

# **Making Learning More Accessible for Women: The Practitioners' Viewpoint**

**Anita Priyadarshini**  
**Indira Gandhi National Open University**  
**anitapriyadarshini01@gmail.com**

## **Abstract**

Open and distance learning is recognized as a system that champions the cause of education for girls and women and has the potential to address the challenges of inequity and gender inequality. The flexibility in the ODL system combined with the extensive use of online platforms has made ODL a preferred choice for seekers of lifelong learning. However in India, there continue to be barriers that restrict women from easy access to higher education. While some of these are created by socio-economic deprivations, there are roadblocks generated by the system itself. The overwhelming numbers tend to make the system impersonal and 'distant', placing women learners at greater disadvantage than their male counterparts. Evaluation studies reveal need for programme accessibility in the preferred technology medium of women learners. There is also need for programmes that empower women even if enrolment is low. In view of this, there is need to introspect and revisit the system to reflect whether ODL has achieved all that it was set up for, in terms of physical accessibility, courses, technology and other provisions that facilitate women's learning. The present paper is based upon the opinions and views of ODL practitioners related to accessibility and inclusion in the area of higher education. The practitioners included male and female teachers with ODL experience ranging from 5 to 30 years. The views were elicited through mixed mode that included interviews and brainstorming sessions. Existing learner data, documents, programme evaluation studies were analysed. Issues raised pertained to access and equity, programme design, counselling, technology, media, infrastructure, programme delivery, research on women's issues, training programmes to promote gender sensitivity, livelihood and employment. The present paper attempts to contribute to designing future strategies for making learning more accessible for women and thus bringing about greater gender balance in education.

## **Introduction**

ODL has been seen as a great liberator which has brought education to the doorsteps of those who are deprived and excluded. Over the years, ODL has been promoted by governments as a viable means for reaching out to the unreached and for overcoming the gaps that conventional face to face education has been unable to fill. Women are considered to be a major section of society that has and can benefit from the ODL system; the flexibilities of ODL are regarded as advantageous to the educational requirement of women and a suitable medium for strengthening women's education. In the recent years, the advances in technology have revolutionized the way in which society functions – the impact on the educational system being significant. Technology is seen as a channel that can increase the outreach to women and can overcome barriers that restrict women's education and change the way in which women learn.

The distance education system in India is now over fifty years old. The first correspondence course was started in 1962 when the University of Delhi set up its School of Correspondence Courses and Continuing Education. The first ODL University was the BR Ambedkar Open University (then APOU) which was established in 1982. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was set up in 1985 and is recognized as lead university in open higher education sector. In view of the mandate given to IGNOU, there is a need to introspect and reflect upon whether the University has achieved all that it was set up for with respect to reaching out to its women learners. Are the issues of physical accessibility, counselling, technology and other provisions for women's learning being adequately addressed and how can the experiences of the past years help to make the system more robust and women friendly?

For this purpose, the present study was carried out with the twin objectives of reviewing the status of women's enrolment in the world's largest university, IGNOU, and suggesting policy interventions for improving access of women to ODL.

## Methodology

This study was conducted in a mixed mode using secondary data as well as conducting content and document analysis. In order to generate ideas and suggestions on issues of gender concerns focussing on the problem of access and equity, the technique of brainstorming was used. Views were also obtained through interviews.

The sample group was made up of teachers and academics, who had been involved with the functioning of the ODL system, and had a work experience which ranged from 5 to 30 years. The total number of the sample was 28 comprising senior Directors of Schools, Programme Coordinators of different disciplines, faculty with representation from the Regional Services Division. The disciplines of the participants varied with representatives belonging to the traditional academic as well as professional, technical and skill development programmes.

## Results: Review of Women's Enrolment in Higher Education

As per the Government of India's Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) Annual Report (2014-15), Gross Enrolment Ratio has increased from 19.4 in 2010-11 to 21.1 in 2012-13 (P) showing growth of 8.76 percentage points during this period. These figures show that although the GER for male population was higher than that for women, yet the figure for GER for women was also substantial. According to All India Survey on Higher Education, 2014(Provisional), the Gender Parity Index was 0.93.

It is also seen that India has made considerable progress since Independence, with there being a significant rise in the women's enrolment in higher education.

