

Empowering Women in Saudi Arabia through Open and Distance Learning

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Abstract

The issue of women's empowerment is a global concern. Worldwide studies have revealed that education is the most potent instrument for the empowerment of women. It is only through education and training that they prepare to play their roles in the nation's social, economic and political spheres as equal members of society. Open and distance learning (ODL) system has emerged as a tool with immense potential for creating widespread access to knowledge for women. It has been instrumental in lowering the illiteracy rate, and dropout rate, and creating accessibility and immense opportunities for Women. Women from all walks of life have continued to seize the opportunities of ODL programmes to improve their education, get better jobs and improve their standards of living. The ICT-enabled ODL System allows women to overcome the barriers of time, space and socio-economic constraints and to bring a variety of learning resources to meet their educational needs.

Saudi Arabia ranks 4th lowest in terms of political and economic empowerment of women and 5th lowest in terms of women's labour force participation in a group of 115 countries which were ranked in 2012. Saudi women are still found to be the most under-utilized resource for the Saudi economy even though 65 per cent of the Kingdom's college graduates are women 60 per cent of new stock investors and 40 per cent of new real estate investors are women. Despite being highly educated, they make up only about 5% of the labour force. Women's unemployment is estimated at 28 per cent. Without empowering women the country cannot develop, compete internationally and witness any real national economic growth.

A comprehensive, modern and open educational system is fundamental to the empowerment and prosperity of Saudi women who have limited access to formal education and training. Full-time housewives can pursue the much-craved training, skills development and education through ODL. It is a viable alternative to a large number of working women in Saudi Arabia who cannot leave their families and work to pursue better education which will enhance their career progression. ODL system has the potential to educate and train them while preserving their Islamic identity as it does not take them out of their social environments. It allows them to pursue qualitative education that will improve their sense of self-esteem without jeopardizing either the important family relationship or the relatively responsible position in their place of work. The present paper is based on an exploratory study conducted at the Arab University (AOU) on a sample of Saudi distance education students enrolled at five branches of AOU in Saudi Arabia. The study examines the place of ODL system in Saudi Arabia, the features of ODL system that make it particularly suitable to Saudi women, its role as a tool for women empowerment and various forms of ODL media to suit the conditions of women in Saudi Arabia. The results of the study would provide Saudi practitioners, policymakers and academicians with useful insights into integrating women in to the economy; upholding deeply rooted social, cultural and ethical values of the Arab-Islamic heritage.

Keywords: *Women, Saudi Arabia, Empowerment, ODL*

Introduction

Women's empowerment as gained considerable importance as an area for policy and policy intervention in most countries of the world. In the context of knowledge societies, empowerment of women is understood as building the ability and skills of women to gain

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insight of actions and issues in the external environment which influence them, and to build their capacity to get involved and voice their concerns in the external processes, and make informed decisions. It entails building up of capacities of women to overcome social and institutional barriers, and strengthening their participation in the economic and social processes for an overall improvement in quality of their lives. Women empowerment needs providing the education that is really needed; providing adequate opportunities for training women; encouraging women to take the initiative and then rewarding them; ensuring continuous support and encouragement by family members and colleagues.

To provide women access to education has received increasing attention world over since the past three decades particularly after the Jomtien Conference on “Education for All” in 1990. A major change in the last few decades has been the recognition of the centrality of education in the struggle to achieve women’s equity and empowerment. To promote gender equality and empower women, eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015 was one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG-3) adopted at UNISCO summit of world heads of states in New York in 2000. Education is indeed a weapon for fighting poverty, diseases, and ignorance and when all these are fought, an average woman becomes empowered to participate actively in issues of development in her community. Education represents the primary gateway to woman’s access to job market, higher status, personal development and self esteem. The empowering role of women’s education affects not only the lives of women, but also the lives of their children and other dependents. For the national economy, educating women has resulted in improved productivity and economic development as well as in a better quality of life, leading to a notably healthier and better nourished population (World Bank, 2001).

Despite the tremendous spread of girls’ education in Arab world in the last five decades, Arab women remain poorly prepared to participate effectively and fruitfully in public life by acquiring knowledge through education (Arab Human Development Report, 2005). Even amid signs of progress like increasing enrolment rates and better test scores for women, the Arab world remains in the lower ranks internationally in the education of women, especially at the higher levels of schooling. This deficit in education is a major factor in preventing women in the region from realising their full potential and contributing to their economies as a whole.

In Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) the successive development plans have placed greater emphasis on the potential role of women in the economy. The social attitudes have

changed in the Kingdom toward women tremendously during the last couple of decades with career women given the respect they deserve. There are more job opportunities for women, which are far more diversified with bigger and better chances for development. Saudi society has accepted the fact that women have a role to play with a second income becoming a need as well (Hamdan, 2005). Empowering women in Saudi Arabia aims at increasing their participation in various fields both within the family and at work site, maintaining Arab and Islamic values; providing better opportunities for women in decision making positions, and development of adequate approaches that lead to empowerment of women in terms of education, health and employment. Even those women pushing for change in the kingdom say that for them, liberation is not a matter of Western-style feminism and that the Islamic traditions are a vital part of their beliefs.

The advent of formal public schooling in Saudi Arabia dates to the 1960s, when the first official primary school for girls opened its doors in Riyadh. Until recently, the education of girls in the Kingdom was entrusted to the Presidency of Girls' Education which, in March 2003, was annexed to the Ministry of Education. The first girls' college was established in 1970 in Riyadh. Approximately 10 similar colleges with the same requirements were opened in the 1980s to offer courses in arts, education, general science and sciences (Al Malik, 1987). Women beyond elementary school age or old era reenrolled in adult education programs since 1973 to raise literacy rate among women. About 121,000 Saudi girls graduate from secondary schools and 44,000 from universities annually. If the number of conventional universities is taken as a parameter for the expansion of higher education in infrastructure then Saudi Arabia takes the lead in GCC countries (having 62 universities) with a maximum number of 21 universities followed by the UAE with 15 universities. KSA spends 5.7% of its GDP and 19.3% of total government expenditure on education. The Ministry of Higher Education is sending talented women abroad to finish their studies in high-demand subjects (Hamdan, 2005). Many families still send their daughters to study abroad when the fields in which they wish to specialize are closed to the Saudi institutions. As per Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2012 Saudi Arabia tops the list of eight countries that have made the greatest strides in women's literacy in the past decade. According to UNESCO statistics the adult female illiteracy in Saudi Arabia for the population aged 15 to 24 years is 73.4 per cent and the illiteracy rates for those 15 years and older are 59.2 percent (UNESCO, 2012). The youth female literacy rate is 81.3% compared to 90.4% in case of male. Saudi Arabia records a sound male-female gender parity (GPI) i.e. ratio of female to male parity in adult literacy (0.90%) and youth literacy (0.98). In the kingdom, the tertiary education enrolment rates for women are higher than those of men.

