

# Empowering Women through Distance Education

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*Alternative perspectives in education and training constitute a major item in the agenda set out for the distance education system. This paper is an exploration in this area. Using the courses of IGNOU, India as a take off point, the author ruminates on the relative weights to be given to course structure, design, content and language in terms of gender neutral, women-friendly approaches in education. The author argues for empowerment (and not concessions) of women through the effective use of the distance education system.*

## Introduction

This paper seeks to contextualize women's empowerment within the social, political and economic reality of a country/region and then moves on to discuss how distance education can address the needs of women and the question of women's development. By doing so, the paper aims to address two themes: responsive course development primarily, and the role of Distance Education (DE) as envisaged in, and pertinent to, national education policies.

While the discussion will draw upon experiences in India, it may be found relevant by academics and practitioners in countries where women share a situation similar to that of their counterparts in India.

When reflecting on the question: "How can distance education contribute to empowerment of women?" or "How successfully has a particular DE institution addressed women?" one needs to critically examine four facets of the DE system. These, and the questions to be contemplated upon when examining them are:

<i>Course Development and Design</i>	Are the course content and tutorial style free of an androcentric bias? Are the courses relevant to the needs of women?
<i>Delivery Mechanisms</i>	Has the planning and provision of student support services taken into account female students' unique needs?
<i>Access to Distance Education</i>	Are there barriers (put into motion by institution's procedure for eligibility, enrolment, fees structure, publicity and so forth which prevent women, in particular, from taking up courses across distances?
<i>Retaining Women Learners</i>	Is there something about the courses or institution's procedures which causes students to drop out before they complete a course? Are a majority of dropouts women?

Each of these aspects merits a separate discussion. I undertake an analysis of the first aspect i.e., how responsive course development can address learner needs, particularly, the needs of women.

### **Defining Empowerment**

Over the last 25 years, there have been major shifts in thinking about women and their role in development. In the 1970s the predominant view was that women had been sidelined from the process of development, that the benefits of development had not reached them, and that there was a need for social justice and equity measures to set the balance right. Integration of women into development was the theme and this was to be achieved through welfare programming. This maybe termed as the 'equity approach'.

In the subsequent shift of perception, women were no longer looked upon simply as victims in the process of development who needed advancement, but soon it was realized that development would not achieve its goals without the full participation of women in all spheres. This came to be known as the 'efficiency approach', with the emphasis shifting to a more positive view of women as ones who are important for efficient and effective development.

The second perception has now given way to a third, more basic one. By relating numerous indicators of the 'status of women' and 'well-being of nations', it has incontrovertibly been established that women are indispensable contributors to family, social, economic, cultural and political life and, without their participation, the rapid economic, social and cultural development of nations cannot take place. This has been called the 'imperative' or the 'necessity argument.' This shift in thinking from 'women need help' to the 'world needs women' is a dramatic one. For women to realize their potential, to make their contribution to the fullest, they must empower themselves. It is within this context that the empowerment of women is discussed here.

While the issues and concerns facing women across the globe are broadly similar, there are enough dissimilarities in their situation which prompts one to look for a region/country specific meaning of empowerment. There is need for "diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women (which) builds on a common opposition to gender oppression and hierarchy" (Sen & Grown, 1987). To take one example to illustrate this diversity of needs. A consciousness about women's needs and issues grew in India only towards the latter part of the 19th century, yet women were granted suffrage in 1935. In contrast, in the United Kingdom, the United States and France the women's movement coalesced in 18th and 19th Centuries, yet the right to vote was comparatively long delayed until the first half of the 20th century. On the other hand, education and employment are areas where Indian women continue to be represented in small numbers while their Western counterparts have moved far ahead on these fronts.

Equality of opportunity in one area seems to be no indicator of equality in another. Thus, empowerment will need to be defined with reference to the needs *felt* as well as *unfelt* of the women in that country/region.

