



EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION

Ramesh R. Kumbhar

Padmabhushan Dr. Vasantodada Patil Mahavidyalaya, Tasgaon, Dist: sangli

Abstract:

Development is a process of structural change in the economic, political, social and cultural domains. It starts with people, their education and their capabilities because people are the primary and ultimate focus of all development. Development is the development of an individual, each according to his or her potential and in this sense education is a crucial aspect of development. Empowerment of Women is one of the important aspect of development of a country. Large increase in population coupled with a growing awareness of the benefits of education are leading governments to explore the possibility of using alternative means to provide education on a large scale, particularly as conventional educational methods are becoming increasingly expensive. One such alternative that universities in the country are considering is Distance Education. Through the external section the Shivaji University had been providing educational facilities to students every year since 1968, which due to various reasons were unable to join the regular courses. This article deals with the empowerment of women through distance education with special reference to Tasgaon study center of Shivaji University, Kolhapur.

Key Words: Distance Education, Study Center, Women Empowerment.

Introduction

Studies over time have revealed that education is the most powerful instrument for the emancipation of any group of people. Position of women in the structure of society has never been considered on the same line as that of men, they have been regarded as a second-fiddle. The education to women has been found to be useful tool and agent of social change especially in countries like India. The Distance Education is hereby considered as an effective strategy for women empowerment, within the functional framework of the general lifelong education process.

The special characteristic of distance education is that it is endowed with high flexibility and can meet the demands of education for all and 'continuing education' which the conventional education system is unable to meet. Further, distance education system able to provide equal opportunity of education to people at any place without any conditions and barriers. Through distance education it is easier to transport knowledge to people than transport people to the people of knowledge. Because of these special features of distance education, it benefits certain categories of people who for various reasons are unable to avail of the formal education system. These include persons without formal qualifications, persons belonging to different age groups, disadvantages groups, and employed persons. There are large percentages of women in all the above categories. Thus women as a category could really take advantage of the provision of distance education in a large measure.

Education and Empowerment of Women

Education has always regarded as a key to modernization and civilization. It acts as

catalysts to the overall development of society. It is observed that almost all the societies have been male-dominated and the women are considered subordinate. However, status of women has been varying from society to society at different periods of time. In spite of certain outstanding examples of individual achievement of Indian woman and a definite improvement in their general condition over the last one hundred years, it remains true that our woman still constitute a large body of under - privileged citizens.

The economic structure of rural areas is such that children, especially girls, are required to help in household work and perform their chores. Young girls have to look after their younger brothers and sisters, have to get water from the well, have to carry food to the father in the field, etc. Since there is so much to be done at home, they cannot be spared for the luxury of attending a school. The resources of the poor farmer are so limited that he does not have anything to spare for the education of his children. If there are resources available, it was the boy who is sent to school first. Parents also do not see the value of educating their children specially daughters who would get married after all and be only housewives. Since they cannot see any direct relationship between education and economic betterment, they have very little motivation to send their children to school. It is observed that the society is still not being realized that there is definite connection between education, good motherhood and efficient house management. The management of millions of household and the upbringing of millions of children in thus is the hands of illiterate women. It is here that a change is required if our democratic and socialistic

intensions are not to remain a mere pretence. The role of women outside home is becoming an important and even essential feature of our present day reality.

In the post-independence period, national policy of education made it clear that education would be used as a strategy. The University Education commission 1948-49 realized the importance of women's education and mentioned; "There cannot be educated people without educated women. If general education had to be limited to men or to women, that opportunity should be given to women, for then, it would most surely be passed on to the next generation".

Female Literacy Rates in India

Even the constitution of India has ensured equal opportunities of education without any gender bias. It has also directed to states to take necessary steps to provide free and compulsory education until they complete 14 years of age. Recently it has been declared as a fundamental right of such children to get education. Inspire of these efforts and provisions, the female education has still been suffering.

Source: Census Reports

From the Table and graph, it is clear that as compared to 1951 there is considerable increase in the overall literacy rate but the difference in the literacy rate of male and female is almost same up to 2011. Due to the large-scale disparity in the literacy rate there is gender discrimination in the field of education is quite unfortunate.

