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WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL SECTOR OF INDIA



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ABSTRACT

The women in Indian society had been subjected to various social, economic disabilities for many years and rural women were the major victims in those times. There are many reasons responsible for their low socioeconomic status. However, their status began to change in early part of the twentieth century by the efforts of various social movements, reform movements and women's movements. Despite the efforts of various movements in India, the majority of the rural women in the country suffer in respect of suppression, oppression and socio-economic exploitation. Hence, their empowerment depends on distance education. Generally, women prefer distance learning because of its nature, since studies of this type allow them to fulfill their family and career responsibilities. Furthermore, it enables them to learn at their own pace, while minimising costs - saving money and time on commuting and child care. Older women students, in particular, comment that the "virtual classroom" minimises the discomfort and alienation they sometimes experience on conventional college campuses populated by 18 to 22 year-olds. This paper aims at analysing the development of rural women by identifying the possible ways of educating them through distance mode of education. This paper focuses on the women's way of being a distance learner. There it points out the crucial reasons why women attend open, distance, and flexible learning programmes, as well as their objectives and their motives. It reports on the factors they consider when they select a distance learning programme or course. Finally, it explores the obstacles hindering women's access to distance education or impeding their successful studies and suggests actions that would make their attending easier.

WOMEN IN RURAL INDIA

In Indian context, rural women empowerment is very essential through distance education. Hence, one can look into the following features of rural women status in India. In India rural women suffer in respect of various causes and reasons. They are: (i) marginality of attention and services of rural women in rural and agricultural development (ii) special constraints to their development and lack of training to develop their awareness and skills, lack of information and lack of bargaining power (iii) low productivity and narrow

occupational choice (iv) inadequate finance and expert guidance for promoting socio-economic activity of rural women and their participation (v) inadequate monitoring of women's participation (vi) inadequate application of science and technology to remove drudgery and (ix) low health and nutritional status.

The second aspect of rural women development is economic empowerment. It could be achieved in the form of greater access to financial resources outside the household, reducing vulnerability of poor women to crisis situation like famine, food, riots, accidents

etc. in the family. Hence, there is a need to increase the level of rural women's income and the power to retain such income and use it at their discretion. Further, economic empowerment should be assured in the form of equal access and control over various resources at the household level and also financial self-reliance of women both in the household and in the external environment. Capacity building is one of the aspects of developing rural women. The capacity building depends on better awareness of health, education, environment, legal rights and improvement of functional literacy and numeracy. It also includes better communication skills, better leadership skills and self-help and mutual help. Thus achievement of overall women empowerment depends on distance education particularly school dropouts among rural women and the Open University system also promotes education for semi-literate rural women. However, many factors hinder education of rural women by distance mode.

BARRIERS TO EDUCATING RURAL WOMEN THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION

Any learning at any age requires time, space and support. At a distance, the onus is on the learner to organize the necessary space and structure their available time, often accompanied by external and internal conflicts. These are conflicts related to a series of corresponding barriers whose relative significance varies according to the level of education and training, the age of the women and the cultural context. (Evans 1995). Further to this point, we put forward the barriers to women's participation in distance learning; barriers which are underpinned by contemporary ideological and social structures. Improving the indicators that concern the participation of women in distance learning will succeed if only the educational institutions comprehend these obstacles. Even though they try hard to combine study with other responsibilities and roles, and despite the motivation and dedication online learners demonstrate, many are still made to feel that they are letting their families down when they try to further their education. (Kramarae 2000) Distance learning demands devotion and time and there are male partners who experience anxiety owing to the extent that they are alienated from this new concern for women's lives. Tolerance is conditional based on length

of time spent and potential neglect of relationships and responsibilities, but on the understanding that this is an aberration.

Dowling (1983) argues that the fear of women achieving success leads them to choices beneath their possibilities and generally hinders their social development. "It seems as if women are consumed by "gendered panic" in the face of success", she points out. One can assume the consequences that this attitude will have on women's self-esteem and confidence." (Nova 1994) and evidently on their studies, especially in the distance learning mode, where initiative plays a decisive role. For all the benefits of distance learning for women, these students still have to make tremendous sacrifices to balance the demands of work, family, and school study, writing assignments, research etc. as mothers, female partners, employees and citizens. That is why the majority of women declare anxiety, and many others especially mothers of young children often do their coursework while the other family members are sleeping (Morgan 1991, Stalker 1997, May 1994) commented that taking on distance study roles often results in "double duty" and Kramarae (2000) concludes that working mothers interested in furthering their education are adding a difficult "third shift" to their responsibilities. "We need to deal with the time bind that all parents and older students face if we want to make the rhetoric of "lifelong learning" for the "information economy" a reality", she suggests.