I do not seek to discuss the question of women's empowerment in India in all its dimensions. However, let me pick up some of the themes, particularly those that can be addressed by a distance education institution. No special significance should be attached to the order in which the themes are presented. There is a need for:

- Creating awareness about discriminatory attitudes and practices towards women, the reasons for their continuance and the need to bring about social change.
- Enabling women to overcome barriers and constraints to their economic productivity .
- Forming and strengthening grass roots level women's groups which will articulate local women's needs and play an important role in decentralized planning and implementation.
- Removing illiteracy on one hand, and ensuring women's participation in non-traditional areas of higher education, on the other.
- Developing a more holistic view of women's role in the family and society as opposed to the perception of restricted roles of motherhood and home making.
- Projecting positive role models and countering projection of stereotypes.
- Creating awareness among women about their rights, the legal provisions and the means of availing them.
- Enabling women to have better access to social services.
- Countering violence against women.
- Enabling women to use science and technology to overcome the drudgery of every day life.

It is the education of women in its broadest sense that has the potential to bring about their empowerment. This realization is reflected in the National Policy for Education, 1986, of the Government of India, which has a separate section on 'Education for Women's Equality'. The Policy states: "In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there needs to be an edge in favour of women. The National Education System will play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women"

### **The Mandate for Distance Education**

The National Policy on Education, 1986, laid emphasis on strengthening the Open Learning System (OLS) supported by distance education techniques. That distance education is a necessity today, particularly in context of the developing countries where the conventional channels of education are neither adequate nor cost effec-



tive to set the education pyramid on its base, is a point that needs no labouring. It is projected that during the period 1992–97, the additional enrolment in India in higher education alone will be around one million (ten lakhs) of which around 0.9 million will be at the undergraduate level. It is expected that the OLS will absorb at least 50 per cent of this additional enrolment during this period, including adult learners beyond the age group 17–23 who have left school long back. The Eighth Five Year Plan document, 1992–1997 states: “A well defined OLS will be developed, relevant to the needs and circumstances of learners, especially girls and women. The major thrust of OLS will be on the acquisition of life skills and vocational skills, directly contributing to productivity and inculcation of habits of self learning.”

Quite clearly, the DE system is ideally placed to develop programmes of study that incorporate women’s issues and needs.

### **Responsive Course Development in Distance Education**

There are three tiers at which we can examine the question: “How can distance education system address women through responsive course development ?”

- First, with reference to the type of courses produced.
- Second, with reference to the duration and the structure of courses as they influence women’s enrolment.
- Last, with reference to the language used in, and the content of the courses as they reflect images about women.

I shall take up these aspects one by one.

#### *Types of Courses*

DE courses can be developed to reach out at different levels.

- *Courses that would be of direct relevance to women.* The profile and the needs of the women learners would be varied. They will have differing levels of literacy and education; they will belong to different income levels and varied social and cultural settings ranging from tribal to rural to urban; they may be unemployed women who want to work or employed women who have no opportunity for inservice training; some may wish to pursue higher education while others may simply wish to advance their knowledge as a means of improving their quality of life and their family’s.
- *Courses for those directly involved in issues and work related to women.* To mention a few groups. They maybe people involved in framing policies at the National, State and District levels; personnel involved in implementing policies and programmes; scholars involved in investigating the reality; development practitioners and activists working with women at the grassroots.

