

Chapter 15

Emerging Concerns for Gender Equality and Role of Open and Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality is increasingly on the forefront of global developmental agenda and it is more acute in developing countries. The Indian conditions are much more difficult due to widespread socioeconomic, ethnic, linguistic and cultural variations across the country thus the job of educational planners becomes much more challenging. As compared to conventional systems of education, Open and Distance Learning systems are in a much better position to respond to the peculiar needs of women in India. This chapter describes the status of women education in light of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and intends to explore potential of Open and Distance Learning to address the issues of women empowerment. Efforts are made to place the women scholastic status vis-à-vis educational opportunities, reforms and prospects starting with a global perspective, the hurdles in women education and various governmental initiatives for women education. The constraints, new possibilities and a critical appraisal of existing initiatives have been given.

BACKGROUND

Education is a human right that is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is crucial to ensure that the billions of girls and women have the same chances to gain education to strategize development investments. A well capacitated and informed woman can have catalytic impact on the prosperity of any society. It is well realized and understood that education can initiate the process of women empowerment thereby strengthening her self-confidence and life skills. Basically education gives them the power to exercise their rights in proper direction. Erin Murphy-Graham states that “we must not equate empowerment with one’s year of schooling rather we must look critically at whether students actually learn something, if their self-confidence grows, and if they learn to challenge instead of accepting traditional gender roles”.

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Women empowerment and gender equality is central to sustainable development and that open and distance learning can especially be helpful in enabling women and girls to access educational opportunities. Achieving sustainable development remains an ambitious goal for all the countries of the world especially the developing countries (Jannatul, 2001). This process will help in transforming the quality of life and promote sustainable development. The Commonwealth of the Learning (COL) is playing leadership role of in the provision of ODL and noted that Open and Distance Learning as a viable way to further enhance the educational sector towards ensuring economic development of the nation keeping the sustainable development goals in mind.

Open and Distance learning technologies have opened up infinite possibilities for millions across the Commonwealth. For meaningful contribution to development of our societies in a sustainable manner ODL can play important role. The use of open and distance learning (ODL) and appropriate technologies has the answer for these questions as it has the capability to increase access, improve quality of life with enhancing skills and cut the costs of education in many commonwealth countries. (Connections,2013). With the advent of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a vehicle to learn without hampering routine work, girls have open access and can now continue education while catering to the needs of their families and their job responsibilities. ODL can suggest avenues of knowledge and skill to be developed in almost all the areas where women aspirants can feel in comfort zone and attain life coping skills.

In India, major population lives in rural areas, remains untouched from the urban development with wide contrast of various facilities and this divide is huge and noticeable with the dimensions of social effects witnessed in urban areas. The provisions in the Indian Constitution are provided to ensure equality of opportunities and openings to all women irrespective of caste, creed or any other difference. States are empowered to take special measures to narrow down the rising hassles for women. Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles under the Constitution of India have direct bearings on Women's education and empowerment. Although most developing countries have made considerable progress in reducing the gender gap in past 25 years, yet a significant gender gap persists. Napoleon once remarked –“give me good mothers and, I shall give you great nation...” (Azad, 2016). Thus, the contribution of women cannot be denied in character building of children and therefore, education and training of women is essential for the growth of its society and the nation. The erstwhile Colonial Indian State, with the aid of the social reformers–missionary educationists, made efforts in the early 19th century to provide opportunities for women's education. This led to the expansion of schools and the recruitment of female teachers to retain girls in the schools. During Indian freedom movement there was considerable debate regarding girl education and its purposes. Cultural revivalists believed the educated women as the custodians and strength of traditional Indian culture.

International Agenda for Sustainable Development

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) , was a visionary roadmap for women's rights and empowerment. As gender equality is a key to sustainable development, the Commonwealth countries identified four priorities for action: economic empowerment of women, leadership roles for women, ending violence against women and girls, and gender and climate change. The sustainable development goals are about inclusion, i.e. about no one left behind. Women make up more than of half the world's population and they are on the frontlines, often more deeply impacted than men by poverty, climate change, food insecurity, and lack of healthcare etc. Their contributions and leadership are central in finding a solution to all these problem related to them. Though much progress has been achieved since declaration, still a lot need to be carried forward on the global frontiers to achieve gender equality.

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