Despite the marked increase in the female literacy, women remain a largely invisible element in Saudi Arabia's strictly segregated society. Saudi women are 51 percent of the population, but represent only 20 percent of the total work force. The Government is creating additional jobs for Saudi educated women as a step to reduce the unemployment rate among women which is estimated to be 26.3 percent of the total number of working women. Saudi Arabia has made key investments in women's education but has generally not removed barriers to their participation in the workforce and thus not reaped the returns on its investment in the development of one half of its human capital. At the higher education level, Saudi women are still concentrated in the disciplines of literature, humanities and social sciences which are not in high demand in Saudi job market. The country has an educated but untapped talent pool and would have much to gain through women's greater participation in the workforce. For example 54% of Saudi women are perceived to be the most challenged in finding access to capital, while only 12 % of Bahraini women seem to experience challenge in this area (Alturki and Braswell, 2010). In terms of attitude, Saudi women seem to be the most optimistic about their business prospects (70%), followed closely by the UAE women at 60% (Alturki and Braswell, 2010). The situation has resulted in more than SR60 billion leaving the Kingdom because of expatriates being employed. KSA could save a third of this amount by increasing employment opportunities for women and then reinvesting the money to benefit our society" (Mokhtar, 2007).

Saudi women are still found to be the most under-utilized resource to the Saudi economy even though the government estimates that 56.5 percent of the Kingdom's college graduates are women. Moreover, Saudi women invest SR42 billion in the market and their bank savings amount to SR100 billion. Some estimates by local portfolio managers say up to 60 percent of new stock investors and 40 percent of new real-estate investors are women. A recent survey shows that approximately 16,390 businesses are owned by women and women own 40 percent of the nation's private wealth (Hamdan, 2005). Considering that 30 percent of accounts worth SR27 billion (\$7.2 billion) are opened by women, and that women control 21 percent of the country's private investments and a fifth of all Saudi mutual funds, the need to empower women in this sector is seen as important to the country's development (Abdullah, 2007).

Five major initiatives have been identified as vital for empowerment and success of Saudi women: providing the education that is really needed; providing opportunities for training women equal to those available for men in banks and companies such as ARAMCO and SABIC; encouraging women to take the initiative and then rewarding them; ensuring

continuous support and encouragement by family members and colleagues; having the same rights and benefits men have—equal legal rights, easy transportation, the freedom to reach official institutions and the freedom to benefit from the legal system and the law (Mokhtar, 2007). The release of energies of Saudi girls and women in the fields of knowledge and creativity would go a long way to deliver tremendous benefits that would elevate Saudi society in all branches of human endeavour. About 66 percent of Saudi university students are women, and that makes their integration into the workforce a must for progress and development. By equipping Saudi women with the necessary education and skills as contributors to their country, whilst reducing the dependency on foreign expertise, self-sufficiency will allow them to become global citizens, which is a step towards their cognition of their role in the global economy. A comprehensive, modern and open educational system is fundamental to the growth and prosperity of Saudi Arabia. A thoughtful revision of the existing system is necessary. Advancements in Saudi women's education require both educators and policy makers become aware of ODL system of education's role in educating, equipping and empowering women

Open and Distance Learning System in Saudi Arabia

Distance education has a very short history in the Arab world. The origin of distance education in the region dates back to the early 1960s when the Arab University of Beirut started with the first generation of distance education, using correspondence model (Al-Harhi, 2005). For many years it was the only University to offer distance education programmes to Arab students and is still a popular venue for distance higher education in the Arab World. Following the worldwide trend the region has witnessed the development of three modes of open and distance learning (ODL) institutions: traditional higher education institutions (dual mode) offering distance or open education programmes, open education institutions (single mode), and virtual universities (virtual mode).

Since the advent of public education in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s, the Kingdom has adhered to a traditional educational system. In Saudi Arabia distance education, especially for non-formal system, has remained marginalized from the mainstream of policy and resource allocation and failed to institutionalize or influence traditional thinking. Saudi Arabia has been slower than many nations to move into distance education and that it has a very short history of using printed, electronic, or broadcast means for students who are not physically on site (Al-Khalifa, 2012). Only bachelor's degree programs were offered through traditional universities' distance education programs for about a decade, and policies for single-mode, distance, and virtual tertiary

institutions are still under development for approval by the Ministry of Higher Education. Some public universities, such as King Abdulaziz University and Al-Imam Mohammad ibn Saud Islamic University, are dual-mode while single-mode distance education is offered by the Arab Open University. Distance education is primarily applied where gender segregation is required in tertiary education, where male teachers are only authorized to teach female students by means of closed-circuit television, one-way video and two-way audio and broadcast.

Experiencing higher education capacity issues, and anxious to improve the knowledge and skills of its citizens, Saudi Arabia now recognizes the need to adopt distance education as part of its educational and development strategies. According to Bates (2009), some of the more forward-thinking leaders of Saudi education have been exploring online education over the course of the last decade. There is great enthusiasm surrounding the emphasis of King Abdullah Bin Abdul aziz on education as a tool of empowerment. One of these innovative measures is the promotion of online learning, which is opening up teachers and students to look beyond the strictures of the traditional system of education. The Saudi Ministry of Higher Education has begun to acknowledge the need to use online technologies in order to offer opportunities to the increasing numbers of students graduating from high school. Embedded online communication in higher education courses and programs are no longer considered luxuries or mere supplements to learning but, rather, are treated as integral parts of higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Online learning, including distance education by online means, has received increasing attention among Saudi educators also as a way of increasing the accessibility of higher education. The Saudi scholars such as Alenezi (2012) and Al Seghayer (2013) have indicated that open and online learning is opening new opportunities for Saudi students to question traditional assumptions of what learning is. This type of instruction offers access to many students who aspire to study at the university level but live in remote areas or are working to earn income and therefore are unable to physically attend educational institutions. The unprecedented openness to new educational resources and cultural perspectives is leading Saudi Arabia's younger generation to become less traditional. Hamdan (2014) argues that in Saudi Arabia students learn best when they are immersed in an educational context that promotes interaction among peers.

One of the recent developments in Saudi open and distance education system is the establishment of the Faculty of Distance Learning at King Abdul aziz University in Jeddah, to provide distance learning in the country. The ODL programs launched by the

University from 2007-2008 in the disciplines of arts, humanities, economics and administration involve blended learning, the virtual class room system (CENTRA and the e-learning management system. The University conducts training and certifies faculty members and individuals outside the university in distance education as well as students using the ODL system. King Abdulaziz University is also the permanent headquarters of the Saudi Distance Learning Society. Al-Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University offers bachelor degrees programmes in distance mode in all disciplines to Saudi and non-Saudi students. In 2008, more than 6,000 students were admitted to the university, and more than 15,000 are currently enrolled in the program. At Umm Al-Qura (Mecca) and King Abdulaziz (Jeddah) Universities e-learning is used to support classroom teaching, although King Abdulaziz University has about 1,000 students taking fully online distance courses (out of a total of 26,000 distance education students). In 2011 a new electronic university was established with three colleges and an enrolment of more than 20,000 students across the Kingdom.