**Table 1: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education: 2010-11 - 2012-13**

Category	2010-11	2012-13 (P)
Male	20.8	22.3
Female	17.9	19.8
Total	19.4	21.1

Source: Annual Report 2014-15, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, p. 81

**Table 2: Women Students' Enrolment & Women Students' Per Hundred Men Students (2014-15)**

Year	Total Women Enrolment (000s)	Women Enrolment Per Hundred Men
1950-1951	40	14
2014-2015	12476	88

Source: UGC Annual Report, 2014-15 p. 61

India has one of the largest higher educational systems in the world. The total students' enrolment in Universities and Colleges for the year 2014-15, through conventional face to face mode, stood at 26,585,437 (26.58 million). Of this, the total number of women was 12,475,669 (12.47 million), which amounts to 46.93%. (UGC, 2015 p. 53-54)

The Open University system has contributed to the growth of the higher education sector. According to Srivastava (2015), the total enrolment in 2013-14 in the 14 Open Universities of the country stood at 2.10 million. The review of the student's enrolment figures show that Open Universities are able to attract large numbers of women learners. As per university reports, the student profile of YC Maharashtra Open University, Nasik for the year 2013-14 shows that 35.5% learners were female, while women's enrolment of B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad stood at 43.3% women for the same period. The Tamil Nadu Open University, Chennai reported 49.1% women's enrolment for 2013-14, while at KKH State Open University, Guwahati women's enrolment in the year 2013-14 stood at 43.9%.

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has witnessed an impressive rise in student enrolment from 4,528 in 1987 to a massive number of 741,726 in 2015 (Vice Chancellor's Report, IGNOU (2015)). As regards the issue of women's enrolment, the enrolment trend of the last ten years shows that IGNOU has also witnessed a steady rise in women's enrolment. While female enrolment in 2004 was around 35.8%, it had increased by 10% by 2015 and stood at 45.8%.

**Table 3: Enrolment Profile of Male –Female Learners of IGNOU**

Sex	2004	2005	2014	2015
Male	64.2	63.6	55.2	54.2
Female	35.8	36.4	44.8	45.8

Source: Based on Chaudhary and Shankar (2015)

It is significant to note from the above data analysis that IGNOU has been able to achieve close parity with the formal education system in terms of enrolment of women. Both face to face as well as ODL system show a similar gender ratio of around 46% with respect to student enrolment of females in higher education.

It is also relevant to review the positioning of programmes in the total enrolment of the University and relate it to the positioning of women within these programmes. In 2015, IGNOU offered 228 programmes, which were at different levels and each programme had its own eligibility criteria for admission. The educational qualification required for admission into these programmes varied from being merely literate to having a degree in a particular subject.

The total percentage wise share of learners in the IGNOU programmes is as follows:

**Table 4: Level Wise % Share in Total Enrolment (1986-87 – 2014-15)**

Level	Enrolment	% Share
Adv. Diploma	18123	0.19
Bachelor	4531896	47.67
Certificate	636561	6.70
Diploma	567211	5.97
Master	3119548	32.81
PG Certificate	6793	0.07
PG Diploma	273095	2.87
Other	352544	3.71
Online	1226	0.01

*Source: Chaudhary & Shankar (2015), p.10*

**Table 5: Male- Female Programme Level Wise Distribution (%)**

Programme level	Male Enrolment	Female Enrolment
Ad Certificate/Diploma	0.25	0.12
Bachelors degree	50.32	42.70
Certificate	14.30	13.59
Diploma	6.88	9.59
Masters Degree	24.43	30.44
PG Certificate	0.16	0.10
PG diploma	3.58	3.01
Others	0.09	0.07

*Source: Chaudhary and Shankar (2015), p.16*

It is seen that the Bachelors and Masters degree programme are most popular and attract 80% of the student enrolment. Another interesting outcome is that the number of women enrolled in Masters Degree programmes is, in fact, higher than the number of males enrolled. This augers well for women and their usage of the ODL system for furthering their education.

However the review of documents shows that the expectations from ODL system in general and IGNOU in particular are high. The ODL philosophy and raison d'être for ODL institutions in the developing world has to be seen in the context of the state's own responsibility of providing higher education for all, especially the marginalized. The ODL system was set up to bring about democratization of education, to reach the unreached, to go to places where the formal system had failed, to reach out to those groups who were left out/ pushed out from the formal system – to encourage participation and freedom of learning through its bouquet of choices and thus cater to those who want to carve out their own educational path. The IGNOU Act (1985) states that the objects of the University would be “to provide opportunities for higher education to a larger segment of the population and to promote the educational well being of the community generally.” (IGNOU Act, clause 4).

These obligations and demands upon the system to provide opportunities for greater access to higher education remain the same even today. The Twelfth Plan Document of the Planning Commission states that Open and Distance Learning will be used to widen access and significantly expand capacity in a cost-effective and flexible manner. The share of ODL in the proposed additional target enrolment of ten million students stands at one million learners. It is envisaged that ODL would be able to create greater access and would reach out to more learners including “non-traditional” learners and thus make its contribution to achieving the target 30 per cent GER by 2020-21. (Planning Commission (2013), p.91,101).

