Sustainable Higher Education for Empowering Women through Open and Distance Learning Programmes of IGNOU

Dr. G. Anbalagan
Assistant Regional Director
Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)
Regional Centre, Madurai, Tamil Nadu

Abstract--- Indian higher education system has entered into the digital era with technology-enabled learning to attract digital natives and reach out to diverse sections of the society. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is considered as a mega model to reach the largest section of the society with flexibility of system to cater the educational needs of millions in the society. The Government of India has launched Digital India, Skill in India and Make in India schemes aiming to cover the population to develop knowledge and skills for the needs of future, as the Indian subcontinent has world’s second largest population and major economic resource hub in Asiatic region. Many foreign countries aim to cover the Indian population for marketing their products in the globalised world, as the impact of information and communication technologies favors boost in economical growth all over the world. Empowerment of women through education is the real need for the society, and Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in India has been found as suitable model for empowering women from various sections of the society like minorities, poor, housewives, differently abled and socially disadvantaged people. Even though number of universities, institutions and colleges are present in the higher education domain of our country, the thirst for higher education still is not fully resolved due to various factors.

The present chapter examines the role of Open and Distance Learning in Indian higher education system to empower women through various innovative programmes of study, thereby increasing their potential of knowledge and skills for societal needs.

Keywords--- Higher Education, Open and Distance Learning, Population, Empowerment of Women, Knowledge and Skills.

Introduction

Indian higher education system has been transformed due to major changes in technology and emergence of various communication channels to increase the opportunities for pursuing higher educational programmes to attain knowledge and skills besides developing various forms of research at the global scenario. Around the globe, many countries promote distance education as mega model for educational empowerment of their citizens through various means as the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system involves cost effective and flexible norms of entry qualifications. The existence of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India has transformed the field of ODL through technological intervention in distance education system. IGNOU, over its three decades of journey in the system has cherished the higher educational goals of millions in the country with its diverse disciplines of study and has enormously contributed to increase of Gross Enrollment.
Ratio (GER) in the country. As a leader of ODL system, IGNOU formulated Distance Education Council (DEC) and played several role in the higher educational domain to increase educational opportunities leveraging many successful modules. Today IGNOU is considered as one of the mega universities in the global arena with more than 30 million cumulative enrollment figures with 4000 learner support centres and 67 regional centres with strong student support service network. As mandated in the IGNOU act and statutes, the University has developed several programmes in many allied areas of diverse disciplines of study with the use of expertise teachers in the country for educational empowerment of the population.

The importance of women education was first realized during the 18th century in India, and thereafter the UNESCO has highlighted the need for women education through awareness and sensitizing programmes and underlined the potential need of participation of women in technical and vocational education for their educational empowerment, livelihood improvement and socioeconomic development (A K Gaba 2007).

**Empowering Women through Distance Education**

IGNOU as a system leader for ODL in the country developed many programmes of study to suit the needs of women and has contributed significantly to transformational changes in women empowerment. Over decades, women have always been dependent on men and their dominant role in the society had deprived women of their education. Today in the technologically developed modern era, women need to excel in all walks of life to showcase their talents and be role models and ambassadors to empower the needy. Government’s plans and schemes are provided for the educational empowerment of women so as to transform the society and improve their sustainable well-being through self-earning potential in all fields. Distance education has been identified as potential resource for educational empowerment to the needy people irrespective of their place, gender and other barriers, thus preventing their educational goals. Over decades, the importance of education for improvement of knowledge and skills enhancement is clearly understood, and that many people excelled in their life through education only. Women education is considered as important need in the society, as the educational empowerment of women is highly helpful for developing the younger kids with ample number of opportunities and talents. Many developed countries in the world provide several opportunities for educational empowerment of women so that to ensure their equal participation in all fields of work.

Feminism in both theory and practice instilled spirit of collectivism, and hence the description rejects individualism as a means for social progress (Faith 1988). Women as a leader can take collective decisions because of their involvement and constructive mind approach. Women learners could particularly benefit from open learning systems as it provides a viable alternative, reducing social opportunity costs and weakening cultural constraints (Thomas 1995; Rathore Singh and Dubey 1996).

Certificate programme in Food and Nutrition (CFN) offered by IGNOU is a wonderful example to sensitize the majority of women learners on effective nutrition required for the wellbeing of humans, and since the introduction of programme many women learners have benefitted by enrolling in it. In a major populated country like
India, malnutrition is one of the curses and many pregnant women face such problem due to paucity of essential nutritional requirement and deprived knowledge in taking nutritious food. The CFN programme of IGNOU is a major boost in the society, as today several thousands of anganwadi workers, especially females pursue the programme for their professional knowledge and practice at workplace.

IGNOU undertook a project on empowering the Self-Help Groups (SHG) of women in India, which has been recognised as the effective strategic measure for women empowerment in rural and urban areas. Many women in the self-help groups work for the cause of social issues like women rights, agriculture, forestry, health and nutrition besides their active role of earning income through microfinance and microcredit. The women empowerment project of IGNOU created avenue for training the master trainers towards training others for sustainable future approach. The training was conducted through satellite-based broadcasting of lessons in the network of 150 programme centres across the country. Master trainers at various parts of the country were trained through teleconferencing facility available in IGNOU Gyan Darshan TV channel and GyanVani FM radio station available at various places of India. Further, training programmes sensitized the SHGs on their legal literacy in various aspects for getting their rights in the government.