Also it is observed that rate of progress is quite slow and disheartening. Comparatively male literacy rate has been increasing fast. It has been observed that in society the girls are directly kept away from getting education. The reasons behind this are poverty conservative and cultural values and beliefs, gender discrimination and lack of infrastructural facilities. In order to tackle these problems the outlook of the society needs to be changed.

The Place of Education in Women Empowerment

Education according refers to the sum total of experiences that a person acquires in partaking in everyday activities and how these experiences have served to make the individual a better person. Many social commentators hold the view that education is a necessary to any meaningful development in the human. The impact of the level of educational attainment on the capacity of individuals and countries to acquire, adapt, and advance knowledge.

When women are given the requisite education, relevant to their needs and environment, they will gradually become more visible and recognised in the mainstream of activities both at home and in society at large. Given the fact that education enhances a person's sense of self-worth, confidence and also creates an awareness of capacity, women will become more assertive of their roles in social activities and take initiatives for themselves rather than wait for the decisions to be made for them. It can also be surmised that their income-earning potential and development will rise with the new educational status. Another crucial advantage of women education is the role it plays in reducing women fertility levels and infant mortality. It is incontrovertible to state that the family of an educated woman tend to appear healthier than that of her non-educated counterpart.

Distance Education as a Women Empowerment Strategy

Due to limitations in resources; both human and financial, the traditional conventional approach of teaching in classrooms can no longer satisfy the maximum population of a country like India, which has population of 121 million people. Clearly a realistic alternative is Distance Education.

The term Distance Education reflects both the fact that all or most of teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner, and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. The desire to anchor as much as possible to the train of globalization demands that all sectors of society must be literate and this kind of mass education can only be afforded through the distance-education.

The distance education is able to provide facility of education to the women belonging to the following groups:

- i) Class of women who are full time house wives, many of who have never had access to formal education or had to give up school at early stages of their lives. Women in this group are not usually enthusiastic about formal education because their husbands had indicated that they are to sit at home and take care of the home and the children.
- ii) Second group consists of women, who have been denied the access to formal training provided by schools and colleges because of their obedience to the Islamic practice of *Purdah*. These women can still have

access to qualitative education through the distance mode.

- iii) A third group is of working women. The women in this group are completing their education roll without disturbing either the important family relationship or the relatively responsible position in her place of work. It is found that women in these groups have been denied access to quality education due to number of reasons.

All these women can benefit from the distance education if they are properly sensitised about the advantages that education holds for their lives their subsistence and their families. Distance education does not take them out of their social environments, yet seeks to deliver qualitative education about their social environment and other societies can then reinforce this.

Impact of Distance Education

The issue of women's lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem is well known through various research studies. The lack of self confidence however is endemic to women and cuts across class, caste and even national boundaries. Coupled with the confidence issue is '*finding their voices*'. This is a positive reinforcement and an assurance that women are intelligent and that they are capable of learning. According to a few research studies, it was found that to their low self esteem, some women stopped attending study centers because they were intimidated by their male colleagues or by the tutor. Most women think within the parameters of their traditional social conditioning and this is reflected in their choice of courses of study.

There are two distinct aspects to women's participation in higher education. One is access and the other is continuation. There are several socio-economic-cultural factors which hinder women's enrollment in higher education. The attitude of parents, especially the uneducated and very conservative parents is such that they do not see any value or necessity for educating girls. In fact, there is resistance and hesitation for investment in girls' education as the parents do not expect to get returns from this. Parents also hesitate to send girls to colleges, if no exclusive women's college is available in their vicinity. If the girls have to be sent out, availability of hostel accommodation in a women's college is an important consideration.

However, it is interesting to note that more and more women are not satisfied with their current levels of educational attainment and have aspirations to further their

qualifications. In many countries, a trend is being noticed of women returning to higher education to enhance their qualifications to be able to enter job market after they have 'completed' their 'reproductive role'. Economic necessity of having to supplement the family income is also becoming a reality.

In this context, distance education has an important role to play in providing opportunities for women to participate in higher education.

Students Enrollment and Performance

The enrollment of students shows an upward trend. There is considerable increase in the total strength for post graduate courses through distance mode. In 2009-10 the number of registered post graduate distance learners is 17279 which are about 63% of the total registration in the University through Distance mode. Out of total registration for PG and UG 13407 were women learners which comes out to be 48.8% of the total.