The launch of the Knowledge International University (KIU), the first virtual university in Saudi Arabia, offering bachelor degrees programs from the College of Sharee'ah and Qur'anic studies and the College of Islamic Studies for non-Arabic speakers is a land mark development in higher education arena of the Kingdom. KIU uses a mix of PDF study materials, audio and video recorded lectures, and live lectures. Each subject consists of 25 live and recorded lectures. KIU has students from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco and is seeking to expand its range of courses. The Saudi government has established a well-funded National Center for E-Learning and Distance Learning in Riyadh. It aims to support in the creation of electronic educational material, and providing an electronic venue for faculty members of any local university to utilize in creating e-courses through its own LMS. Once deployed successfully the project is expected to help alleviate some pressing problems currently faced by the higher education institutions in the kingdom, such as lack of support for off-campus students and catering to the rapid growth in enrolment. It will be the epicenter of the open and e-learning wave that is expected to spread through out the kingdom.

A good number of public and private universities and colleges such as the King Fahad University for Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran, the Prince Mohammed bin Fahad University in Dammam and Effat College in Jeddah have already taken it upon themselves to establish learning as a method for augmenting the educational experiences of their students. King Saud University has also started an ambitious plan towards the

campus/traditional universities in Saudi Arabia universities. Many universities and colleges in Saudi Arabia have over the last five years established online communication forums to supplement and reinforce face- to-face teaching.

The Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia is finalizing the rules and regulations governing open e-learning and accreditation from other Arab and international institutions. Nevertheless, there remains considerable reluctance among some stakeholders to introduce entirely online degree programs, including among leaders within the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education. The Ministry has not yet moved to accredit online distance education provided by international universities because it currently stipulates that to approve a degree from any international university, the students must be able to present evidence that their time is dedicated to studying on a full-time basis while residing in the country where the degree was earned. Like most Arab countries, Saudi Arabia has yet to authorize private ODL institutions except that of Arab Open University to function in the Kingdom. ODL is often looked upon in KSA as less scholarly, less rewarding, and offering fewer career advantages. There is still strong resistance, especially in the national accreditation agency, to fully online distance education, because of concerns about quality.

Given the increasing population rates and geographical expansion of Saudi Arabia, distance education would appear to be an obvious means of widening access and offering quality and flexibility in programs of choice. There is no dearth of finance, government commitment, and the urge on the part of women to learn. Since Saudi Arabia is a large country with many of its areas isolated from major cities and established colleges and universities, providing higher-education programs through ODL would greatly benefit the country. Through the use of distance learning and the integration of Web-based training and technology, information and knowledge can be made available to students in the King do many time and anywhere. The introduction of additional Web-based educational opportunities will help Saudi universities move from formal classroom training and education to a new way of teaching and learning that does not require classrooms. The development of online or Web-based ODL curriculum would enable women students to learn from the comfort of their own homes.

With the rapid increase in the number of students in Saudi Arabia graduating from high schools, there is a growing strain on higher-education resources. Institutes of higher education do not have the necessary resources to provide all of these students with a good education. In the past decades, many institutions of higher learning in Saudi Arabia were able to respond to the continuing pressure of the growth of the student population by

expanding existing colleges and universities or by building new ones. Some administrators believe that creating education programs that make use of modern technology, such as video and television broadcasting and the Internet, address the financial constraints and limited resources being experienced in the Kingdom. Many Arab Islamic countries and some Islamic organizations (from both Arabic and non-Arabic countries) are very interested in knowing how distance learning can be used to “make Islamic culture the basis of educational curricula at all levels and stages” and “safeguard the Islamic identity of Muslims in non-Islamic countries” (Nasser and Abouhedid, 2000).

More than 65% of the current Saudi population is that of youth (i.e., those under 35 years of age). With an increasingly young population, the demand for higher education in the Saudi Arabia far exceeds the supply. Many high-school graduates were unable to find places at the universities and approximately 100,000 are currently studying abroad on scholarships. Besides a large number of nontraditional students (older, working) are seeking further education to improve their competitiveness in the labor market. For many Saudi students who are interested in higher education from reputable international universities, and who cannot travel to other countries as a result of financial, employment and/or family obligations, distance learning is a great option. ODL offers the prospect of expanding the total number of students who can be enrolled in Saudi universities without actually requiring increases in the physical capacity of the universities and associated facilities. As the public and private higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia cannot accommodate the increasing number of high-school graduates, it is paramount that open and online learning become part of the higher education system in the Kingdom.

A perusal of ODL experiences of the Kingdom reveals many obstacles hindering the development of open and distance education. The Government is skeptical of the practice of distance education program staking it as a process of teaching and learning by correspondence and not an innovative approach to instruction. This belief has serious implications for the development of ODL mode in the country. The policy towards distance education at the governmental level is vague. Educational researchers and experts have criticized the planning and administration of ODL in Arab countries and Saudi Arabia in particular with respect to their objectives, policies, delivery systems, self-study materials, and student support services (Alsunbul, 2002; Mohamed, 2005). If the country is to benefit from ODL, these issues need to be handled both at the individual and government all levels. A more proactive approach is required to articulate policies addressing critical issues, including equity of access, curriculum relevance to labor market needs, accreditation, consumer protection, and cultural sensitivity (Al-

Harthi,2005). To overcome most of these problems, it is vital to assure high quality of ODL programs and to ensure their suitability to Saudi students. Having closer ties with distance and open universities worldwide, AOU is in a good position to offer guidance to other open learning institutions in the country endeavoring to establish their own quality assurance frameworks. AOU quality assessment is conducted by academic assessment and accreditation commissions of concerned Arab countries and OU Validation Service of UKOU that enjoys complete parity with all the universities in UK and other parts of the world.

ODL and Saudi Women

Women have constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic difficulties. Because of its inherent flexibility in terms of entry and exit, pace and place of learning, methods of evaluation etc, ODL holds the promise of providing equitable access of education to women in view of their special circumstances, which is otherwise not possible through traditional means of education. Distance and open learning has emerged as a tool with immense potential for creating widespread access of knowledge for women. ODL can be an effective technological media for creative, cost effective teaching, while reaching a large number of students and reducing faculty utilization. ODL can, with its outreach to their homes, enable them to learn at their own pace and place to take up vocations and skills for economic and individual development. It can provide them a second chance to step into the main stream of education, enabling them to earn and learn at the same time and also fulfill their family responsibilities.

ODL is seen as globally preferred by women. Experiences across the world reveal that women have outnumbered men in accessing education through open and distance means. In India, women make up 42% of distance education students compared to 28% in the conventional face-to-face mode. In Australia 56% of distance education students are female. At Canada's Athabasca University (an open university) and Open Learning Agency, over 62% and 69% of the students respectively are women compared to about 50% in conventional universities in Canada. At UKOU's undergraduate courses about 42% of the students are women compared to just 40% in conventional British universities. At Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan (AIOU) female participation rate is 51%. Interestingly, there is a significant increase in female enrolment in culturally restricted areas of Pakistan where formal system offers limited access to learning for female population. In Sri-

Lanka majority of the ODL students are women. On an average 40% of total students enrolled at Arab Open University (AOU) is that of women.