- *Incorporating within each and every course* (whatever be its main theme and whosoever be the target audience) *a critical discussion on the status of women in society, within the broad parameters of the course.*

Thus, the target audience of Courses when speaking of women's empowerment would be:

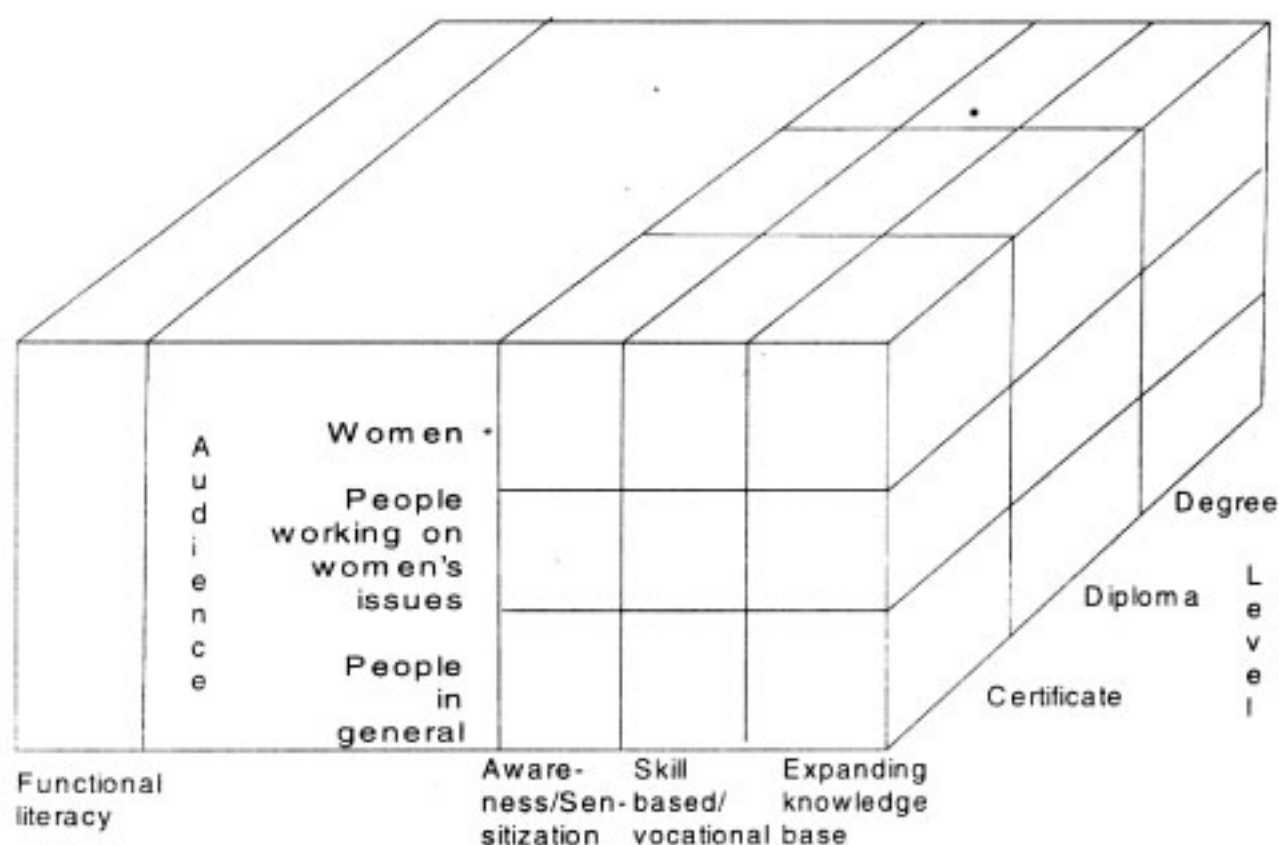
- women themselves
- people directly involved in issues or work related to women
- people in general

Of course, the three categories mentioned above are not quite separate. Rather, they may be thought of as concentric circles with the first contained in the second and the second being in the third. The purpose of visualizing them as separate is to enable one to specifically address the needs that are unique to each of them.

The courses would have different aims. At one level, they may seek to expand learners' knowledge base, develop critical and analytical abilities and equip them to carry out further research in the field. At another level, they may be skill-based, enabling the learner to train for a vocation. At yet another level, their purpose may be to generate awareness and sensitize, without going deep into theoretical, analytical, ideological or methodological issues.