Tasgaon study center is working under Center for Distance Education, Shivaji University; Kolhapur and was established in June, 2009. The numbers of students have been taken admission for different courses of Shivaji University, Kolhapur through this center are given in the following Tables. In Table:4.1, the year wise distribution of distance learners is presented class wise. Table:4.2, consists of year wise distribution of distance learners for post graduate education in Arts and Commerce faculty.

From Table:4.1, it is observed that the percentage of number of UG women distance learners in academic year 2009-10 was only 12.7%. In academic year 2011-12 it is of 37.94% which shows more than 25.00% increase within only two years while in 2015-16 the total increase in the women learners is 41.26% and it shows 28.6% increase as compared with the 2009-2010. It means there is impact of distance education on women learners in the Tahsil. From graph: 4.2 it reveals that there is considerable increase in the total number of distance learners in the Tasgaon Tahsil.

From Table: 4.2, it is observed that the percentage of number of women learners for PG through distance mode in academic year 2009-10 was 58.82%. In academic year 2011-12 it is of 53.3% which shows decrease in the percentage within last two years, while in the year 2015-16 out of the total registered students 147 were female, that is 47.88% of the total enrollment. From the Graph: 4.2, we say that the number of Men and Women distance learner in PG is going on increasing considerably. That

means the Distance education is essential for those who have not completed their education up to PG level due to some difficulties.

It is observed that as compared to UG learners, the number of women learners for PG through distance mode is very high. It means due to facility of Distance Education in the Tahsil, number of women learners are able to increase their qualification and can improve their status in the public life.

The distance education learners are assessed at two levels. Assignments are carried out by the students in each paper and are evaluated by the concerned subject experts. This makes for continuous assessment to the students comprehension of the subject which is necessary in the case of an independent learner or distance learner. The University provides the Study Material to all students with the help of which the distance learners can study the subject articles and the scholars undertake a regular university examination in all the papers and are evaluated externally by examiners which are appointed for regular courses of the University. The performance of the students is also satisfying where nearly 50% of the students who appeared in Distance Education came out successfully. The other 50% either lacked motivation, or academic and financial support. The age factor may affect on the performance of the distance learners.

Impact of Distance Education on Women Learners in Tasgaon Tahsil

In the final analysis, there seems to be number of advantages of the distance learning system. The fore going shows that the functional implications and advantages of the scheme cover a broad spectrum of society such that everyone and anyone can benefit at no great a cost. While the focus of this work are primarily the women, the distance learning system holds great advantages for the entire society, almost anyone can benefit from this unique system of education. The system however holds special implication for the women, especially, those who are registered in Tasgaon study centre. Lots of market women, traders, and businesswomen, women in *Purdah*, working women as well as women and girls resident in the sub-rural societies could benefit from this scheme. This observation confirms that education is the most effective strategy for promoting women empowerment.

The influence of quality education in these societies have been much discussed, it is a poverty reduction scheme, it can be used to sensitize women about family planning issues,

HIV/AIDS issues, issues relating to peace and governance within their societies, primary health maternal and infant mortality as well as environmentally sustainable practices.

In order to assess the impact of distance education on women, their motivation, persistence and success rate in distance education, a sample of 50 women were taken for study from Tasgaon study center. Out of which 70% are from PG level and 30% are from UG level.

As per the Questionnaire containing various aspects of distance education, the information was collected from this sample of 50 women distance education learners. Out of 50 women learners 38% feels that the women from any age group can enroll her name through distance mode to improve their qualification that means there should not be any condition on age of the women distance learners.

The following are the impact of Distance Education on women learners drawn from responses of the sample.

- They gained confidence.
- Improved their career opportunities.
- Attained more degrees for satisfaction.
- Updated their skills.
- Acquisition of knowledge.
- Better decision making capacity.
- Respect in family and community.
- More opportunities for networking and communicating.
- Vision broadened.
- Flexibility in time and space.
- Gives more freedom to the learner and extends the campus into the people's home and work places.
- Assists in facing the challenges in life of women.
- Increased the literacy rate of the country and State.
- Leads to empowerment of women.
- Women in age group can complete her education through distance mode.

