

Advancement and Empowerment of Women through Open Distance Education

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The concept of 'open university' has revolutionized contemporary educational history. As an institution, open university is regarded as a powerful instrument for equalizing higher educational opportunities and levelling educational imbalances. Open University has become a valued component of many national educational policies, programmes and practices.

The foundation of the Open University in the United Kingdom in 1969 marked the beginning of a new and prestigious era in the history of distance higher education. In the 1970s and in the following years, a good number of open universities in both the developed and developing countries have been established.

India is one developing country, in which a number of open universities have been established. At present, there are fifteen open universities, one at national level and other at provincial level. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) is one such university established originally as the Andhra Pradesh Open University in 1982. It is the first Open University in India. The establishment of BRAOU was a great land mark in the history of distance education in India. It heralded a new era in India's higher education. One of the important objectives of BRAOU is

“to realize equality of educational opportunities for higher education for a large segment of population including those in employment, women including housewives and adults who wish to upgrade their education or acquire knowledge and studies in various fields through distance education”

In 1993, BRAOU established Women's Studies Cell which was later renamed as the Centre for Women's Development and Extension Centre with main objectives of:

- Critically studying the problems, aspirations and needs of women learners constituting 35 percent of University's enrolment.
- Providing information, knowledge and skills for economic independence of women, particularly for women learners and their family members.
- Enhancing access to legal literacy and information on women's rights and entitlements in society.
- Organizing extension activity in the areas of literacy, health, nutrition, environment, entrepreneurship, etc.

BRAOU has been conducting, over the years of its existence, varied academic programmes, extension activities and counseling practices for the advancement and empowerment of women of the region through open distance education methodology.

Authors of this paper conducted a small study of some successful women learners of BRAOU. The study aimed at knowing the reasons of women's educational backwardness, impact of distance education on women and suggestions for the increased participation of women in distance education.

A short questionnaire with most open ended items was prepared and administered to 100 successful women students of graduate and postgraduate courses who were received degrees at the recent convocation of BRAOU held in April 2013. The responses of the learners are categorized and commented in the following paragraphs.

Reasons for Educational Backwardness of Girls and Women

Responses of learners on the reasons for educational backwardness of girls and women are:

- General indifferences to the education of girls.
- Social resistance arising out of fears and misconceptions that education might alienate girls from traditions and social values and lead to maladjustment, conflicts and non-conformism.
- Early marriage and social inhibitions against girls pursuing education after marriage.
- Prevalence of child labour among girls belonging to weaker sections and the hard domestic chores which some of the unmarried girls are required to perform.
- Prevailing notions that sole occupation of women is to bear children, look after her husband and children, and thus be restricted to domestic work.
- Discrimination against women's labour in both organized and unorganized sectors in matters of recruitment, training and promotion.

- Many girls and their parents find that the school curriculum does not conform adequately to their needs and interests.
- Unsuitable and inflexible social timings and inadequate facilities for girls in schools, particularly in co-educational schools.

Impact of Distance Education on Women Learners

Responses of learners on the impact of distance education on women learners are:

- Gained confidence in dealing with family members and outsiders.
- Increased career opportunities.
- Achieved higher educational qualifications that increased social esteem.
- Second chance for the earlier dropouts and the disadvantaged.
- Acquisition knowledge.
- Changed socialization process.
- Gained better decision making.
- Gained respect in family and community.
- Acquired better communication skills.
- Changed the politico-socio-economic perception of society.
- Enabled to promote literacy in neighborhood.
- Enabled participation in local bodies.
- Facilitated the acquisition of variety of knowledge through the print and the non-print media.
- Enhanced the means and methods of empowerment of women.
- Enhanced access to legal literacy and information relating to women's rights and entitlements in society so as to participate as an equal footing in all areas.
- Developed ability to think critically.

