 to 18 are in the vocational stream. However, higher investments in terms of equipping schools with teachers/trainers having technical skills and equipment (such as workshops, machines, computer equipment) are challenges in providing vocational education at secondary stages. In this context, open schooling can be an opportunity to provide skill training with lesser costs and public-private partnership.

The massive drop-out in school education has also resulted in the inadequate supply of potential candidates to the vocational training section. More than half of the children (50.2 percent) those who enter grade 1 fail to complete grade 10 in 2011-12(School Education Statistics, 2014-15). In India, the students after completing grade 10, can take admission in the formal vocational training, i.e. ITI-based training. Thus, most of the drop-outs join the informal workforce without any skill training. Open Basic Education programme having the flexibility of curriculum with the added component of basic vocational programme including Cutting, Tailoring and Dress Making, Beauty Culture or any other vocational subject as per local requirement can help to acquire basic educational and vocational skills and prepare them for world of work. 12th five year plan has also recommended that “The option of open schooling needs to be strengthened so that rural labour, artisans and others in petty jobs in villages and urban slums achieve some learning equivalency in order to enable them to continue in community polytechnics, part-time community colleges, Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS) and accredited Skill Knowledge Providers (SKPs) to pursue secondary education and acquire upgraded vocational skills. Those who have dropped out before completing the elementary stage need opportunities for education and certification in a flexible manner.”

The government of India has targeted for creation for 50 million non-farm employment and also skill certification of such clientele. However, the current training infrastructure has the potential to train only 4.5 million target populations. On the other hand, the geographical distribution of ITIs/ITCs meant for vocational education is uneven among states. While western and southern part of India has large scale of infrastructure, in North and Eastern part of India has limited support. There are also large-scale variations within states between rural, urban and remote tribal areas. It is also a huge challenge to create huge infrastructure for vocational education due to their high cost involved in it, with the unit cost being three times higher than that of general higher education (World Bank, 2007). Open schooling can be used as the viable option for optimum utilization of the existing infrastructure of ITIs/ITCs at many places. These centers can become NIOS Study Centre known as Accredited Vocational Institute (AVI) or Special Accredited Institute for Education for Disadvantaged (SAIED). The female learners can choose these centers nearby their place and study as per their own convenience.

Conclusion

The emerging global economy demands more high-skilled and better-educated quality workers than earlier years. While there is tremendous need to expand vocational education system, including through open schooling to meet the learning needs and skill development challenges, particularly of women, it is highly essential to maintain quality and ensure that the training is responsive to market demands. There is also the necessity of collaboration with industries to make the curriculum market and employment oriented so that learners get adequate employment. Each component of the vocational programme needs to be seriously reviewed given that large percentage of potential employees requires quality training to match the global competitiveness. NIOS has the unique provision of offering academic along with vocational courses. This makes education holistic with the integration of academic with vocational courses and thus, learners are provided education for life as well as livelihood. However, there is

need to make the courses linking to job opportunities and market realities and ensure that the learners get decent employment.

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