

## Gender Equality in Distance Education: An Analysis of Course Materials of Indira Gandhi National Open University

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After decades of theorising and academic debate, 'gender studies' has now become an established and dynamic knowledge base. This article, the first in the area to feature in our journal, deals with the well-known and relatively simpler theme of andro centric bias in the construction and dissemination of knowledge.

A straight forward content analysis of the materials — as the author herself admits — this piece analyses the materials of the postgraduate diploma in higher education of IGNOU in terms of content and presentation with a view to determining the extent of marginalisation and the perpetuation of stereotypes of women.

We hope this marks a beginning in two respects: a beginning of an analysis and steps towards changes for the better in the design and language of our course materials and more importantly, a beginning of more stimulating discussions of this nature in an area which is fascinating to many of us in its own right, apart from the benefits one may derive from such endeavours.

The uneven spread of education between men and women has caught the attention of the concerned all over the world. This has been a matter of even greater concern in the developing nations. The low level of education among women as compared to men has been attributed to several factors. One of them is education *per se* which is found to perpetuate inequality between the two sexes in terms of access, participation and performance. Examining the existing conventional educational system, one comes across several criticisms levelled against it. One criticism is on its discriminatory characteristics in terms of its structure, content and practice which inhibit women's participation and performance. In this context the Feminist theories go out to prove the negative role played by the school system in terms of reproducing the incorrect socialization norms reinforcing the traditional patriarchal ideologies, the sexual discriminatory practices through its content, teaching practices, teacher behaviour and perceptions etc. All these factors are found to perpetuate inequality between the sexes.

While the educational content is found to mirror the subservient status of women in the society through its textbooks and other learning materials, to add to this as if it is not enough, even teachers themselves are found to perpetuate the discriminating practices through teaching, assessment and other curricular interactions. Such discriminatory tendencies by teachers are attributed to the deficient and inadequate teacher preparatory programmes that one undergoes prior to undertaking a teaching assignment (Mbilinyi, 1985).

In the Indian sub-continent, the women's educational achievement has been at a low ebb in terms of literacy gains during the post-independence era. The 1991 census reveals a poor 39.42% literacy rate among women in the country. The problems of low literacy level is further compounded by their poor participation rate in the formal educational system which also reveals a pathetic survival rate and their poor performance.

Even though at the inception of its educational policies in Independent India, the Government recognised the need to develop a curriculum which promoted equality between sexes, it was the Education Commission (1964-66) which gave more articulation to this issue by recommending that Indian text books should not promote archaic, sexist stereotypes. Further, the constitution of various commissions and committees in the country to look into the issues of women's education are testimony to the concerns exhibited by the National and State governments. Of these the Status Survey Towards Equality (1974) and the National Perspective Plan for Women (1988) are noteworthy from the point of view of the range of analyses of women's issues. The recent New Educational Policy (1986) has also not lagged behind in declaring its commitment to removing educational disparities between men and women. It reflects deeper concerns for women's education by devoting a separate section on Education for Women's Equality which outlines several fresh approaches to tackling the issue of women's education. The policy holds the view that the education would play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women. Further, it reiterates its stand to develop new values through redesigned curricula, text books and the training and orientation of teachers, decision makers and administrators for the same.

It is with the basic objective of promoting equality and social justice that several alternatives have been provided at various stages of education. Part-time and continuing education, correspondence education and open universities have been specifically launched to cater to the demands of those sections of population including women who for various reasons cannot utilise the opportunities provided by the conventional educational system. The rigidities imposed by the conventional system in terms of attendance and other entry requirements pose hazards to these sections of population. It is in this context that the Programme of Action (1986) declares that open university

system in a country like ours would augment opportunities for higher education and ensure access and that it would be cost effective and promote flexible and innovative system of education.

It is along these lines that the Indira Gandhi National Open University was launched during 1985 with the avowed objective of democratising educational opportunities across regions, genders, castes and classes. IGNOU uses distance mode to take education to the doorsteps of those who are otherwise preoccupied but are desirous of continuing their education. As compared to other distance education programmes, IGNOU's programmes appear to be quite popular and are in great demand owing to its special characteristic features like relaxed entry regulations, learner's autonomy in terms of choice of courses, choice of media for learning, a flexible time-place schedule, a very well organised student support services through its Regional/Study Centres and the innovative multi-media instructional packages. In fact, the course materials of IGNOU have won great accolades from both academics and non-academics owing to their self-instructional features which are developed along the lines of programmed instructional technique for effective individualised learning. It is no wonder that the IGNOU course materials are sought after even by some conventional universities for their regular courses of study.

