

## EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN THROUGH ODL TECHNOLOGIES IN J&amp;K

Geetika Singh\*

**ABSTRACT**

*Learning is a lifetime process, beginning with the universal experience of socialization within the family, “from the cradle to the tomb”. The importance of women’s education was first realized in the 18th century. More than 40 years ago, the Universal declaration of Human Rights asserted that “everyone has a right to education. In 2001 in Dakar, participants in the World Education Forum committed themselves to “achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.”. Now much later, UNESCO has underlined the importance of access by girls and women to technical and vocational education for economic and social development, and they organised a conference on this issue in 1962. In particular, some Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were set at the Millennium Summit of world heads of state in New York in 2000 that included MDG-3 to ‘Promote gender equality and empower women - Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015 .This paper aims at explaining the scope of using ODL technologies for women empowerment in the rural areas through enhancing literacy, business skill and social awareness. The paper also identifies possible barriers in using ODL tools to enhance women literacy and business skill in relation to the complex and multidimensional concept of empowerment of rural women, specifically with respect to the state of J&K.*

**Key words:** Rural Women, Women Empowerment, ODL Technologies, Jammu and Kashmir.

**Introduction**

Education has been the main instrument of human development and its importance has been emphasized through fundamental rights, principles, statutes in a number of countries. According to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948):Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Similarly, at World Education Forum Dakar, Senegal, April 2000, the framework for action was developed according to which goals for international communities were defined . Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) passed by the UN General Assembly in a special session in the fall of 2000, further strengthening international commitments towards Education for All (EFA).MDG3: Promote gender equality and empower women. Target: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015.Today, education in India stands at the crossroads. *Even though a large number of policies have been adopted to make Education For All goals at the primary, elementary and secondary level come true in the Indian context , there is still a large percentage which gets left out ...very large percentage of them being women who cannot make the transition to higher education due to various constraints.*

According to the most recent 2001 census data, women account for 48.26% of the 1028.6 million population of India. About 27% of these are 15-29 years old. The literacy rate among women has improved from 7.83% in 1951, to 54.16% in 2001.However, there remain still 228 million women considered to be illiterate (<http://www.censusindia.net> ). Only 6% of women who completed secondary education (35% of

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\*Academic Officer (Management), Jammu & Kashmir State Board of School Education, Srinagar.

the total population who enrolled in Class 1) entered higher education. *It is clear therefore that a large number of women are still outside the existing higher education system in India.* Data show that women in India represent about 50% of the adult population, but only 33% of the labour force. They perform nearly 66% of all working hours, receive only 10% of the world average income, and own less than 1% of property.



*“To awaken the people, it is women who must be awakened;  
once she is on the move, the family moves,  
the village moves and the nation moves”*

**Jawaharlal Nehru**

Today, the right to education can no longer be understood as the right to access the school system (and eventually complete a certain number of years of schooling). The right to education implies essentially the right to learn and to learn throughout life. The state has an obligation to ensure equal learning opportunities for all, within and beyond the school system, at all ages. This is where Open and Distance learning is bring about a silent revolution in the equitable access to educational opportunities irrespective of gender , age or time or place. *Open and distance learning is defined by the Commonwealth of Learning as a way of providing learning opportunities that is characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or both time and place; learning that is certified in some way by an institution or agency; the use of a variety of media, including print and electronic; two-way communication that allows learners and tutors to interact; the possibility of occasional face-to-face meetings; and a specialized division of labour in the production and delivery of courses* .Open and Distance education is a branch of education where teachers and students are separated in terms of place and time. They communicate at times of their own choosing by exchanging printed or electronic media, or through technology that allows them to communicate in real time and through other online ways. With the recent trend of technological advance, distance learning is becoming more recognized for its potential in providing individualized attention and communication with students internationally. Initially, developed countries were practicing distance education but off late developing countries have also gone for distance education in a big way.

Open Education is considered as very effective for societies like India, where literacy and education levels are low. More over the system and its features are inclusive in nature. India has emerged as one of the biggest centre of distance education in the world. Since open learning system in India adopts multi-media approach learner can study the course material, watch audio visual programmes related to their courses in his own pace and place. Thus the flexibility in terms of study, greater access compared to conventional education systems and the multi media teaching learning package and the cost effectiveness attracted millions of people. At the school level , NIOS or national institute of Open schooling is providing ODL solution to lakhs of students while at the higher education level , IGNOU (Indhira Gandhi National Open University , BRAOU , YCMOU)just to name a few are providing lifelong learning options to people.