As women have gradually become empowered at the individual and collective levels through Distance Education, they have been able to address themselves to problems such as access to drinking water, payment of minimum wages, access to health services, ensuring functions of the village school, children's participation in education and have taken collective action against domestic and social violence.

Women worldwide increasingly opt for distance education. The secondary source of

data reveals that 40 to 50 percent of the students of the majority of the open and distance education institutions are women. In India, the percentage of women in distance education is 30 to 40%.

It was observed from the sample study that 70% of the women were highly motivated by self interest, friends, members of the family, the changing environment in the society, media etc., and 30% of the respondents replied that their motivation level was low. The highly motivated groups mostly belonged to urban and working sector, while the less motivated group belonged to rural areas and were less educated group with poor socio economic background. Candidates with high motivation level had proved successful in their examinations while the success rate among the less motivated group was not appreciable.

Recommendations and Conclusions

India is the seventh largest and the second most populous country in the world. About 75% of the population lives in villages and their main occupation is agriculture. India achieved Independence in 1947 and has adopted a parliamentary form of government based on universal adult franchise and a mixed economy. India had made notable advances in various sectors, but still is a developing country. Distance Education in India has a history of nearly three decades. Persistent efforts have been made by both government and voluntary organizations to achieve universal literacy and expand opportunities for female education.

Recommendations

Distance Education carry educational messages from the humanities to science courses such as mathematics, from elementary to higher education. The following suggestions are made to increase the participation of women in distance education for their empowerment.

- Awareness programme regarding the distance education courses for women in urban, rural and tribal areas will provide opportunity for women to gain knowledge about existing educational facilities.
- The courses for women in distance education should be application oriented so that it will help them in their economic and social empowerment.
- The fee should be affordable to weaker sections of the society especially women.
- The scholarships facilities like formal education should be provided to the distance learners.

- Confidence building and personally building programmes are essential to help women to overcome resistance in distance learning.
- Women should be motivated and trained to use technology for faster and easier learning.
- The ICT facility should be used in contact session of Distance learners.
- Special programmes on T.V. and radio must be introduced to promote distance education for women.
- Study centers have to provide special facilities to the women learners.
- Recognition is also required for distance education degrees among the educational institutions, employers and in the society.
- The quality of the study materials should be enhanced and availability should be made in time for the learners.
- The contact programmes in Distance Education should be flexible to suit to the timing of working women in urban and rural areas.

Conclusions

Distance Education is an important milestone in the development of higher education and has great potential to equalize opportunities and take higher education to the door steps of women. It is expected that Center for Distance Education will lead to empowerment of women especially among rural and tribal region.

The presence of women in distance education is significant not only in the success of women as functionaries in the field but also in the recognition of women's experience as the basis for an adequate theory of distance education. Theories of distance education generated by men cannot speak for the experience of women. Women are necessarily central figures in developing appropriate theory and practice for a growing female learner population.

Table (3.1): Literacy Rates of Males and Females in India

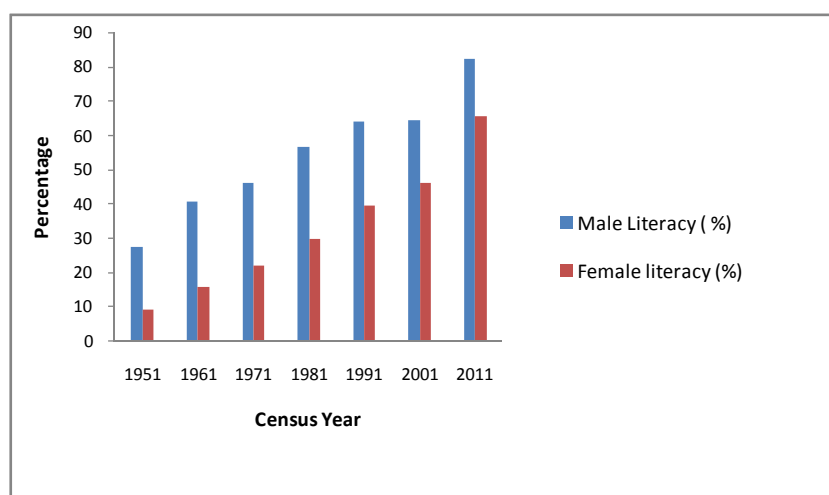
Census year	Male Literacy (%)	Female literacy (%)
1951	27.16	08.86
1961	40.40	15.54
1971	45.95	21.97
1981	56.37	29.78
991	63.86	39.42
2001	64.10	45.80
2011	82.14	65.46