Despite the attributive features of IGNOU, there are, however, certain disturbing trends in its performance which is a matter of concern for the planners, policy makers and the educationists. A preliminary analysis of the enrolment trends and staff composition in IGNOU has revealed that there is a tilt in the enrolment towards urban, male and general sections of population rather than female, rural and S.C/S.T population for whose chief benefits the open university was started. Even the gender profile of IGNOU staff reveals a male bias in terms of academic, technical and administrative staff both in regular and contractual assignments (Jagannathan, 1991). Anyway it is too early to draw generalisations as the university is still in its infant stage.

It is noticed that generally two related problems emerge regarding women's access to and successful participation in distance mode courses: (i) the traditionally male construction and ownership of knowledge and (ii) the invisibility of women in course materials (Elizebeth Burge and Helen Lenskyj, 1990). It is these theoretical postulates which have set an agenda for the present research. The present study seeks to find out to what extent women have been represented and are visible in the course materials prepared by IGNOU for distance learners. In essence the study seeks to find out whether equal amount of importance has been given to women as much as to men while developing and designing course materials.

It is surprising to note that despite glorious declarations

by the various commissions and committees to remove gender bias in the curriculum, discrimination in one form or another has been creeping into the curriculum. This may be perhaps due to the fact that there has been no systematic and comprehensive evaluation of the Indian textbooks to analyse the sex role-models to determine as to what extent the declared policy has been effected. Research efforts in this direction have been sporadic and have had limited scope. Further researches dealing with issues of gender discrimination in the course materials of distance education programmes are conspicuous by their absence. Thus, a need has been felt by the researcher to look into the issue of any possible gender discrimination in the course materials of IGNOU. Against the backdrop of this, the present study is set with the following objectives:

- to examine the extent of representation given to women as compared to men in the preparation and developmental stage
- to examine the extent of visibility of women in the course contents.

*Methodology:* The present study has adopted a case study design with content analysis technique to examine the above objectives. A case study of one of the Post-Graduate Diploma Programmes of IGNOU has been carried out for purposes of the present study. Content analysis of the course materials belonging to this particular programme has been done. Frequency counts have been used to represent the extent of women's visibility in the course materials. The analysis has been both quantitative and qualitative, and inferential.

Before presenting the analysis of the data, it would be in place here to present a brief resume about the post-graduate diploma programme selected for the purpose of present study. This course is termed Post-graduate Diploma in Higher Education (PGDHE). The programme is basically visualised and developed in response to recommendations of the National Policy on Education (NPE)-1986 with a view to providing necessary knowledge, understanding and skills pertaining to higher education to university and college teachers (IGNOU, 1991). The programme is meant for a target audience of those who teach or aspire to teach in universities, colleges and other institutions of higher learning. The programme has the following underlying objectives:

- a) to acquire a perspective regarding the system of higher education, its context, its functions and its linkages with other systems;
- b) to develop professional competencies that a university teacher ought to have; and
- c) to develop readiness to undertake reforms and innovations in the practice of the teaching profession.

The programme consists of five courses, one of them being a project (course-5). The other four courses are:

- Course 1 : Higher Education: Its context and linkages  
 Course 2 : Instruction in Higher Education  
 Course 3 : Higher Education: The Social-Psychological field  
 Course 4 : Planning and Management of Higher Education.

Each of the above courses consists of four blocks (printed booklets of self-instructional material) thematically linked to each other, and a few audio and video cassettes.

The rationale for selecting this particular programme (PGDHE) for the purpose of the present research has emanated from the following:

- The researcher herself was a student of this programme and hence had access to the course materials.
- The programme is specifically meant for college and university teachers, who form an integral part of the educational system and who have a significant role to play in eliminating gender discrimination if any, in the class room during curricular transactions. It is presumed that the effect of gender bias in a course like this would certainly have spill over effect on the participants when they start practising teaching. For the purpose of content analysis, one block from each of the courses is content analysed. Each block (booklet) in the inside cover pages indicate the composition of the course committee, course contributors, editors and production personnel. An analysis of these cover pages would indicate the extent of women's representation on the course curriculum preparation and development. As mentioned earlier the course materials are designed along the lines of programmed instructional technique so as to facilitate individualised self-learning. Each self-instructional unit in the booklet consists of three sections: opening section, the main body of the texts and the ending of the unit. The opening section consists of title and number of lessons, outline of the unit contents, the objectives and an introduction. The main text/body is the actual content of the text. There are also illustrations/examples/diagrams/flow charts, pictures and cartoons to break the monotony of reading the texts, make the self-learning interesting and exciting, and thereby sustain the motivation of the learners. Further, there are also self-check exercises and in-text activities which ensure feedback and greater involvement of the learners.