### **Empowerment of Women through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Technologies**

Empowerment of women, also called gender empowerment, has become a significant topic of discussion in regards to development and economics. Entire nations, businesses, communities, and groups can benefit from the implementation of programs and policies that adopt the notion of women empowerment. Empowerment is one of the main procedural concerns when addressing human rights and development. The Human Development and Capabilities Approach, The Millennium Development Goals, and other credible approaches/goals point to empowerment and participation as a necessary step if a country is to overcome the obstacles associated with poverty and development.<sup>[3]</sup>ODL is a source of progress and development for women. *Marriage has and will always be a a terminal point for women education after secondary level especially in rural areas.* It was believed among educated men that little education was sufficient for women just to make them literate. It was believed that educated women would not be submissive to their husbands, and hence women education met with resistance in terms of financial and moral support from their husbands. Today, ODL has brought succour to the women education and subsequent empowerment. Women can aspire to reach any level in their education through ODL programmes. It is worthy of note that despite the ample opportunities through ODL, there are still millions of women who are still illiterates due to ignorance, cultural hindrances and poverty in urban, rural and remote areas of the country.

ODL has played significant roles in accelerating women education and subsequently women empowerment. ODL has created opportunities for women to squeeze time out to learn and further their education. It also created opportunities for women to up-grade their qualifications and skills at reasonable intervals. ODL is a veritable instrument in bringing social and economic transformation of women. Distance Education can surely fill up the vacuum created by on campus studies especially for women. Distance education is being considered as a favorite option by majority of women folk because it is accessible. Women can study what they want and also from where they want. It is their own prerogative. Moreover ODL is advantageous because it is flexible. Women can study when they want, completing course work on their schedule, rather than that of college.ODL is being considered as a good option for those women who want to meet their personal and professional goals simultaneously.ODL has the potential to alleviate or remove some of the barriers or constraints that prevents women and girls from accessing educational opportunities such as illiteracy, poverty, time scarcity, socio cultural factors, mobility and relevancy, leading to women empowerment and gender equality. If used in the right manner, ODL can become the tool for women's active participation in improving their situations. Simple access to information and improved communications can end the isolation of women and promote improved health, access to reproductive services, economic growth as well as alleviate poverty. Women need to be

encouraged to enable them to make use of ODL in improving their educational status. ODL provides various types and levels of education to be acquired by the women. Flexibility of access and study times and the potential to reach women in rural areas or women facing social barriers that limit their access to schools, make distance learning via ICT a promising educational approach for women. ODL may open economic opportunities especially for Muslim women, since in their culture, Muslim women are expected to stay at home and are not permitted to have face to face contact with men other than close family, or to travel. In such cases, telephones, computers and the internet allow women to telecommute and hence work and interact with men without face to face contact and even without being in the same place. Innovative open, distance and technology-mediated learning offer a more realistic alternative as it allows for open access to quality education and increases the capacity of the university to respond to growing demands for quality undergraduate and graduate education. ICT provides the means to support personalization, where learners are also considered to be knowledge builders and creators and not just the recipients of transmitted knowledge (Commission of European Communities 2008). Following these dictums, the need of the hour is that we will focus about possibilities of using key ODL technologies -Print medium, Radio, Television, Mobile Telephony, and Internet and Computer networks for promoting women empowerment especially in rural areas. For carrying out this task the following ODL technologies can be used.

- **Print Medium** -Print media is one of the well established educational medium in India and papers in local languages can go a long way to promote literacy in rural women.
- **Radio** -Radio broadcast, both for information and education, is fairly old in India. Expansion of radio transmission has been rapid, and today there are over 197 radio stations, including 184 full-fledged stations, 10 relay stations and three exclusive commercial radio stations reaching 97.3% of the population and 90% of the geographical area (GOI 2002; 2003). The radio has immense reach in India and radio listening still remains an important source of information for a large number of listeners particularly in rural India.
- **Television**- As per the TAM Annual Universe Update (2010), India now has over 134 million households (out of 223 million) with television sets, of which over 103 million have access to Cable TV or Satellite TV, including 20 million households are DTH subscribers. It is also estimated that India now has over 500 million TV channels covering all the main languages spoken in the nation.
- **Mobile Telephony**- Talking about role of mobile phones in the non-formal and informal context among rural women from resource poor communities, The Indian Mobile subscriber base has increased in size by a factor of more than one-hundred since 2001 when the number of subscribers in the country was approximately 5 million to 635.51 Million in June 2010 (TRAI 2010). Agarwal (2005) observes that phone networks, including cellular phones, leading to “silent” communication revolution enabling millions to overcome the literacy barrier in communication.
- **Internet and Computer Networks** -The researches world over shows that internet has immense potential and is one of the best medium to spread lifelong learning. Jullien & Branchet (2010) noted that the Internet is a significant source of an increasingly diverse body of knowledge, a sort of "one-stop shopping paradise" for those seeking to learn: theoretical knowledge like foreign language or music theory or practical, hands-on skills. A few examples might include someone seeking guidance concerning a cooking recipe, an individual attempting to solve a technical problem related to his personal computer or someone needing to repair his washing machine.