The requirements and priorities of Saudi women are different from those of Saudi men because of a complex interaction of social, cultural, religious and economic conditions obtaining in the kingdom which need to be taken in to account while devising a mechanism for educating and empowering women in KSA. In Arab world in general and Saudi Arabia in particular many factors are at work for Saudi women's lower educational participation and attainment including lack of education amongst the adult of the family, distance of schools, transport hurdles, security problems, too many siblings, early marriage and motherhood. Marriage has always been a terminal point for education of a large number of Saudi women. ODL has the potential to address the gender imbalances, inequities and inequalities which the overall education sector is unable to handle. In addition to advancing their material circumstances, ODL can provide an 'empowering space' wherein women have both the time and facilities to study; and whether women acquire the skills they need for upward economic and social mobility.

Distance education would make it easier for Saudi women to participate in educational settings in the kingdom as it preserves the original idea of genders segregation in Muslim societies. They can get educated through ODL, maintaining obedience and adherence to Islamic religion practice of veil because the mode allows them to learn at a 'safe distance' from their instructor without going against the injunction of their religion practice. Most Saudi women are willing to accept the position of women in return for the guarantee of security that social and Islamic traditions provide for them. Even those who seek change want that to occur within the context of the Arab culture (Jandt 2004). Saudi Arabia has its own cultural norms which may differ from international best practices, which may have to be de- contextualized to suit the cultural situations prevailing in Saudi Arabia.

These women can be trained, exposed to knowledge and enabled to contribute their bit to nation building. Women who are full time housewives may never had access to formal education or may have given up schooling at early stages of their lives. They are usually not enthusiastic about formal education because they are required to sit at home and take care of home and the children. Through ODL, these women become learned and empowered because the mode of educational allows them to sit at home as housewives and study for a programme of their choice without jeopardizing their marriages. Distance education is a boon to career women who aspire to enhance their personal and professional competence, to about 70% out-of-school Saudi girls, to home-bound women who wish to profitably use their time and resources to satisfy their deferred academic aspirations, to the rural girls who have no access to the mainline educational system.

Distance education seems appropriate to provide opportunities of equal access to quality education at all levels to women even in cultural lyre stricted areas where women are not allowed to go out of their homes.

ODL has already been instrumental in lowering illiteracy rate, dropout rate, and furthermore creating accessibility and immense opportunities for the Women. Many Saudi women have continued to seize the opportunities of ODL programmes to improve on their education, get better job, and improve on their standard of living. The use of very small aperture terminal (VSAT) broadcasting technology and the internet to teach more than 300 masters' students in 36 Girls Colleges in the Kingdom, operating under the aegis of the Princess Noura University, amply demonstrates how ODL methods and technology can be used to enhance higher education opportunities and facilities for female students in Saudi Arabia. Had this method not been employed thousands of girls in Saudi Arabia would not had the chance to pursue their higher studies. Beginning in 2006 with the cultural, religious, and economics lectures broadcast from Riyadh to the Girls' Colleges around the Kingdom, the project is now developinge-learning curriculum being hosted on the website of General Presidency for Girls Education. ODL has played a significant role in accelerating such women's' education and subsequently their empowerment (Hamdan 2014).

On the whole, the isolation of women from the mainstream economy and their lack of access to education because of societal, cultural and market constraints have led to their distancing from the global pool of knowledge. This distance is reflected in the low levels of empowerment and equity of women and has enormously contributed to the slow pace of development in the Kingdom. According to the World Economic Forum's 2012 Global Gender Gap Report, Saudi Arabia ranked among last four in a group of 135 countries in terms of economic participation and opportunity and political empowerment. It is now a well understood fact that without empowerment of women, any attempt to raise the quality of lives of people in the country would be incomplete. Ironically, the importance of bringing a gender perspective to policy analysis and design of development tools and interventions is still not widely understood, and the lessons for development still need to be fully ingrained by the national policy makers. In the context of knowledgesphere, the issues of gender equity and empowerment of women become even more significant as women have a strategic role in the incubation and transfer of critical knowledge. The situation calls for an alternate strategy and system to address the issue providing the educationally unreached population of women the opportunities of education through flexible approach in wider context. Therefore, distance

education may be used to supplement the formal system providing learning opportunities to all through its multi-media approach and grounded in the slogan, "Education for All".

The Role of Arab Open University

The participants to the Arab States Regional Conference on Higher Education for the 21st Century held in

Beirut in 1998 proposed the establishment of an Open Arab University as a model for unifying Arab efforts in the field of distance higher education. As a result of these efforts the Arab Open University (AOU) was established in 2001 at the initiative of HRH Prince Talal Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saoud. With its main headquarters in Kuwait, AOU has branches in Lebanon, Bahrain, Jordan, Egypt, Oman, Kuwait, Yemen and Saudi Arabia and more branches are proposed to be opened in the near future. Making use of modern information and communication technologies, AOU aims to make higher education and continuing education accessible to every willing and capable Arab citizen with the aim of contributing to the training of highly qualified Arab human power in fields which are essential for national and regional development, conducting research, studies, and consultations in these fields. AOU adopts an open learning methodology to be able to accommodate larger number of students and allow a great deal of flexibility while maintaining respectable academic standards. The university intends to promote human resources development that is compatible with the demands and challenges of current and emerging information technology platforms and international socio-economic developments.

AOU is a pan-Arab non-profit institution established as an open access university providing higher education to the underprivileged irrespective of gender, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic status particularly those who didn't have the chance to continue their higher studies for economic, social or geographic reasons. It focuses on widening access, especially for women and uses a mix of textbooks, videos, audio cassettes and educational CD-ROMs. AOU is distinct from other single mode universities in the Arab region, in terms of being established under the umbrella of the Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND) and adopting broad regional educational goals. It has partnerships with the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to help ensure a good quality of learning. Collaboration, partnership and licensing agreements between the AOU and the UKOU allow it to adopt UKOU learning materials for its use, be accredited by UKOU Validation Services and award its own degrees. All the seven branches of AOU have received local institutional accreditation

from Ministries of Higher Education in their respective countries. To meet concerns raised by local Ministries of Higher Education the AOU requires its students to devote 25% of study hours to face-to-face contact.

In Saudi Arabia, AOU has been accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education and National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA). It is the first university in Saudi Arabia to use distance learning system in education. In the Kingdom, AOU has fully accredited regional centers in Ahsa, Dammam, Hail, Jeddah, Medina and Riyadh with Branch headquarters at Riyadh. It offers degree programmes in business studies; English language and literature, information technology and computing, and education. At AOU, the form of open education combines some traits and attributes of systems of virtual learning, distance education, distributed education and “blended system of open education”. Students learn via the Moodle-based learning management system, interactive multimedia lectures, face-to-face lectures and practical sessions and study texts. Computing facilities and wireless internet access are available in all of the regional centres, which are equipped with separate labs for male and female students.