Women empowerment depends on access to education. However, rural women do not have easy access to education due to various causes and reasons. This section makes a comprehensive discussion about factors hindering women's access to distance education. Common patterns in lack of family support for women engaged in distance learning are the cultural and cross-cultural social norms and traditions by which the subservient status of women is maintained. (Effeh 1991, Kirkup and Abbot 1997, Athanasiadou 2002). However, the intersection of discourses in the home is located where traditional and postmodern gender expectations collide. The under education of women due to cultural restrictions at their expense, not only in developing countries (Commonwealth Secretariat 1987), but in many developed countries (United

Nations 2000, Vergidis 1995) is one more limiting factor since it deprives women of the basic prerequisite necessary for distance learning studies. The principle of the autonomy of the programme participants with their interaction with the teaching material, as well as the development of critical thinking abilities, that are applied in distance learning, create additional problems of adaptation in women who follow the general model of passivity of their gender. (Evans 1995, May 1994).

As feminists have pointed out for decades, when women pursue an interest or activity which does not relate directly to their domestic role, and effectively expose and challenge unequal power relations within the family, they quite often meet with strong resistance from male partners because of suspicion/jealousy as well as ridicule. (Evans 1995). Sometimes wider family with children, parents and parents-in-law, creates and sustains internal and external barriers to study, reinforcing gender stereotypes. Greek grandmothers who do baby-sitting during the face-to-face Team Counseling meetings usually state, "She should be at home taking care of her family. What does she want with this course of action?" In general majority of the rural households are either illiterate or semi-literate. In such households there is no self-interest on the part of women members. This is due to lack of knowledge and awareness of education. Hence efforts should be made to develop self-motivation among rural women with a view to give them of educational opportunities by distance education mode.

In rural India, majority of the poor households are unable to meet their basic needs. In this situation they send their female children as wage labour rather than to school. They feel double burden with respect to educating their female children; it is loss of earning due to sending female children to school and the second one is cost of educating their children. Thus supplementing household income as wage labour prevents women's education by distance mode. In rural area because of illiteracy and semi-illiteracy majority of the rural households do not know anything about existing opportunities and potentialities and ways and means of availing themselves of such opportunities. Further due to lack of communication they do not know about available courses, subjects, degrees, diplomas

etc., by distance education. Hence efforts should be made about possible ways and means of continuing their education by distance mode.

Further difficulties may present themselves in lessons that demand the extended use of computers for example. (Furst-Bowe 2001, May 1994) due to the fact that women may have (whether they believe or not) less ease of use and experience working with technological interfaces. Female students may have less experience of working with technology than do their male counterparts and may become frustrated with distance learning courses that require extensive use of computers. Despite this, the belief to persists that females are by nature technologically ignorant and unable to absorb scientific and technological information or acquire technical skills. On more obstacle related to the nature of distance learning programs is that students experience isolation and lack of individual attention. The sense of isolation that women students experience in their studies is due to the lack of natural contact with their peers. (Kirkup and Von Prummer 1990, Furst-Bowe 2001). Gilligan (1982) confirms the difference of women, supporting that the tendency of women to share their studies with their classmates, their friends and their families is not connected to any type of inferiority or to any negative personal experiences, but to a positive stance of participation and "dependent connection." This stance probably extends from their social role that strengthens a model of behaviour, which is less independent. (Beauvoir 1989). In rural areas people are conservatives and their traditional background hinder their learning environment. Women in rural areas engage themselves in various household activities and they find little time to engage themselves in reading and writing activities. Usually there is a discouraging social setup with regard to women's education. In illiterate and semi-illiterate households early marriage practice is quite common among women and it is a discouraging learning environment.

