

Women's Participation in Higher Education: A Case Study of Distance Education Courses in a University

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Abstract: *This article examines the role of the distance education courses in higher education as its effects women's empowerment and motivations for participations in educational programmes. It examines motives behind Indian women's educational participation in distance education courses in one of Indian universities situated in West Bengal. A sample of 200 women randomly drawn from all women enrolled in distance education courses in higher education was used for the study. The results from the data established that distance education programmes in higher education offered Indian women the opportunity to bridge the gender gap and achieve their potentials.*

Introduction

Women's empowerment has become the focus of considerable discussion and attention all over the world as well as associated with research in many educational disciplines including that of distance education. In an attempt to bridge gender disparity in the developing world different agency are trying to elevate the status of women so that they become increasingly visible in various roles such as socioeconomic, political and civil leadership.

The Indian national policy on education enlists the aims of higher education in the countries educational system. The women's education and education as the means for a better life have therefore, become intrinsic to the Indian education system and are under the control of Local, State and Central governments.

Overview of the Literature

Mehta Neelima (2011) studied the factors governing access and equity in open distance learning programmes: with special reference to distance mode institutes (DEIs) of dual mode universities in Western Maharashtra. The objectives of the Study were to explore the causes, how far Distance Education has actually made

education accessible to identify the factors governing access and to assess the degree of inequality, causes of inequality and , thereafter, to suggest the remedial measures for promoting inclusiveness .

Gogoi, Manashee & Hazarika , Mukut (2009) studied awareness and Attitude of the College Students Towards Open and Distance Learning. The Objectives of that study were to find out the level of awareness of the college students (male and female and rural and urban) towards ODL and to find out the level of attitude of college students (male and female and rural and urban) towards ODL. The study had revealed that the level of awareness and attitude of the college students towards ODL system was not very high. Besides, there exists significant differences between male and female; and rural and urban students as far as their awareness and attitude towards ODL system was concerned. The authors concluded that the students were aware about the merits and accessibility of the ODL system and form a healthy attitude towards it, it will not be possible to attain equity and access of the higher education, which is the need of the hour.

Villi, C. (2003) conducted a “Study on knowledge, Attitude perception and Expectations (KAPE) of the Women Learners of Open University” . The objectives of the study were (a) The reason for choosing the open university system (b) The reason for the continuing higher studies(c) The reason for the choosing the optional subject (d) Source of getting study information (e) Opinion about contact seminar (f) Expectations and suggestions for improvement (g) Opinion about the open university system (h) Opinion about entrance test. This study showed that, majority of women learners quite a significant percentage found the open learning system to be a formal system of study, with not much difference vis-a-vis the conventional system. Newspaper and friends emerge as the primary sources of information about Open University programmes. Opinions about the contact seminars indicated the areas of required improvement in the system

Research Methodology

The question to which answer was sought is whether Indian women who enrol open and distance education courses in higher education are driven with specific motive or reasons to participate in higher education programmes. The sample for the study was women enrolled in the distance education Post-graduate courses in different subjects of Rabindra Bharati University [in a study centre named Midnapore Law College] in West Bengal in India during the sessions 2010-11, 2011-12, 2012-13 and 2013-14. Questionnaires were rated on a Likert scale of one (less important) to four (most important) to determine the extent to which statements influence their decision to participate in higher education. A return rate of 75 percent was achieve and considerate usable for data analysis. Two hundred women whose ages range between 20 and 50 years are randomly selected for the study.

The research instrument used for the study was an adaptation of the Continuing Education for Women Motives Questionnaire (CEFWMQ)

developed by Maslin (1978), which consist of seventy statesmen of possible reasons of attending higher education Institution. Forty-six of the 70 statements were found relevant and adapted for the study. The statements are eight categories: Self improvement, self actualisation, vocation, role, family, social, humanitarian and knowledge. The content and construct validity was determined by the author, the later on the basis of factor analysis, and coefficient of stability range from 0.80 to 0.91; Test- Retest methodology yielded a Pearson correlation of 0.86 p< 0.001 (Maslin 1978).

Findings

Of the sample 88 percent (176) were between 20 and 35 years of age range and 12 percent (24) between 35 and 50. Eleven percent of the respondents were engaged in one kind of employment or the other.