The AOU-Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Branch has experienced rapid increase in student strength. With a modest beginning of 3174 (fresh and registered) students in 2002-03; the number increased to 20898 in 2006-07. In the year 2006-07, 52.33% of the students were enrolled in IT and 39.88% in Business while 7.79% were enrolled in English language. The AOU mission advocates the offering of opportunities of higher education for the marginalized groups in Saudi society, including the women especially those residing in remote areas. In 2003, women enrollment accounted for 34% of the total enrollment which increased to 40% in 2005-06 and 48% in 2006-07. The enrolment of female students in all academic programs of the University in Saudi Arabia is impressive. Providing them with flexible opportunities is a solid contribution to their empowerment. So it is quite evident that women students are increasingly approaching AOU as an alternative mode of study wherein they can adjust their professional and social commitments with the passion for study and professional development.

The Study

The present paper is based on an exploratory study conducted at Arab Open University (AOU) in Saudi Arabia on a representative sample of Saudi female distance education students enrolled at all the five branches of AOU in Saudi Arabia. The paper examines the current state of ODL system in Saudi Arabia, assesses how the ODL system of education can offer access to education to Saudi women suiting their circumstances ,and

suggests an appropriate strategy for empowering Saudi women through ODL. It points out the crucial reasons why women attend open and flexible learning programmes, analyses the relevance of ODL system to women considering their specificities, highlights the benefits of multimode delivery of ODL programmes to women, assesses the potential impact of ODL system on women, explores the obstacles hindering women's access to and participation in education through ODL. It reports on the factors they consider when they select a distance learning programme.

The study is descriptive in nature and field research, participative observation and documentary research methodology has been adopted. Stratified and convenient sampling technique was adopted for collecting data from respondents to ensure participation from all programmes and regions. A bilingual structured questionnaire developed on five point Likert type rating scale and a semi-structured interview schedules were used as research tools to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire was tested by comparing it against selected previous research instruments for its validity and reliability. The data collected was analyzed through quantitative (mean score) as well as qualitative approaches. The SPSS statistical package was utilized in analyzing and interpreting collected data.

Two hundred female students were randomly sampled and questionnaires were sent to all of them. During the specified time 130 responses were received and analysed. The selection of women students for the study was done on the basis of a number of criteria like their programmes of study, status of program completion, age group, family status, employment status, and annual income etc. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with ten female students from each programme to find out the role of ODL through AOU in their empowerment, professional and social development and their emotional experiences in balancing different social roles and commitments while studying at AOU. All the interviews approximately one hour in length were recorded and transcribed.

Results and Discussion

The women students under study are spread over to the entire Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Areas on ably high percentage of women under study is pursuing IT programme (45%), followed by English (28 %) and business studies (15%). Majority of them (51%) are adults (in the age group of 20-25 years of age) and only 17 % in lesser than 20 years of age. About 46% female students are married and a reasonable number are employed (63%). While a size able number of them speak English and Spanish, Arabic is

the mother tongue of a large majority of them (90%).

The study results (see for details table1) reveal that more than 86% women students under study found ODL programme of AOU meeting their requirements and circumstances. While there are several reasons for preferring ODL mode, the majority stated that they choose ODL for the convenience of being able to study at their own pace and time(74%meanscore)and for gaining much needed professional competence (65%). A good number of women choose ODL mode because they could not get a chance to study at a regular institution(62%)orhadto take careof childrenordependents.ODL at AOU is seen as a salvation by all the women students as it allows them to participate effectively in their educational endeavors while still accommodating their multiple roles. Some women had to give up their studies in face to face universities after marriage and to join AOU to complete their studies while taking care of their children. Some joined AOU forgetting a professional degree recognized in and outside KSA and for improving their employability, as AOU degrees are valued by employers in KSA.

While selecting a distance-learning program, in addition to considering the nature of the degree and the type of delivery system, women students consider the programme availability and quality, the institutional reputation and its location, the service quality and costs. Further, adult women students opt for a distance learning program because it fits in with the other demands of their lives. Some women students argued that Old-line can fulfill the peculiar requirements of women as it can lead to effective skill formation, career improvement, and development of personality. The individual case studies reveal that the first feelings women had about returning to an organized educational process were that of excitement and enthusiasm. Many saw their participation in the distance learning program as an opportunity they were long seeking to renew themselves, personally and academically, without a major upset in their lives. Some female students described their participation in ODL programmes at AOU as under:

Table1: Reasons for choosing ODL system for study

I really needed this at this stage in my life...some kind of renewal and repositioning my priorities...Ifeel that by doing this I will get a new meaning in my personal quest, I will gain new motives and move onto other things(35yearsoldschoolteacher).AOU fulfils lifelong aspirations to get more education. It was made possible because of the way the programme is delivered to the students. The ODL mode allows me to attend to my familial, professional and social responsibilities which could not be possible otherwise and this makes me feel very happy (30 years old social worker).

No.	Reasons	f	% age Mean Score	Rank
1	To learn a town pace and convenience	83	74.1	1
2	Get a recognized degree	64	57.1	5
3	Improve career prospects	54	48.2	7
4	Being married can't study as a regular student	66	58.9	4
5	Get a job	57	50.9	6
6	Gain professional competence	73	65.2	2
7	Get a promotion at work	40	35.7	9
8	Improve social status	52	46.4	8
9	Got no chance to study as a regular student	70	62.5	3
10	Can't study alongside current job	26	23.2	10

The study reveals that the career paths of women students are expected to be markedly changed after completion of their studies at AOU. Majority of the respondents are confident that their studies at AOU would go a long way in developing their self-confidence, improving their job and promotion prospectus and enabling them to pursue new goals. Various benefits have also either accrued or are expected to accrue to women because of their education through distance mode (see table 2 for details). Most of the women studying a AOU feel empowered by enhancing their employability and improving their job prospectus as among those who were unemployed prior to enrolling with AOU a clear majority is hopeful of using AOU degree in getting a job and those already employed expect to get promoted at their prior job or change to a better job. Some women had become disillusioned with their earlier jobs and they had joined the University to be educated and equipped with an internationally recognized degree so as to change for a better job after graduating from AOU. This advanced education is expected to lead women to highly desirable jobs in terms of job satisfaction, challenges, status etc. It may be difficult to measure the economic value of education for those Saudi women who work for their families and are not paid but they nonetheless contribute their bit to the Saudi economy. Mothers' education, for instance, can benefit the future educational achievements of her children and this is a highly desirable indirect economic benefit to the nation.

To Farah Serafi, 21 years married Saudi woman, pursuing business degree programme, ODL mode has helped her in planning the studies at her own place and pace which would not have been possible had she got enrolled in conventional mode. She strongly feels that studying here is more convenient because the programs are in English, cost-wise affordable as compared to other Universities, has flexibility, and does not require mandatory attendance, making it more attractive for working women. She now enjoys better status in the society and feels empowered, more mature and proud of her

awareness. She is also admired in her family, able to look at the society in a different way with a better understanding of the social issues. She can now guide and help other women friends and relatives.