The courses would be pitched at varying levels of complexity, each requiring a different set of basic qualifications for admission. Completion of a course may lead to the award of a Certificate, a Diploma or a Degree depending upon its level of complexity.

The schematic framework underlying the above discussion may be depicted with a matrix (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Schematic framework for course development**

This matrix has been developed primarily with reference to DE institutions working at the University level. However, one can extend the columns to the left, so as to include courses that would aim at secondary and elementary school education, with the extreme left column representing courses to impart functional literacy.

With this framework as the base, and the meaning of empowerment as discussed in the earlier section guiding the academic content, I shall describe some courses that can be developed to address the needs of women in the developing world, particularly India. Some of the courses I shall talk about have been launched by the Indira Gandhi National Open University. The courses talked about in this paper are illustrative, not exhaustive.

*As examples of employment oriented programmes of study of interest to women* are the Diploma Programme in Early Childhood Care and Education and the Diploma Programme in Nutrition and Health Education prepared by the Women's Education Faculty of IGNOU. The objectives of these courses are to enable women to get employment or be self employed. They would also serve as in-service training programmes for a certain cadre of functionaries. A large number of early childhood workers, and nutrition, health and extension workers in India are women. The rationale behind the development of these courses was that a woman's feelings about herself change once she is able to participate in economic activities that are recognized as such. Women's employment, it was perceived by the Faculty, is the first and crucial step in changing the power relations between men and women. The two Diplomas are offered after completing school — thus they enable women to take up employment without necessarily having to pursue higher education.

Some other programmes prepared by IGNOU which have a specific employment orientation are the Bachelor's Degree Programme in Library and Information Sciences, Bachelor's Degree Programme in Nursing and the Diploma Programmes in Management. Women are well represented in all these courses except the last. This aspect has been taken up for discussion in a later section of this paper.

A programme of study that would be of relevance in developing countries is one that deals with promoting entrepreneurship among women. Most often, women lag behind in creation of enterprise, not because they lack the ability, but because they do not have access to relevant information. Such a course of study would seek to develop requisite attitudes and abilities, discuss aspects of new enterprise creation, enterprise management and growth and sustenance as relevant to the socio-economic context of the learner.

*Examples of awareness courses of relevance to women* are courses on legal literacy programmes addressing needs of rural women and men in agriculture, and allied occupations like social forestry, dairying and soil conservation. The IGNOU has prepared an awareness programme in Foods and Nutrition which aims to promote better nutrition practices in the family.



Besides developing such programmes with a specific subject matter, a DE institution can promote awareness at a more general level by preparing reading materials for neo-literates. This could be done by collaborating with organizations involved in promoting literacy. This is particularly relevant in the context of large scale illiteracy in the developing countries. It is well known that lack of appropriate reading material is a major reason why neo-literates slip back into illiteracy. The DE institution is well placed to reach out to the millions of neo-literates through its study centres. Such reading materials can be a means of creating awareness at the grassroots about issues that are important within a particular socio-economic and cultural context.

*Courses for development practitioners working with women in different fields* would have as their subject area the different theoretical concepts that have emerged out of the 'women in development' literature, and the ways in which theory could be developed into practical training course material. Such courses, depending on the specific profile of the target group, would examine the different issues in development programming, talk about ways of organizing women, themes in and methodology of communicating with women, formation of cooperatives, enabling women's access to credit, training women for entrepreneurship, to mention some areas. In a sense, such courses would fall in the ambit of training of trainers.

*As an example of a programme of study that would be relevant for a diversity of learners* is one on 'Women and Development'. Such a programme would analyse those factors which help perpetuate the unequal status of women. Analyzing women's social, economic, legal and political status, it would look at women's experiences within the framework of their own culture as well as within the larger global system. Among other aspects, it would deal with women and work, women's access to resources, their use and control over their income, their participation in decision making from the micro to the macro level, effect of development and the national policies on women.