The IGNOU programmes on health, child care, organic farming, water harvesting, teacher education, environment, sustainability, law, nursing, community radio, computer literacy etc., have attracted many women learners in the country, particularly from north eastern parts of India since IGNOU has entrusted the network of learners support activities through its Educational Development of North East Region Unit (EDNERU) and the Regional Centres in such states. Most of the certificate and diploma level programmes of IGNOU provide meaningful knowledge development and skill empowerment to the people for exploring their talents in such disciplines of study. Many female learners of conventional higher educational institutions in India, in particular degree and masters level programmes, simultaneously pursue the IGNOU certificate and diploma programmes for gaining knowledge and increasing their potential for future employment. The University Grants Commission (UGC) in its XI plan guidelines highlighted the specific need to emphasize Women and Gender Studies in all universities, and accordingly most of the universities and autonomous colleges have established separate centre/departments for Women and Gender Studies to increase research studies. Further anti-sexual harassment committee has been formed in all institutions of higher learning to protect the women students and staff from discrimination against gender.

Master level degree in Women and Gender Studies is being offered by IGNOU to cover the distance learners and increasing research attitude amongst the scholars for developing strategies on women development.

The School of Gender and Development Studies (SOGDS) of IGNOU coordinates with the regional centres and learner support centres for increasing access to women empowerment programmes to cater the needs of distance learners.
Distance Education Bureau (DEB)

Though Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) formulated Distance Education Council (DEC) in the early 1990s to regulate the Open and Distance learning system in the country as a system leader, it cannot control the proliferation of campuses and study centres beyond the territory of dual mode universities due to various reasons. The Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD), Government of India has shifted the DEC from IGNOU to UGC under its control during the year 2012, and accordingly the erstwhile DEC was dissolved to form Distance Education Bureau. After the formulation of DEB, various strict measures were taken by UGC to control the activities of dual mode universities operating study centres in various parts of the country and educational business through distance education mode.

The increase in usage of ICT in distance education and changing dynamics of ODL system providing access to various sections of the society has slowly eliminated the requirement of spatial boundaries of classroom-based learning and campus-based learning (Kulandaiswamy 2011). Today the number of dual mode universities has increased close to the number of 200, and it may be due to the fact that growth and infrastructure in the classroom-based face-to-face mode instruction is unable to match the educational needs of increasing number of aspiring students in the society. It seems that more than 25% of students from higher education segment are enrolled in the distance education system, and hence ODL system is a strong pillar in increasing Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of the country.

The Distance Education Bureau (DEB) needs to support research studies on the impact of ODL programmes on empowerment of women and other socially weaker sections in the country so as to plan for the vocational and skill empowerment programmes by distance learning institutions to increase the women enrollment as well as to support the real cause of sustainable development in the society.

IGNOU as a role model among ODL institutions in the country has established special study centres for women learners in all parts of the country in higher educational institutions enrolling only women students. Such a measure is highly helpful to women learners to pursue their educational programmes hassle free with female peer group without any gender discrimination at the study centres.

The 21st century needs competitive skills to meet the challenges and to curb growing unemployment problems in the country. Women shall play vital role in all segments with self-confidence and quality motivation. The increase of web-based resources, e-learning, m-learning and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) provided by several educational domains has increased the opportunities for enhancing knowledge and skill competencies. Open Educational Resources (OER) on the other hand has widened the access to educational knowledge in several disciplines of study. The Open and Distance Learning with advanced technological developments like TV lessons, radio lessons, interactive web-based lessons, online learning, etc., are certainly more helpful to women for achieving their higher educational goals.
Conclusion

The proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in educational sector favors increasing access to the unreach and educationally deprived people through various means like Television, Radio, Internet and Mobile based communication channels. Since the present conventional mode of higher educational institutions caters the need of only nine million students, which contributes only 7.5% of the eligible age group between 17 and 23 years. The estimated share of ODL in the higher education system is close to 20% and the government is aiming to attain overall Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) to 20% by the end of 2020.

IGNOU offers free education to transgender, jail inmates and sex workers as a rehabilitation strategic approach for educational empowerment of such people in the society. The war widows of army personnel are given 50% fee concession in all programmes of IGNOU, and moreover 50% fee concession is given to rural learners in the agricultural programmes of IGNOU, and such concession is extended to the below poverty line students of urban areas also.

Since the educational programmes of IGNOU are diverse in nature and knowledge oriented towards employment opportunities, the women learners, in particular housewives shall use the potential resources of IGNOU for their educational development and rights. The massive expansion of educational opportunities with the launch of SWAYAM portal for offering Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) will certainly address the real need of the society.

References


www.ignou.ac.in

www.ugc.gov.in

DOI: 10.9756/BP2018.1012/19