Table2: Benefits of Pursuing Education through ODL

S.No	Particulars	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
1	Become more self confident	4.55	0.77	1
2	Develop new friendships	3.76	1.29	9
3	Improve social status	3.73	1.29	10
4	Change to a better job	4.12	1.09	3
5	Acquire new goals	4.09	1.16	4
6	Develop new interests	3.82	1.23	7
7	Become more balanced & mature	3.84	1.24	6
8	Get Promoted	4.35	1.08	2
9	Raise self esteem	4.02	1.23	8
10	Improve career prospects	3.88	1.32	5

The above results are in conformity with the arguments of Sabates (2008) that literacy would help women to be aware of new productive opportunities in the areas of entrepreneurship skills acquisition, greater income generation, better opportunities in the world of work and greater income opportunities to better their lot in the society. One of the expected outcomes of ODL is improved quality of life, increased income, improved health, greater participation, citizen awareness and gender sensitivity among those who have participated in various educational programmes at AOU.

A high percentage of women students of AOU recorded a strong preference for AOU system of blended learning to other available modes because of its high quality self instructional material, flexible but well structured face to face contact programmes, teaching through assignments, heavy reliance on online learning and very dynamic and interactive website(table3).About55%female students preferred studying at home using online resources. Student forums, study notes and summaries of their lessons are also more attractive and relevant to women students. Critical engagement of women students with ODL'smulti mode embedded form of programme delivery and relating those to their own lives help women in the process of their empowerment.

For Kind a Bulk hair an employee of a bank, the ideal is a Saudi woman who plays a far broader role in societybutretainshertraditions.ODL mode and LMS is convenient for planning studies and in interacting with group members and tutors and it is the reason for gradual increase in women enrolment at AOU. She feels that Business Program is more suited for seeking employment in Saudi Arabia because its necessary components are

suited to the requirements for jobs in bank, airlines etc for women. Studying and working simultaneously makes her feel empowered and her other lady colleagues also realized that they are now better equipped professionally and competent to handle issues of work life.

Another case is that of a 25 years old unmarried but working Saudi girl who is about to complete her course. She feels that as long as women “uphold modesty and Islamic principle” there should be no limits to her progress.”Any other mode of delivery would have made it impossible for me to participate as I am limited by my familial and social responsibilities. She now looks at things with a more open, proactive and different perspectives and can give her views with an academic approach. Besides, it gives her a good public image and competitive feeling for better communication skill and a foreign degree. Due to flexible time, online availability of material, interaction with the tutors and ability to coordinate with others, she is determined to complete her program of study. She now feels empowered and admired in her family, community and at her workplace for her multi-tasking roles. She strongly believes that AOU has effectively contributed to reducing the social distance experienced by women earlier in the family and the society as a whole.

Table3: Preferred modes of ODL Delivery

No.	Particulars	Mean	Std.Deviation	Rank
1	Printed self learning materials	4.39	1.05	1
2	Face-to-face counseling	4.29	1.03	2
3	Teleconferencing	3.34	1.43	9
4	Practicals/hands-on experience	3.61	1.23	8
5	Student forums	3.72	1.19	6
6	Assignments	4.08	1.10	3
7	AOU website	3.98	1.15	5
8	Study guides/keys	3.70	1.26	7
9	Internet based resources	4.05	1.01	4
10	AOU support system	3.16	1.34	10

Students ‘engagement in LMS and web based communications cultivated new experiences and interactions that not only helped to enhance written and oral communication skills but also to expand their understanding of various issues. The students understudy argued that their introduction to ODL sources enabled them to gain experience with different ways of thinking, different styles of writing, and different approaches to improving their communication skills. Students gained self-discipline and displayed their ability to work independently. They are convinced that embedded education at AOU, in combination with traditional approaches to learning, enhances their

communication abilities, academic skills, and level of self- motivation.

When students were asked about how the convergence of various media of learning influenced their learning experience, the new interaction opportunities were frequently emphasized. They argued that Saudi women students are now acquiring a new culture of learning as a result of being introduced to open learning and web-based instruction. There is a shift from unilateral communications from the teachers to the students to a multimode approach in which two-way communications flow between the teachers and the students, and students also receive opportunities to interact with each other in a classroom setting. This new approach to education is changing the culture by providing people with learning material that comes from different sources that present different perspectives and aspects of that material. The degrees of success with which female students interact, benefit, and grow with distance learning need to be explored in greater depth over an extended period of time (Hamdan, 2014).

After employing the blended approach, most of the students under study demonstrated a keen interest in moving beyond the rote-learning to interactive and self-directed learning and critical thinking that enables students to reach new levels of educational attainment and personal development. Students revealed how their engagement in blended learning improved their critical-thinking skills and allowed them to think deeply about various subjects in ways that would not be possible if it were not for blended and distance learning. Students' engagement in online learning helps them to develop greater planning and time- management skills as well as greater self-discipline.

The present education system in Saudi Arabia neither prepares women for self-employment nor for job opportunities. The traditional areas of employment like the manufacturing and governmental sectors are shrinking. Consequently the current high rate of educated unemployed will worsen. Keeping in view low literacy rate and the challenge of reaching lakhs of unreached people spread throughout the kingdom, adoption of open learning through distance mode seems to be inevitable choice. An attempt is made below to identify the areas of intervention for ODL system, the types and level of programmes to be launched through ODL for women (for details see table 4).

Table 4: Areas of intervention for ODL System

Level	Area of Intervention	f	Mean	Rank
School Education	Open Schooling	73	2.83	1
	Education for special needs children	71	2.77	2
	Computer literacy	70	2.33	3
	Art and craft	66	2.17	5

	Vocational courses	68	2.20	4
Adult and Continuing Education	Fruit processing	68	2.89	3
	Multi skill vocational programmes	73	3.08	2
	Food and Nutrition	66	2.79	4
	Women Education	89	3.98	1
	Home management	60	2.27	5
Technical & Vocational Education	Tourism	74	3.63	1
	Agriculture and horticulture	69	2.81	3
	Petroleum and minerals	70	3.22	2
	Poultry farming	60	2.46	5
	Entrepreneurship development	66	2.80	4
Higher Education	Applied Sciences	79	3.32	1
	ICT based courses	66	2.30	5
	Professional Courses	69	2.65	3
	Systems management courses	67	2.36	4
	Religious Studies	75	3.03	2

Keeping in view the fact that a large number of school age children are never enrolled in schools and among those who enroll a sizable number drop out from schools, women education through distance mode of learning at the school level assumes great significance for women. There seems to be a strong case for establishing a national open school in active collaboration with similar open schools operating worldwide. The Saudi National Open School can play an important role by providing necessary technical and professional education to school age children and arrest the tendency of school drop outs. ODL can be used conveniently for meeting the special needs of children and offering literacy and vocational courses at the school level.