Overall, 71 million users accessed Internet in India in year 2009, with 52 Million “active” users who accessed it at least once in a month.

### **Review of Literature**

A large number of studies have been done to explore the role of ODL systems to promote women empowerment and gender equality. A general finding from a brief review of these studies indicates that more women have recently achieved getting their first job - mostly in education as teaching faculty - and most of them were married (McIntosh, 1973). Kanwar (1995) stressed the need for increasing the upward mobility of women in distance education institutions. Meanwhile women students continue to face problems while studying through the ODL system. Rathore et al (1996) revealed that lack of student support system creates problems for women learners in ODL system. Bhalalusesa (2001) found that there are factors like the faraway locations of the study centres that make studying more difficult for women than men. Taplin (2000) found that the female students reported severe bottlenecks in pursuing their studies due to their social commitments, and a similar finding was visible through their academic results. Sharma (1996) argues for empowerment of women - and not concessions to women - through increased effective use of the distance education system.

Studies by Woodley (1995) and by Gaba (1999) have found that the career paths of graduates have been markedly changed after completion of their respective programmes. Taplin & Jegede (2001) found that most students studied through the ODL system for self-satisfaction and for this improved employment status. Learning may be seen as an approach that is at least complementary and under certain circumstances an appropriate substitute for the face-to-face methods that still dominate most educational systems. While its benefits can be evaluated by technical, social and economic criteria, distance learning methods also have their own pedagogical merit, leading to different ways of conceiving knowledge generation and acquisition (Moore & Tait 2002, p.20).

In empowering women through literacy, Asaolu (2010) is of the view that vocational education must be an integral part of the education to be planned for them for it is this that will set them on the part of self-reliance; a stage whereby they will be able to add voice to their faces. In the same light, Iogwu (2010) believes that educated adults empower their families to develop socially, economically and politically. Women, important members of families of the world, must be made literate and not given away to rotteness with their endowed potentials. This fact is supported by Bhola (1983) that without literacy, development only limps on one leg. Talking about her experiences to use ODL for lifelong learning for women, Jakkamal (2009) explains, “I watch television to learn something about agriculture and goat rearing. Whenever I come across any experts, I discuss with them about the various aspects of agriculture and animal husbandry. I use my mobile phones mostly for talking to experts, SHG members and listening to the audio messages. I can explain the differences between conventional learning and ODL. This type of lifelong learning has helped me to improve my goat rearing abilities particularly in buying good breed, better feed and health management etc.” A Report by Commission of European Communities (2008) observes, “ICT can extend the scope of education and training and be instrumental in providing new educational services at all stages in life.

### **Findings**

The State of Jammu and Kashmir has a peculiar topography which is a hindrance in achieving the desired goal of complete literacy. The network of schools is spread sparsely/thinly and the majority of populace lives in far flung and inaccessible areas, countenance many problems like easy access to

institutions, lack of infrastructure, weather vagaries etc. To add to that has been the problem of militancy which has taken its toll on the accessibility to education in certain pockets of the state. Women constitute about 47% of the total population in J&K. The literacy rate of J&K is 55.52% with male literacy of 67% and female literacy of 43% (census 2001) and as per BPL survey 2008 the literacy rate of J&K is 64.18 with male literacy of 72.32% and female literacy of 55.35%. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in classes (1 to VIII) is 74.45% in J&K as against 93.54% at all India Level. On an average one lakh population is catered to by 153 Elementary Level Schools as against 97 such schools at National Level. In Secondary/Higher Secondary Education there are 13 schools per lakh population as against 14 schools at National Level. On an average, one University in the State caters to the educational needs of 11.80 lakh of population as against 27.4 lakh at National level. Similarly, one college caters to the educational requirements of 2.12 lakh of population as against 1.04 lakh at National level. J&K has a lower literacy rate than the all-India level of 68.64 per cent; the difference in the male-female literacy rates here is also a whopping 20.25, higher than even Bihar, where the literacy indicators are the lowest at a rate of 63.82 per cent, so is the gender gap at 20.03 per cent points.