In 2016, the Government of India released the Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy. The Report states that despite many gains, the Indian education system faces several problems that dent its credibility. The neglect of skill and vocational education and over-emphasis on acquiring “dead end qualifications” which do not lead to employment is cited as one such challenge. (NEP (2016), 9.4.2, p.171). The Report notes the disparity in women's participation in higher education and finds the situation far from satisfactory. (NEP (2016), 4.13, p.35)

India is also a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals, of which Goal 5 is a standalone goal for achieving gender equality and empowering all girls and women. The World Economic Forum Report on Global Gender Gap (2014) found a positive correlation between gender equality and per capita GDP. The rise in female education brings about a rise in the participation of women in the labour force. The inclusion of women in employment contributes to the sustainable development of the country. Yet India has one of the lowest rates of FLFP (female labour force participation) rates in the developing world. According to World Bank (2016), this rate dropped further from 27.6 per cent in 1990 to 24.2 per cent in 2014. The need to cater to the educational requirements of women calls for their inclusion in flexible learning systems, through institutions like IGNOU.

The success of the ODL system has to be therefore measured against its own objectives rather than against the formal system. Undoubtedly ODL system cannot afford to feel satisfied even if it stands close to the same enrolment rate as brick and mortar educational institutions. In fact a successful ODL system is one that delivers more effectively and efficiently than the formal system. The strength of ODL system lies in its ability to be flexible to fulfil the multifarious needs and aspirations of its diverse student population, especially those who are marginalised.

It is with this perspective that one needs to reflect upon the observations of ODL practitioners towards women's participation in higher education through ODL.

### **Discussions and Observations: Challenges Facing Women Participating in ODL**

The most critical issue in ODL still remains that of access and equity. The low participation of women is a common trend in developing countries. There are many studies from Africa and South Asia which have investigated low participation of women in ODL and identified the main reasons for this phenomenon. (Mensa, *et al*, 2008). Educational deprivation related to socio-economic, cultural and religious reasons is also well documented. The role of political will and government policy, advocacy, allocation of resources in deciding access and equity is also well known. However there is another challenge that women learners face and this comes from within the ODL system itself, i.e. whether the system is equitable? Does it take into account the specific problems that women learners face? Or does the system become a prisoner to its own need to conform? Do the large student numbers create a hierarchy and an educational order in which there is survival of only the fittest? The following observations were made by practitioners pertaining to both academic and non-academic issues.

The growing phenomenon of massification of higher education has implications for the ODL system. IGNOU already has 2.8 million students on its rolls in 2014-15 (Vice Chancellor's Report, IGNOU, 2015). With close to 80% of its ODL learners pursuing Masters and Graduate level programmes, the space for learners in shorter duration non-traditional programmes has been reduced. This uneven enrolment distribution means has its own implications as many such programmes, including skill based programmes, are those that have social and economic value for women. There is a fear that such low enrolment programmes, which are not financially viable, may become marginalised and lower in priority in the larger scheme of operations. This would curtail accessibility of women to education and skill development through ODL.

The issue of physical accessibility remains a major challenge for women pursuing ODL programmes, with geographical distance acting as an obstacle in their smooth academic pursuit. When women take up programmes, they must be able to attend counselling. Counselling refers to the face to face component which is provided at programme study centres where learners can attend tutorials, submit assignments, use technology support, make use of library and laboratory facilities. Counselling is an academic requirement in programmes which have a "hands on" component. There is therefore a necessity of having study centres that are in close physical proximity to the women's home or workplace. In a recent programme evaluation study of a high value programme, it was seen that women learners dropped out due to the distance (physical inaccessibility) of the study centre. (Priyadarshini, 2016).

The views of practitioners on the Self Learning Material (SLMs) call for reflection upon their design and development so that rigidity of material design does not become a deterrent for women learners. The importance of printed learning materials in the life of the IGNOU learner can be seen from the fact that, the total volume of course materials printed, in 2014, was 18.9 million (Vice Chancellor's Report, IGNOU (2015)). IGNOU in its initial years developed its own instructional design house style, along with a procedure for development of materials to ensure high quality. This design became the 'standard' and was adopted across all programmes. However as new programmes, with diverse aims, are offered to learners of different educational backgrounds, there must be options

for new instructional design. Further there is sufficient research to show that gender differences exist in learning behaviour. The treatment of content has to be conducive to women's learning. Learning from one's own experiences and building upon what has been experienced is in line with the tenets of feminist pedagogy.