Data analysis on the eight category of reason for participation in higher education showed that of the 200 women's surveyed 36%(72) get self improvement, for example, needing something important for a change to improve self intelligence and setting an example for others, as the motive for participating in distance education course in higher education. The first reason, ‘self improvement’, as was categorised in this study, and as shown in table 1, was not regarded as a strong factor for this participation of the sample of Indian women through distance education courses. Table 1 :Self improvement as a factor of participation

Items	N	%
Need to do something important for myself for a change.	15	7.5
It is a way to help to raise the status of women in our society	10	5
My intelligence was being largely wasted before I entered university	8	4
A university degree is the entrance ticket to a better place in society	12	6
It helps me overcome feelings inferiority and raises my self-esteem	6	3
It is like therapy for me, a way of working	9	4.5

myself out of an unpleasant emotional state		
Working towards the goal of a degree gives some meaning and purpose of my life.	8	4
My effort will make the path easier for others like me to get somewhere and to set an example and lead the way	4	2
Total	72	36

However, out of the eight items under “self improvement”, “Need to do something important for myself for a change” was rated as the most reason for the participation in higher education, while “My effort will make the path easier for others like me to get somewhere and to set an example and lead the way” was rated as the least reason for the participation . In table no 1 only four respondents (2%) rated it as one of reason participation in a distance education post graduate course.

The second category self actualisation, as shown in table-2, indicates that 60% (120) gave “self actualisation” or “a chance to expand and grow as a whole person” as a major reason. 18% respondent found their participation in a distance education post graduate course useful for discovering and evaluating the extent and limits of their capabilities.(See table no 2) Fifteen percent respondents also claimed that It gave a chance to expand and grow as whole person. This item was rated as the second most important reason, while the item “It helps me learn to think and act on my own, without relying on others to make discussions” was the least important (3%) in the self actualisation section as a factor influencing participation

Table 2: Self-actualisation as factor for participation

Items	N	%
It give a chance to expand and grow as whole person	30	15
It is like opening a door on a world of ideas and knowledge that i had been aware of	16	8
It is a good place to evaluate and	36	18

discuss the extent limits of my capabilities.		
Is makes me feel that I am in the mainstream of life	10	5
It helps me to develop hidden potential that I suspected I had	14	7
It is an opportunity to explore myself and find out who I really am	8	4
It helps me learn to think and act on my own, without relying on others to make discussions	6	3
Total	120	60

The third category of the eight motive factors (vocation) under study showed that 45% (90) of the respondents participated in distance education post graduate course to enable them to qualify for the right career and job (Table no 3). The desire to meet educational requirements for a certain kind of jobs and earn more money were equally rated. However, 18 out of 90 respondents (9%) who gave “vocation” as reason for participation felt it would help them to be “financially self supporting” , while 8.5% choose “I have a better chance of getting a job that is interesting and satisfying to me” to them. The list number opted for choice “I will better able to choose the right career for myself” category was only 5.5%.

Table 3: Vocation as a factor for participation

Items	N	%
It is necessary to meet educational requirements for the kind of work I want to do	15	7.5
I have a better chance of getting a job that is interesting and satisfying to me	17	8.5
I will better able to choose the right career for myself	11	5.5
It is a way of preparing myself to be financially self-supporting when I want to be or need to be	18	9
It will qualify me to earn more money in a higher-level job	15	7.5
It will increase my knowledge of possible career opportunities	14	7
Total	90	45

Responses to the items under the forth category (role) reveals that a number of women (20%)

opted for distance education post graduate courses so as to compensate for my husband’s level of ambition and/or success. However even those reason was rated the highest in this category, the desire to get a new perspective on my marital relationships (10%), getting away from the demands of home and family responsibilities (11%), and compensating for lack of satisfaction(11%), were also responsible for the participation (table 4).

Table 4 : Role as a factor for participation

Items	N	%
I can help me get a new perspective on my marital relationship	20	10
It is a legitimate way to avoid being absorbed in the demands of home and family responsibilities	22	11
It is a way of compensating for lack of satisfaction in aspects of my life	22	11
It is a way of convincing someone in my family that I am smarter than they gave me credit for	14	7
It helps me compensate for my husband’s level of ambition and/or success	40	20
Total	118	59

Table five shows that majority of the respondents in this study claim that concerns for family well-being and educational equality with husbands are paramount in their decision to study. Surprisingly, raising family standards and style of living was the least desired option.