For further development of women's distance education

For further promotion and development of women's distance education some of the suggestions made by women learners are:

- Introduction of job oriented courses in the areas of computers, biotechnology, chemical technology, travel and tourism, home management, health, office management and such other newly emerging job oriented fields.
- Interaction with industries, business concern, trading companies etc. to have hands on experience in the concerned fields.
- Better physical amenities at study centres and special facilities for women students.
- Setting up regional centres to monitor the activities of study centres.

- Timely conduct of annual and supplement examinations and declaration of results.
- Prompt replies to inquiries by students.
- Regular publication and supply of newsletters.
- Orientation to tutors and counselors in distance education methodology.
- Setting up career guidance cells to enable learners to be aware of the employment facilities.
- Regular visits to study centres by the institutions 'headquarters' academic staff.
- Appointment of more women counselors, co-ordinators and tutors.
- Increased family support to learners of disadvantaged groups.
- More family assistance and support for distance study.
- Organization of extension lectures by women working in government and voluntary organizations for women's development.
- Periodical meetings of students and their family members at study centres.
- Facilities for games, sports and cultural programmes.
- Visits on the days of counseling by senior faculty members from other distance teaching institutions.
- Periodical surveys to get feedback from the students on course materials, counseling sessions, examinations, assignments, results etc.
- Organization of seminars, workshops, debates, symposia etc so as to encourage the participation of girls.

For Women's wider utility of Distance Education

A review of research in distance education recommends the following for the women's wider utility of distance education. These suggestions are:

1. Continue efforts to reduce and eliminate barriers that prevent and restrict women's participation in learning activities.
2. Develop courses that build upon women's diverse experience and that do not impose rigid external expectations and arbitrary requirements.
3. Recognize the student learning environments comprise the home and local centre from which women study as well as the educational institutions; "education, like technology, has to be adapted to local circumstances".
4. Create support and safe environments in distance education contexts. Educators need to be sensitive to women's personal and unique circumstance and to investigate ways to help students develop effective support systems.
5. Increase the number of women's studies courses available via distance delivery and ensure that feminist perspectives be incorporated into curriculum in other disciplines.

6. De-emphasize the utility of prescribed materials and promote the assumption and fact that course materials are not the course per se. Women students require opportunities to make real and significant choices regarding their learning goals and activities.
7. Conduct research into the type and levels of interaction essential to feminist learning in distance education contexts. Collect empirical data about actual interactions and processes that students and tutors experience in distance mode learning. The nature and prevalence of social aspects of learning essential to feminist learning also require specific investigation in distance settings.
8. Provide tutors employed for feminist distance courses with useful, appropriate training. Orientation activities need to include skills training in telephone and teleconference technologies and their applications. Such training should have as its focus effective use of communication strategies and feminist processes for facilitating adult learning in distance settings.
9. Examine the context in which distance education technologies operate. It is important to scrutinize institutional constraints and to moderate or eliminate those that have a negative impact on student learning. The constraints experienced by teachers/tutors need to be recognized and measures taken to mitigate against these constraints.

Distance Education Promotes Women's Educational Development

Distance education as non-formal method of education should fully exploited and utilized.

Distance learners have many advantages over the conventional learners. The advantages are:

- Distance education materials are written by good teachers.
- Distance education materials are self-teaching in form and hence there is no need to go to colleges regularly.
- Distance education uses technologies like radio, television, computers for providing education.
- Distance education enables people to study while working.
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- Distance education students who join from rural and remote areas need not stay in hostels and spend money.
- Distance education system given books for study while conventional education does not provide any books to students.
- Conventional education does not allow aged people whereas distance education does not impose any restrictions.
- Even without having any educational qualifications one can study degree courses and PG courses.

- Distance education system is offering many new and useful courses which are not offered by conventional system.
- Distance education is egalitarian while conventional education is elitist.

Conclusion

Given the opportunities, women are keen to embark on self-development initiatives without being hampered significantly by the social or cultural inhibitions imposed on them. Better and easily accessible educational opportunities and the impact of communication technologies on the social and cultural environment are making substantial difference to the attitudes, values and concerns. In the changing scenario, women are likely to benefit much more from improved access to education. They have the confidence, the will and the motivation.

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