Adult and continuing education is an important area that did not receive adequate attention as a component of women education in KSA. A majority of Saudi adult, married and working women are seriously unrepresented in education and these women are most urgently in need of access to meaningful quality education through ODL as it is their only a venue to improve the quality of their economic, social and psychological lives. Distance mode continuing education assumes special significance for KSA because of its diversified geographical location and ODL system's flexibility to address diverse learning styles and preferences of women. Women constitute a vast reservoir of human resource for Saudi Arabia which can be turned into valuable asset, through effective distance education intervention. Some multi skilling vocational courses based on felt needs can also be developed and introduced in the areas of nutrition and child education, early childcare, food and nutrition.

It is widely believed that women mostly prefer “soft options” in languages, humanities and social sciences than professional and technical courses. But the emerging trend seems to shift the focus from conventional academic courses to more professional, vocational and job oriented courses at all levels of education. In vocational and technical education, the rate of women enrollment is much less than that of male enrollment in KSA. Some sectors have a great potential for employment generation in the country and contribute significantly to the Saudi economy. Tourism is one of the major sectors having a great potential in boosting the economy of KSA. The unique contribution that the Kingdom has made to tourism is the preservation of pilgrim centers and civilization heritage. The Kingdom may consider the establishment of distance mode institutions exclusively for education and research on tourism related subjects to cater to the educational and management needs of this sector. These have a great potential for fresh women graduates who would like to opt for tourism as their career and want to start their own tourism related business. Agricultural institutions in the Kingdom along with AOU and other distance mode institutions can provide know-how and the inputs needed for processing, packaging, promotion and marketing of agricultural and horticultural products in the rural areas. Petroleum and minerals being the backbone of Saudi economy, diversifying, marketing and human resource development in this area can be addressed through distance mode. Entrepreneurship development is an important area of intervention for ODL system which will develop confidence in women students and enable them to start small enterprises in manufacturing or service sectors based on the core competence of KSA. School and university syllabi need to be integrated with entrepreneurship courses.

The increasing demand for higher education on the one hand, and the limited output capacity of the conventional system on the other, does not allow much scope for innovation. The higher and technical education system through ODL mode has therefore to gear up to generate manpower relevant to the present day manpower requirements of the Kingdom and be sensitive to emerging global changes. The study results are indicative of the fact that the Kingdom can consider offering programmes in engineering, medicine, science and humanities in partnership with reputed open universities in the Arab World for providing quality higher education to women in these emerging areas. Due to technological advancements in education it has now become possible to offer such programmes through ODL mode. Saudi Arabia provides an excellent ground to experiment dual mode operationalization of higher education. The conventional system of higher education may concentrate its efforts in such areas which need vigorous face to face classroom/interaction/laboratory hands on practice, learning other emerging areas to

distance mode of education.

It was also fairly interesting to examine whether women students are able to cope with the pressure of study while simultaneously fulfilling their other commitments. Towards this end we examined various problems that women face while studying through the ODL system. Majority of the students (see table 5) rate the external conflicts such as work and family commitments and social pressures as main barriers. A higher percentage of older, married and working women rated these external causes very high as these had caused some of them to drop out from studies for some time or change from one course to another. Some blamed the internal factors like lack of proper study planning on their part, in adequate student support services and difficulty level of the programme of study. Language constitutes an important barrier as in open and distance learning system being followed at AOU the course material is available in English language which get accentuated due to distance. The study also reveals that women who are placed at a geographical distance and in accessible areas find it difficult to avail the educational opportunities through distance mode as they faced problems in having access to attend the tutorials. The study thus makes it amply clear that if some Saudi women have not fared well in the ODL system, it is not because of the system itself but due to their personal difficulties and conflicts.

Table5:Barriers to learning through ODL

No.	Types of Barriers	f	Mean	Rank
1	Social pressures	84	4.24	3
2	Lack of proper planning	81	4.21	4
3	Course difficulties	77	4.09	6
4	Work commitments	94	4.70	1
5	Family commitments	89	4.64	2
6	Inadequate Student support	79	4.15	5
7	Lack of interest	70	3.62	8
8	Language barriers	73	3.65	7
9	Cost of the course	69	3.54	9
10	Physical barriers	65	2.84	10

A further analysis of the data reveals that for all the years and in all the semesters, the percentage change in registered students at AOU is below 100 which show that there is significant drop out of students. Students drop the courses or entire program due to language problem, difficulty in understanding and studying the courses, lack of family support, at times professional constraints, increasing course fees, language problem, since the first language of most of the students is Arabic, not much of understanding of the

ODL system of managing ones studies and managing self -learning as most of the students are fresh from high schools. Some barriers were linked to the realities of women students' lives: a multiplicity of roles, costs of study, the importance and value attached to caring responsibilities, and time management problems. Sometimes a larger family with children, parents and parents-in-law, creates and sustains internal and external barriers to study, rein forcing gender stereotypes. Even though they try hard to combine studies with other roles and responsibilities and despite the motivation and dedication distance learners demonstrate, many feel that they are letting their families down when they try to further their education. The women students make tremendous sacrifices to balance the demands of work, family, and study, writing assignments, research etc. as mothers, female partners, employees and citizens. Taking on distance study roles often results in "double duty" and working mothers interested in furthering their education are adding a difficult "third shift" to their responsibilities (Kramarae 2000). There are some other factors hindering education of women like priority consideration for the education of male children, uneducated peer group, in adequate transport facility, high rate of drop out sat the primary level, long distance of access to educational institutions, playing multiple roles etc.

“Everything else needs to come first and we have to wait until everybody goes to bed and all the things settle at home and then we switch on the computer”, says a married secondary school teacher studying English literature at AOU. It is funny but when I talk with my male fellow-students they never seem to be mentioning things such as home, children, house work...whereas for us it is a common topic for discussion. Another 35years old student, working as a supervisor in a hospital, also notes that “I try my best to respond in the best possible way to the demands of this program. I want to participate in everything that goes on but unfortunately it is not humanly possible. Time shortage does not allow me to do that”.

It is here that ODL institutions have a pivotal role to play in developing such kind of programmes which would play a multi-dimensional role, firstly provide basic educational opportunity to all those who do not have access to education, secondly, generate awareness amongst the women on their social and economic rights and finally, imparts skill based entrepreneurial training for the upliftment and growth of Saudi women.

The problems faced by women distance education students call for attention from all distance learners, educational administrators and teachers. There is a need for focused strategies for overcoming the existing barriers in order to provide women equitable access to quality education. Some of these strategies have already been in existence for quite

some time in other countries which with minor modification can be adapted to suit the needs of KSA. The results of the study (table 6) reveal that for further enhancement of ODL as a tool for educating and empowering Saudi women a right mix of programmes needs to be offered through ODL. In order to identify the needs, aspirations and expectations of women, the first logical step would be to undertake intensive search for identifying the areas in which specific programmes need to be developed to suit the requirements of Saudi women. This would require specific programmes, professional courses etc. to upgrade their skills and competencies, which are not available in the existing traditional system.