Table 5: Family as a factor for participation

Items	N	%
I felt I was being left behind by my husband and/or children educationally and intellectually	36	18
I will be able to make a significant contribution to our family income	17	8.5
I will know how to make possible more enriching experiences and opportunities for my family	22	11
I will be better able to give my family the advantages they need for a good start in life	38	19
I will enable me to raise my family’s standard and style of living	12	6
Total	125	62.5

Analysis of the “social” category as a factor confirm that getting relief from troubles and concerns was the most important reason for enrolling in education. 24% of the respondent rated the item “It is a way to take mind off my personal troubles and concerns” as the most important for the educational participation. The desire to be in tune with other women, and to be acceptable and treated with respect, are some of the reason influencing Indian women in the study (table-6)

Table 6: The social factor for participation

Items	N	%
It is a way to take mind off my personal troubles and concerns	48	24
It is a good way to meet interesting men	20	10
Going to college seems to have become the thing to do among women like me	26	13
College is an ambition that my parents had for me and it will make them proud	21	10.5
It will make me be acceptable and treated with respect among men and peers	23	11.5
Total	138	69

Table 7, however shows that among the items rated under “Humanitarianism” , the urge to learn, teach and share knowledge with others was most important. Concerns for acquiring the best in order to participate in the affairs of fellow humans was uppermost in Indian women’s desire to advance in higher education. Political motivation was rated the least important (4.5%).

Table 7: Humanitarianism as a factor for participation

Items	N	%
I want to learn so that I can teach or share my knowledge	18	9
I will be better prepared to use my abilities for the benefit of my fellow humans	23	11.5
I will better able to pull my share of the load in the effort toward a better life for all people	14	7
It will help and prepare me politically to serve my community	9	4.5
It will help me to begin a new lifestyle, to find a whole new way to live	16	8

Total	80	40
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Data on “knowledge” which is the eight categories showed that the desire to have a better understanding of life and the world in general was regard as the most important item. Table 8 shows that 38% of the respondents gave “knowledge”, for example, gaining better understanding of what life and the world to having better relationships with friends as motives for participating in higher education.

Table 8: Knowledge as a factor for participation

Items	N	%
It will make more intelligent	17	8.5
It is a way of gaining better understanding of what life and the world are all about	28	14
It will enhance my understanding of the environment around me	10	5
It will help me understand my job better	12	6
It will help me knowledgeable and understand individuals as friends and improve my relationship with them	9	4.5
Total	76	38

The overall analysis of the eight categories given and as developed by Maslin (1978) adopted for the study, showed that of this rated by the participants, four stood out as the most important motives for participation. As shown in table 9, these are: “social” (69%), “family (62.5%), “self actualisation (60%), and “role” (59%).

Table 9: Rank Order of Motive Factors for Participation

Factor	%	Rank
Self-Improvement	36	8
Self-actualisation	60	3
Vocation	45	5
Role	59	4
Family	62.5	2
Social	69	1
Humanitarian	40	6
Knowledge	38	7

The findings as revealed in table 9 indicate that Indian women in the study utilised distance education post graduate courses in higher education for emancipation and for better future

roles, both in the family and society. The implications are that the distance education post graduate post graduate courses has opened for Indian women to pursue their educational and carrier aspirations to remove the perceived deficiencies that served as barriers in being equal to their male counterparts in all areas of life.

Conclusion

Indian women are struggling to emancipate themselves in all areas of life. Motivation for learning has been an aspect that greatly influences one's participation in distance education, as all people have an innate need to develop their full potential as human beings (Bates & Norton, 2002).

The distance education post graduate courses in Indian higher education have given women the opportunity to bridge the gender gap and achieve their potential. Various motives influence them, as is evident in this study. While further researches necessary to validate and improve upon the findings by enlarging by scope of the study, this preliminary work it is hoped, will assist policy makers, professionals and education practitioners in India to improve their knowledge and understanding regarding the nature of distance learners

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