There can be no doubt about the value of ICTs in the learning process. However it was felt that if technology has to effectively contribute to the ease of access of knowledge, then appropriateness of technology has to be considered. In a recent programme evaluation, it was seen that most learners had easy access to radio and mobile phones (Priyadarshini, 2016). Problems arise when programmes are telecast through time slots that are unsuitable for women. In rural areas, the reality is that the time slot reserved by women for milking cows, filling water, feeding cattle, or organizing the household cannot be given up for viewing educational programmes.

Accessibility is also increased when programmes are linked to livelihood and are perceived to be able to add to a women's financial status. The enrolment data of IGNOU shows that short duration certificate programmes in the areas of health care, food and nutrition, guidance, childcare, primary teacher training are able to attract higher female enrolment (Chaudhary and Shankar, 2015). There is a need to reach out to women in the unorganised sector through programmes that are aimed at their skilling, reskilling and upskilling.

It was agreed that one of the biggest stumbling blocks is the lack of research in areas related to women in ODL. Women and issues of their learning tend to be neglected due to which policy making gets impaired.

A disturbing challenge related to women learners is the issue of their safety and security both within and outside the learning environment. As women travel long distances to study, they are vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation. The fear of being accosted while travelling is reason enough to dropout. This is where ICTs can play an important role through online, e-learning support. Technology may be used for monitoring security measures so as to protect the rights of women to pursue education in a safe and dignified environment.

Related to this is the issue of mindset and attitude of ODL functionaries towards women learners. The need for demonstrating gender sensitivity towards women, creating avenues for their grievance redressal is important. The need for gender sensitisation through training programme for all levels of ODL functionaries would help in creating positive attitudes and in turn help in retaining women and preventing dropout from the system.

One of the interesting issues that emerged was the contradiction between ODL serving as an educational model for providing education to deprived marginalised groups as against the need for ODL institutions to be self-sustaining. There is a perception amongst policy planners / fund providers that the large student numbers will provide financial resources for ODL. However the fact is that ODL institutions have been set up not to make profits, but to fulfil the state's social and moral responsibility towards its citizens. Therefore the economies of scale model need not be applied on programmes of high social value for women, as this could impact the growth of an inclusive society.

### **Future Strategies: Some Recommendations**

The review of documents, interviews and discussion resulted in certain recommendations in some specific areas. In order to increase access for women's participation in higher education, the following measures were suggested:

**Strengthening Access and Equity:** Special measures to address access and equity issues to reach out to women be taken up as part of policy. Programmes be developed for marginalized sections even if enrolment is low. Flexible custom-made programmes for women in the unorganized sectors be developed. Special provisions for women learners and within women, special measures for those who are more deprived i.e. marginalized communities, tribal minority groups, disabled be made.

**Nurturing High Social Value Programme with Low Enrolment Programmes:** Such high social value courses should be promoted irrespective of their financial viability. Suitable revenue models including tapping corporate funds of industry should be explored.

**Developing Innovative Women Centered Self Learning Materials:** Gender theme be included in all SLMs, along with regular gender editing and content analyses to prevent stereotyping.

**Reducing the Distance through Media and ICTs:** Promotion of radio, community radio, M-learning, E-learning, online programmes, MOOCs to be developed as appropriate technology for teaching and training purposes.

**Ensuring Safe and Secure Programme Delivery:** Provision for innovation and designing of different paths for programme delivery, including counseling, with gender sensitivity. Environments and infrastructure to address safety, security, protection against discrimination and sexual harassment be developed.

**Training Programmes for Gender Sensitization:** Training plan for continuous gender sensitization programmes for all groups be developed, along with training materials on gender concerns.

**Conducting Research on Gender Concerns:** Development of a research culture on gender concerns, with gender audit and programme wise gender breakup data being made available to teachers for research purposes.

**Linking Employment /Placement/Industry Issues to Education:** Developing industry matched programmes on skill development for self employment/entrepreneurship/better livelihood by regular placement drives for women.

## Conclusion

The views of practitioners revealed that the ODL system in IGNOU had achieved considerable success in reaching out to women but there is scope for more. The expectations from the ODL system to provide higher education to all in general and women in particular are very high. The system has to ensure that systemic barriers are overcome so that more and more women can easily access higher education. IGNOU has the necessary expertise and experience to overcome these challenges. The experiences of practitioners can help in transforming the system to make it more accessible for women. The increased participation of women in higher education would contribute to gender equality, help in bringing about a greater gender balance in higher education and ultimately contribute to the sustainable development of the country.

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