For the present study the content analysis of the course materials is done both course-wise and block-wise. Before actual content analysis of the course materials is done, at the outset, an attempt is made to find out the extent of representation given to women as compared to men at the preparatory/developmental stage of the course materials.

#### Construction and Ownership of Knowledge

For developing course materials, IGNOU has set up an

expert committee consisting of eminent people in the field. This committee decides the curriculum and content density for the course concerned. The course developers are supposed to have pedagogical competencies to do the complex job of researching, writing and editing. For writing contents for the course, there are course contributors/writers who either work individually or in a team. Further, these course writers comprise both full-time and part-time staff. While the former are the faculty of the IGNOU, the latter are drawn from various conventional colleges and universities. Besides course contributors, there are also editors, coordinators and production personnel, all from IGNOU.

In this analysis, an attempt has been made to find out the extent of involvement of women in the development stage of the course. The following table reveals the same.

Table 1 : Showing representation of women and men on the expert committee

Courses	Women	Men	Total
Course I	4	23	27
Course II	4	23	27
Course III	4	23	27
Course IV	4	23	27

It could be seen from the table that there is an apparent imbalance in the representation of women on the expert committee as compared to men. There are only 4 women as against 23 Men in all the courses. The same four women are noticed in all the course expert committees. Incidentally three of these four women are Delhi-based, and only one is from Mother Teresa Women's University, Madras. One of the reasons for such an imbalance could be non-availability of women at the topmost academic ladder. As the members for the Expert Committee are normally drawn from who's who of Education and most of these people are in the top echelons of the academic world, women may be a 'rare commodity' to be noticed.

A further analysis of the composition of course contributors/writers has revealed the following:

Table 2 : Showing representation of women and Men on the Panel of course contributors/writers/technicians/production personnel

Courses	Women	Men	Total
Course I	5	10	15
Course II	4	12	16
Course III	5	11	16
Course IV	3	16	19

Even here it could be noticed that women are under-represented as compared to men. These are by and large senior faculty members teaching in conventional universities and colleges. The overall representation of



women teachers in the university teaching departments and degree colleges is one-sixth and one-fourth respectively (India, 1990). As such women may be poorly represented here. Another plausible reason could be that women teachers were approached for course writing assignment which was subsequently declined due to their prior preoccupations or women teachers were never approached at all for the purpose. In any case the analysis reveals that there is a tilt towards men teachers while selecting the course writers. The question, 'Is it because the people who select course writers are by and large men and therefore have tended to select men only?' needs further probing. However, it would augur well for a university which is named after a woman to give at least equal if not more representation to women on its academic and allied bodies.

### The Course Content

The content of the course materials of PGDHE of IGNOU is analysed for any possible gender biases. Both the textual and pictorial contents have been examined for the purpose. These materials analysed are as follows :

Unit 1 'The progressive social role of a university

*Education : The social-Psychological field.*

Unit 4 'Management of Instruction in Higher Education' under Course 4 – *Planning and Management of Higher Education.*

All these course materials have one common audience i.e. the university and the college teachers. Hence the teachers are referred to in the content more frequently in one way or another. It is noticed that the content on the whole does not reveal any gender discrimination either in terms of elevating the status/role of men teachers or denigrating the status/role of women teachers. The content in all the courses is free of any gender biases. Hence IGNOU could be credited for promoting the equality of sexes through its course contents.

### Language of the Content

An attempt has also been made to analyse the language used in the content to determine gender biases, if any in the textual contents.

It may be noticed from the table that the language used at different stages of content presentation has lent itself for possible gender biases. However it is at the stage of presentation of unit content and while presenting examples and illustrations that gender biases are found to

Table 3 : Showing the kind of language used by the writers while addressing the teachers

Unit Components	Course I			Course II			Course III			Course IV		
	M	F	B	M	F	B	M	F	B	M	F	B
Introduction			9	2								
Objectives												
Unit content	2		66	116	2		1		88	14		91
Intext activity				6	1							
Self-check exercises			2	3								
Let us sum up				2								
Examples/Illustrations	7			17						2		
Unit-end activities			2	1								
Points for Discussion				3								
Total	9		79	150	3		1		88	16		91

M — Male Centred, F — Female Centred, B — Both Male and Female Centred

teacher in India' under course 1 – *Higher Education: its context and linkages.*

Unit 2 'Instruction in a Systemic Perspective' under Course 2 – *Instruction in Higher Education.*

Unit 3 'Psychology of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education' under Course 3 – *Higher*

Education: The social-Psychological field. It is noticed that only in Course-II, gender bias is conspicuous to the extent of cent percent. This is a course which speaks about Instruction in Higher Education in general and Instruction in Systemic Perspective in particular. As said earlier since the course is targeted to teachers in colleges and university teaching departments, it is expected that both men and women teachers should be addressed by the course writers to an

equal extent. However, it appears from the pronouns used in the language that the course is addressed to only male teachers. Although, it is the he-man language (as Dale Spender (1980) has called it) which is universally used and the formal rules of English grammar prescribe that man in the sense of mankind should be understood as including both men and women, yet empirical evidences point out that the use of 'he' language is not understood as inclusive of 'she' language in educational situations (Miller & Swift, 1977).