In villages people have gender bias towards girls' education. As a result, parents give more importance to educating their sons rather than daughters. Usually their daughters will be married of as soon as they attain puberty. Tuition fees in distance learning are very expensive in some countries. It is obvious that the

high cost of the studies inevitably hinders women's participation. This is a crucial factor especially for those who depend on their family for financial support or on sponsorship from their employers. Even women who have their own source of income are on an average paid less than their male counterparts, and as a result the economic obligations for study become insurmountable. There are some other factors hindering education of rural women. They are listed here: Priority consideration for the education of male children in the household budget ; Child labour practice ; Uneducated peer group ; Inadequate transport facility; High rate of dropouts at the primary level ; Long distance of access to educational institutions ; Playing multiple roles;

Scholarships, the low tuition costs and the widening of economic assistance for distance learning study programmes are extended to the educational institutions and the state can make it easier for women with economic dependence to break free of social and educational isolation. The establishment of more local study centers is one way to counter the isolation that women distance learners experience (thus ensuring a quiet place for study - supportive services and one-on-one lessons). (Effeh 1991) Educational policy-makers must be sensitised to the needs in particular of working mothers who are engaged in distance learning programmes. The services for the professional orientation, finally, belong to that category of supportive mechanisms which give meaning to all of the previous effort. Otherwise, there exists the strong possibility that women distance learners will be unable to utilise the knowledge and skills that are gained through the programme thus rendering their efforts futile both typically and essentially. Professors and counsellors can decisively contribute to the removal of barriers that women in distance learning encounter by treating distance learners as responsible and intelligent human beings, not as passive educational consumers (Kramarae 2000) and by creating a safe and supportive environment in accordance with the principles of adult education (Rogers 1999), with the intent of dispelling women's fears concerning education. Educators need to be sensitive to women's personal and unique circumstances and to investigate ways to help students

develop effective support systems. Supportive conditions, which raise the self-confidence and self-awareness of the learner in the context of distance learning education, can be ensured by the use of a variety of communication means and pedagogical methods - strategies as well as the promotion of interaction between students, professors- counselors and technology. (Furst- Bowe 2001, Kirkup and VonPrummer 1990).

In order to promote distance learning education, the broad dissemination of information to women populations that can benefit from the advantages of distance learning programs of study but for whom it would be impossible otherwise to access the typical sources of information such as websites, must be ensured. Within this category are unemployed women, older women, women living in rural/agricultural areas, and women in prison. Women themselves can contribute to this effort through the network of the women's movement and of women's professional organisations. Discrimination against women must be confronted more generally First and foremost, the role that the house and the local setting play in the learning environment of the woman student must be recognised and the fact that this education, like technology must be adapted to local circumstances (May 1994). The next step is to conduct research into the special way in which women engage themselves in distance learning, into the types and levels of interaction between students and tutors that suit the female way of learning, as well as the documentation of the major social aspects that influence women's learning.

As far as the programme of study is concerned, more women's studies courses must be made available via distance learning programmes and a feminist perspective must be incorporated in the curriculum in other disciplines. More women administrators, teachers and students should be involved in the planning process for on-line courses so that their experience can contribute more directly to the benefit of others. (Kramarae 2000). This means that the possibility of adapting study programmes to suit the needs of women can be utilised in such a way that steadily the educational demands of other categories of learners can also be satisfied.

STRATEGIES TO EDUCATING RURAL WOMEN

THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION

In order to overcome the problems as cited above, one needs some action oriented programmes. 1. Conducting awareness campaign in rural areas, thereby the importance of women's education could be imparted to the rural households. 2. Involving women voluntary groups and non-governmental organisations to initiate various kinds of activities, which would motivate girls to go for higher education by distance mode. 3. There is a need to motivate women's self-help groups in imparting awareness of women's education through distance mode with a view to disseminate the same to their members. 4. Initiating special counselling programme on raising the study skills of women including career guidance in rural area itself. 5. There is a need to start rural communication centre with a view to disseminate knowledge of educational opportunities available through distance education system. 6. Encouraging Open University system of learning among rural women. This can be done with the help of NGOs and civil society. 7. There is a need to reduce the cost of distance education, particularly for the benefit of rural women. 8. Universities should conduct

awareness campaign in rural areas about the educational opportunities, courses offered, eligibility conditions etc. This will motivate rural women to pursue higher education by distance education. 9. School dropouts among rural girls should be encouraged to pursue their education by distance education system. 10. There is a need to impart computer education in rural Girls schools with a view to develop their vocational skills and thereby make use of them of IT in distance education. 11. Efforts should be made to enroll more girls' students under distance education system by offering job-oriented courses. 12. There is a need to start development programme to promote awareness of the academic needs of the rural women students. 13. The curriculum of distance education at least should have one general paper on women development, focusing on health and family welfare, environment awareness, plan policies and programmes pertaining to women empowerment. 14. There is a need to start separate website on courses offered by various universities under distance education system. The website address could be disseminated to our rural people particularly, girls and women.

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