Such a course, depending upon the treatment of content and the level of complexity, could be an awareness course for people in general; a sensitization course for people working with women or on women's issues such as policy makers and law enforcement personnel; would help expand the knowledge base of scholars researching women's issues; insofar as it deals with practical issues in working in the field, it would be relevant for development practitioners.

*Besides specific programmes for and about women as described above, any course has within it the potential to raise critical issues pertaining to women. "In the transformation of education towards egalitarian models, it is essential to make authentically visible any group which has been heretofore ignored, distorted and or vilified"* (Faith, 1988). To give just one example, a course in management could critically examine the questions: "What are the reasons for the lower representation of

women in the higher cadres of the management hierarchy?”, and “What are the specific problems faced by women managers ?”

#### *The Duration and the Structure of Courses as they influence Women's Enrolment*

Informal discussions with learners and people involved in the delivery of courses in IGNOU suggest that short term study programmes of six months to one year in duration are preferred by all learners, particularly women. A modular programme structure which allows multiple entry points, leads to a certificate or a diploma at the end of each module and opens up some employment avenues is preferred by all learners. The more successful programmes in IGNOU are those that embody one or all of these features. Long term courses without a specific employment orientation have been seen to be more difficult to complete and these courses have a high rate of dropout.

#### *Language Use and Course Content*

The use of language is an important issue, particularly in case of those courses where traditionally women's participation has been low. It is essential that gender inclusive language be the norm. Even now, in many cases the student is addressed as “he”. This is unnecessary and gives the message that the woman learner is not important or is not targetted at. A title ‘Managing Men’ in a management course, for example, could easily be substituted by ‘Managing Personnel’

It is sometimes said that courses based on disciplines of nutrition and child development support and foster sex role stereotypes. This is not true. For one thing, the content and subject area of these disciplines as ‘a body of knowledge’ is gender neutral. Secondly, no course by itself is capable of fostering stereotypes unless the treatment of its content projects such images about women. Rather, through these courses one can generate consciousness on issues such as the role of women in the family, differences in food intake and health care of girls and boys—discriminatory socialisation practices towards and role expectations from boys and girls.

Before concluding I would like to briefly dwell on an aspect which brings out how factors other than responsive courses development serve to enhance/restrict women's participation in a DE programme.

I had referred earlier to the participation of women in the Diploma in Management Programme of IGNOU. Women comprised 8 per cent of all learners in this programme in 1993 whereas the women's share in enrolment for the Certificate Programme in Foods and Nutrition (CFN) of IGNOU was 81 per cent. It would be easy to explain this by saying that the latter is an area that appeals to women while the former is an area traditionally dominated by men. A deeper exploration would show that other factors may be involved.

The eligibility criteria for admission into the Management Programme is threefold the students must have a certain minimum educational qualification, they must clear



an entry test given by IGNOU and they must have a work experience of three years at the supervisory level. The number of women managers in the private as well as public sector is known to be small. So the Diploma restricts the entry of women to only those who have reached a certain cadre in the management hierarchy. It is unlikely that the proportion of women on this course will increase significantly so long as work experience is required for admission.

In contrast, the CFN programme requires no formal academic qualifications (only the ability to read and write), is offered in 13 regional languages and has minimal fees. These factors have definitely contributed towards making it a popular programme among women.

The question that needs to be asked when setting up eligibility criteria is: "What is the purpose of demanding a particular eligibility criterion?" If it is mainly to restrict numbers, as seems to be the case in the management courses of IGNOU, then it would be worth considering to do away with this requirement in the case of women.

### Conclusion

When developing programmes pertaining to empowerment of women, there are likely to be diverse opinions on the issue of applied content versus the more theoretical programmes of study. The choice of courses made by an institution must be an informed one, guided by an understanding of women's issues and the needs of women in that region. Responding to the question of "what is to be done" remains the primary objective, but effective and emancipatory answers to this question require understanding of the systems that constrain or enable us.

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