Table: 4.1-Year and Class Wise Distribution of UG Distance Learners

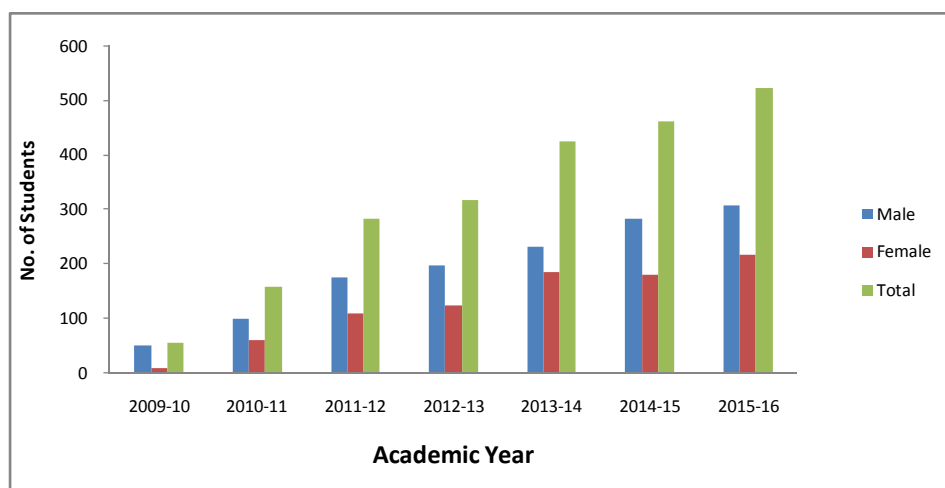
Class	Male	Female	Total
	B. A./ B. Com	B. A./ B.Com.	
2009-2010	048	007	055
2010-2011	098	059	157
2011-2012	175	107	282
2012-2013	195	122	317
2013-2014	231	183	424
2014-2015	281	179	460
2015-2016	306	215	521

Table: 4.2 Year and Class Wise Distribution of PG Distance Learners

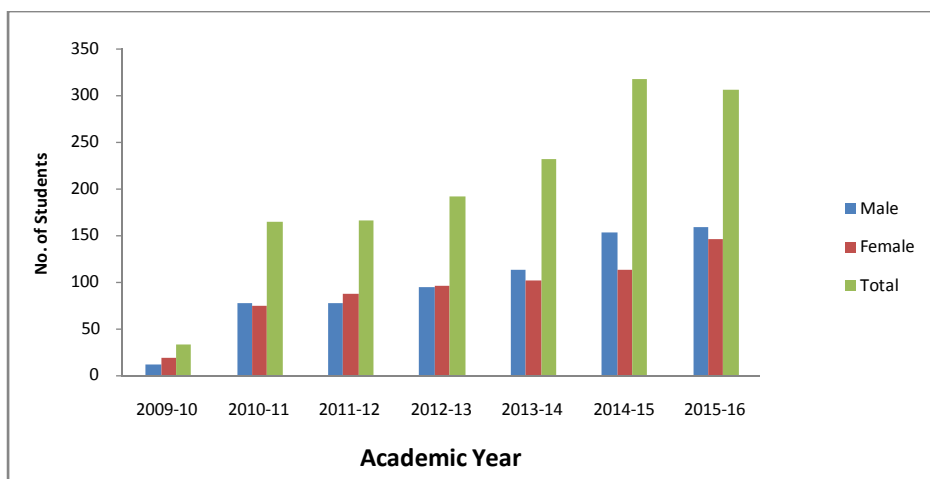
Class	Male	Female	Total
	M. A./ M.Com	M. A./ M.Com.	
2009-2010	13	20	34
2010-2011	78	76	166
2011-2012	78	89	167
2012-2013	96	97	193
2013-2014	115	103	233
2014-2015	154	114	319
2015-2016	160	147	307



Graph: 1 Male and female literacy



Graph: 4.1. Year Wise Distribution of UG Distance Learners



Graph: 4.2. Year Wise Distribution of PG Distance Learners

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