Table6:Strategies for reaching out through ODL System

No.	Strategies	Frequency	Mean	Rank
1	Research and need analysis	83	4.73	2
2	Identification of educational requirements	85	4.89	1
3	Development of need based programmes	80	4.62	3
4	Use of local language	77	4.33	5
5	Use of appropriate technology	78	4.41	4
6	Institutional Collaboration	65	3.94	9
7	Appropriate student support service	68	4.04	8
8	Networking and resource sharing	60	3.91	10
9	Mass awareness about the role of ODL	75	4.27	6
10	Involvement of NGOs and women activists	72	4.05	7

Selection of appropriate technology is an important factor in reaching out to women. The learning environment of women also needs to be taken in to account while planning the media strategy. If an academic programme is available in one's own mother tongue or language of choice, it certainly facilitates learning. This is more pronounced in open and distance learning system followed at AOU in which course material adopted from UKOU is available only in English. The use of Arabic language is not only desirable but also imperative as it would certainly delimit the reach of education among a large section of women students who find English difficult and would like to get educated in their own mother tongue. There is still greater need for more publicity and networking. AOU can act as a nodal agency for coordinating with organizations, institutions committed to the cause of learning, education and development of women in Saudi Arabia. Committed individuals, voluntary organizations, women groups, can be tapped as instruments for skill development and capacity building of women. After attracting women to ODL, efforts need to be made to retain them as higher dropout rates have been reported among

women compared to men. They need constant reinforcement and encouragement to sustain their initial motivation.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The findings of the study have demonstrated that ODL system at AOU has benefited a good number of Saudi women. Ofcourse the inferences drawn may be limited by the size of the sample and the low response rate, but in view of the fact that the respondents represented the entire population, the findings may be reasonably valid if generalized to a larger or whole population. The findings have policy implications for Saudi conventional and ODL institutions with regard to introduction of academic specially targeted at women, design and delivery of support systems for ODL students in order to optimize the learning environment for women and specific promotional strategies to attract and sustain more women students.

Open and Distance learning mode of education is an avenue for KSA to effectively disseminate educational benefits to all its citizens economically and more effectively, especially to unreached women who were denied access for social or other considerations. This mode of education would enable women to have access to functional training and education which would empower them, make them self reliant and prepare them for the demands of the social system. It gives them a chance, hitherto unaffordable, to carry out the dual responsibilities of a second chance to education as well as fulfillment of family responsibilities. Distance learning in Saudi Arabia can be available to Saudi girls who, for one reason or another do not find a place in state or private universities or who are not able to be enrolled for study on men's campuses due to cultural considerations. In addition, there are women who are not allowed to be taught by men directly and therefore receive much of their instruction by distance learning means of remote communication, such as closed circuit televisions and phone links.

As elsewhere in the world, the development of Saudi women's self-motivation and self-directedness in any educational undertaking is important. The ODL environment is more women friendly and gender equitable. The ODL discussion is appropriate for collaborative learning and group interaction which is women favored learning styles. Connected teaching, connection between teacher, learner and the curriculum is a women friendly teaching strategy. ODL, more than any other type of educational modality, can lend itself to a higher degree of learner control, and hence illustrate its potential to democratize access to education and thus improve the lot of Saudi women, their families, and society as a whole. This is in tandem with the observations of many researchers that

‘all nations of the world desirous of a cost effective, convenient, conducive, efficient and comprehensive way to educate all its citizens particularly the disadvantaged ones have embraced open and distance learning’.

How pedagogy and curriculum development can become gender sensitive and reflect the interest of women need to be seriously researched by both men and women together. An important 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. The findings of this study support the call for course design strategies that address the specificities of women as distance learners in Saudi Arabia. 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. The curriculum of distance education should at least have one general course on women development, focusing on health and family welfare, environment awareness, plan policies and programmes pertaining to women empowerment. An adequate number of empowered women need to be put at the top rungs of the educational hierarchy to sustain and implement women related issues and concerns holistically at the systemic and policy levels. More women administrators, teachers and students should be involved in the planning process for ODL courses. Efforts also need to be made to involve 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. School dropouts among girls should in particular been courage to pursue their education through ODL.

It is the duty of educationists and planners to make distance education easily available to those women who are eager to improve their quality of life. Within the Arab world the network of AOU, Education Departments and Distance and open learning centres should pool their infrastructure, finances and human resources; jointly develop relevant programmes and courses, and share material and communication technologies already available and adapt them to suit their requirements. The only way the ODL system can address the poor perception of open learning in the Arab world is to convince the stake holders as to the quality of the open or blended learning it offers which is evidenced by meeting the requirements of internationally recognized benchmarks. Arab Open University has made substantial progress in changing hearts and minds in the Arab world about ODL.

Governments and civil society organisations have still not fully absorbed the full

potential of ODL in women empowerment and therefore are far from the stage of creating enabling frame works and spaces for the growth of women. A collaborative mechanism could be established between various development agencies, research and training centres on the one hand, and distance-learning agencies such as open schools, open polytechnic and open universities on the other. Such a collaboration could be a powerful tool to make relevant knowledge and skills available to Saudi women and girls, thus enabling them to empower themselves to shape their own lives. Modality of potential partnerships between the conventional educational system and the open and distance-learning system to design, develop and deliver quality education to women need to be explored.

Educational Institutions offering ODL should be encouraged to expand the scope of the programmes to meet the needs of various categories of women in rural and urban areas, nursing mothers, workingwomen, and semi-literate women. The general areas that should be addressed by distance-learning programmes for Saudi women are capability building, skill enhancement, integrating literacy skills with functional knowledge in the field of family education, economic and income generation, health education and civic consciousness. Organize short term programs on business communication skills, personality and self development. ODL can be used to contribute in professional development of women by conducting short term programs on translation, basic health care, managing small business, entrepreneurship, banking, finance and accounts, CV writing and interview skills and confidence building and personality development which would increase job prospectus of Saudi women. AOU has contributed towards these areas tremendously for the professional development and competency enhancement of women in the country. However, it needs to improve upon the present system so as to provide a better platform for augmenting access to lifelong learning for professional and social development of women in Saudi Arabia.

There is well established technological infrastructure but less supportive social and cultural environments for ODL in KSA. To counter this ineffectiveness, we propose establishment of an indigenous Open University and an Open School model for the kingdom to provide meaningful and continuing education to underserved populations and regions through advanced technologies, upholding deeply rooted social and ethical values of the Arab-Islamic heritage and an appreciation for other human cultures and heritages. The Open school can provide basic education to thousands of disadvantaged girls of the country. If special courses, non-formal programmes and vocational courses for the girl students could be introduced at the school level, no doubt the Open School in Saudi Arabia would fulfill its goals of inclusive education. Opportunities for school education,

vocational training and tertiary education can also be provided through ODL.

Saudi Arabia has enormous resources for distance learning which could be effectively used for the benefit of women and girls in the kingdom. Bates (2009) believes that the future of Saudi higher education, and especially the successful implementation of e-learning, will be driven by women faculty in view of their great determination and a commitment to seeking knowledge and improvement. Women will be the driving force in e-learning in Saudi Arabia and for using technology to improve the quality of teaching and learning in KSA.

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