Gender disparity in literacy in J&K is historical phenomenon. The female literacy in the State is only 43%. The gender gap in literacy is 23%. The harsh terrain of the State in majority of the areas, socio religious bottlenecks, lack of access to schools, parents feeling insecure about sending girl children to schools, their engagement in agricultural and other domestic activities etc, early marriage of girls, unwillingness of parents and in-laws to allow the women to continue education after secondary level, lack of awareness and lack of motivation incentives being provided by the government agencies and civil society to promote continuation of education by girls and women through distance mode have been some of the factors which have resulted in a high gender gap especially after higher secondary stage. Some of the salient observations regarding the Rural Woman are:

- **Role-playing in family:** Usually, the head of the family is man. Females are just housewives. Their main responsibilities are bearing and raising children, preparing foods for the family members, working in the family farms, etc.
- **Resource endowment:** Most of the rural poor families do not have any fixed asset. Even if some families have some fixed assets (land, for example), females do not have much authority on the family assets.
- **Income earning activities:** Most of the females are not involved in marketable production activities. Their production activities are not counted in monetary terms in family income accounting. They have to depend on the males' income.
- **Literacy:** Most of the adult rural women cannot even write their names, though government's recent initiatives such as 'free education for females', 'food for education programme', etc. have enhanced the literacy rate among the young females.
- **Access to capital:** Since the rural women do not have free access to the family assets, before they couldn't source liquid or physical capital because the financial institutions asked collateral.
- **Entrepreneurial skill:** The major deficiency of the rural poor women is the lack of entrepreneurial skill.
- **Access to technologies:** The rural poor women do not have access to modern technologies due to the lack of affordability and accessibility. However, they have little access to radio broadcasts.

### Suggestions

Keeping in view the difficult terrain of the various regions of the state of J&K be it Kashmir, Ladakh or some regions of Jammu division, the heterogenous religious and cultural environment in which the women live and other constraints –socio economic and religious, various strategies can be developed to make ODL systems as vehicle for lifelong learning for women in j&k thereby improving the gender equality ratio in access and delivery of some of the suggestion are as under-

1. Phone-in-programs by Radio particularly on *Gyan Vani* may be helpful to create awareness and provide information about lifelong learning. These programs will help learners to put up their learning needs and queries with anchors/experts.
2. Distance education bodies and agencies can collaborate and use panchayat centers and anganwadis as centers to promote community learning for women of a specific area. The local panchayat/Anganwadi can be developed a learning hub having a multimedia center where rural women enrolled in ODL programmes can meet once a week for interactive Videocalls/TV programmes/radio telephony.
3. The Radio and Television can be used as a medium to impart education related to skill based courses which can help girls to improve their qualifications and generate self employment sitting at home. They may not want to increase their qualification but want to use the skills which they have been taught as girls or is part of the family craft -like horticulture , carpet weaving & shawl making , Embroidery , bakery , bee keeping , food processing at cottage level , cattle rearing , tailoring and beauty to earn a respectful living and become economically independent with these “home skills”.
4. Mobile Multimedia vans having state of the art ODL technologies can visit learners at various rural junctions to impart awareness and literacy.
5. Jammu and Kashmir having a very large percentage of female muslim population also has another group of women who have been denied access to qualitative education due to ‘purdah’. The use of ICT in ODL systems is a boon for this section of women to contribute to her own quota to self and national development.
6. Women workers engaged in handicrafts such as shawl making /carpet making/Kashmiri embroidery/basholi paintings/local products/food processing can sell their products on the internet directly to buyers using the ITC –E choupal Model
7. Horticulture being the most important sector after tourism in the state , the ODL bodies in india can join hands with the agricultural universities and Home science departments of Higher education in the state to develop distance learning packages especially for women focussing on setting up of nurseries , food processing & pickling , commercial vegetable production. Radio programmes/TV programmes giving education on setting up of small cottage units can be imparted.
8. The itinerant nomadic women – gujjars and bakarwals in our state can also benefit from this ODL revolution. Mobile telephony , radio broadcasts can help girls from these communities to study while moving along with their families. ODL systems can also help them to get formal education in their family trades or nomadic practices-such as certificate programmes in dairy farming and cattle rearing. The mobile phone would not only help in the learning process but would also support the goat-rearing enterprise in terms of animal management and marketing management

### Conclusion

The concept of lifelong learning stresses that learning and education are related to life as a whole - not just to work - and that learning throughout life is a continuum that should run from cradle to grave. The

first step for the women empowerment is to enhance their literacy level and uplift their entrepreneurial skill. ODL technologies creates opportunities for women education today to learn throughout their life time. Education given to a woman is un-quantifiable, the spill over effect of women education on children, families, communities and the nation cannot be over-stressed. An educated woman is a better mother, wife, social mobilizer or citizen. ODL systems can bring about a revolution a state like J&k by focussing on areas which will allow women to utilise their human potential.

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