The same Course-II also reveals male-centred language to a greater extent than the other three blocks while citing examples and illustrations. It may be noted from the table,

students or teachers or both. Invariably only male characters are used for the purpose.

### Findings and Discussion

The study made an attempt to examine the possible gender biases if any in the course materials of IGNOU, which employs distance mode for imparting instruction. It was assumed that for promoting equality between sexes, it was necessary that course materials should present gender bias free contents. However, the existing empirical evidences point out that owing to traditional ownership and construction of knowledge by the male-dominated society, gender discrimination still persists in terms of

Table 4 : Showing representation of Men and Women figures in the diagrams and cartoons

	Course I			Course II			Course III			Course IV		
	M	F	B	M	F	B	M	F	B	M	F	B
Pictures/ Illustrations/ Diagrams	—	—	—	5	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cartoons	7	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1	13	—	—
Total	7	—	—	6	2	—	—	—	1	13	—	—

M = Males only F = Females only B = Both

that the language used in the other three courses has given equal emphasis to both genders as course writers seem to be quite cautious while using pronouns (she/he & her/his). Hence to this extent, it could be said that IGNOU does promote gender equality through its course materials.

The course writers have also interspersed pictorial illustrations/diagrams, cartoons along with the textual contents to reinforce self-learning as well as for breaking the monotony of drab reading. An analysis of these pictorial/cartoon contents has revealed the following in terms of gender discrimination.

For this analysis, only those pictures/cartoons which showed men and/or women figures have been picked up. There were altogether 7 such pictures and 22 cartoons. It may be noticed from the analysis that excepting in course-III, in the remaining three courses, only figures representing men are presented to drive home the point. These are the pictures which show a teacher teaching or performing her/his task and students inside the classroom. In no picture women are shown to be teaching or interacting with students. On the other hand only men teachers in the classrooms are shown. Even while showing the students, one can see that male students either outnumber female students or they are sitting on the front benches and female students are sitting at the back benches. Cartoons by the famous cartoonist R.K. Laxman mock at the education system through the actions of either

content and language presentation in the distance mode of education. A case study of course units on 'The progressive social role of a university teacher in India'; 'Instruction in a systemic perspective'; 'Psychology of learning and teaching in Higher Education'; and 'Management of instruction in Higher Education' of the Post-Graduate Diploma in Higher Education offered by IGNOU was done. The content analysis of these course materials was carried out to test the hypothesis. As far as construction and ownership of knowledge in these courses are concerned, male domination is obvious as women are found to be poorly represented both on the expert committee and on the panel of course writers. There are only four women out of 27 on the expert committee and 3-5 out of 15-19 in the course contributors list. Hence there is a need for giving more representation to women teachers to correct imbalances.

The content materials of these courses do not reveal any gender biases. However, the language used in the textual content does display a sexist bias only in one course out of the four courses examined. In this particular block namely *Instruction in a systemic perspective*, it appears that the course writers have only male teachers in view. In the remaining three courses, the course writers have given equal importance to both men and women. The course writers of these three courses are found to be cautious in addressing both male and female teachers while referring to teachers in Higher Education. So far as pictorial

illustrations and cartoons are concerned, there is a definite gender-bias.

Thus, the findings of this research study imply that whatever sexist-bias revealed in language of the textual content and pictures/cartoons, presentation needs to be corrected and a more balanced treatment of men and women needs to be presented to the distance learners. The present study is only a small attempt that deals with

a limited sample of course materials from only one programme of IGNOU. Hence, the findings may have limitations for broader generalizations. Perhaps, content analyses of course materials on a large scale in a few undergraduate programmes offered by IGNOU may provide a better picture about gender biases in distance education and may have broader implications for future course of action to promote gender equality.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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13. Works by Liberal Feminists like Stacey Judith (1965), Wolf Margery (1985), Desta Asayagen (1974), Social Feminists like Firestone (1970), Millett (1971) and Radical Feminists such as Deem Rosemary (1978) Kelly and Nihlen (1982) and Wolpe (1978) reveal the negative role played by the school system in reinforcing traditional patriarchal ideologies. They not only suggest the kind of curriculum that is needed for promoting women's equality but also suggest the kind of roles that teachers have to play in undoing the traditional dominant ideologies.