

Socio-economic Background of Women Learners of K. K. Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) and Inferences There-of

Dr. Indrani Deka

Dr. Sarmistha Rani Baruah

Chayanika Roy

I. Introduction

The research paper aims to relate the socio-economic background of a distance learner and study the various implications of their background with regard to education. In this paper we shall focus primarily on women learners who are pursuing their education through distance learning mode. The socio-economic background of women learners affects their learning process. Hence, a study of the socio-economic background of the women learners is relevant as it shall lead us to analyse and find out the status of women learners of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) as well as their priorities for choosing the Open University. This shall further enable us to get an overview of the role played by the one and only State Open University of Assam in providing value education to women and assess their overall development. It must be noted that by the term “socio-economic”, here, we imply the issues and concerns related to social and economic factors. Various socio-economic factors such as age distribution, social category, marital status, family type, monthly income, rural-urban character, type of accommodation and other important topics related to the women learners have been identified as vital markers to see the effect on women learners’ overall achievement.

The importance of education in the development of a nation is worth mentioning chiefly when it comes to socio-economic aspect. Education is a highly essential means for a nation to achieve progress and prosperity. Distance education plays a vital role in recent education scenario worldwide. In the Indian context, distance education has been benefitting the masses since nearly forty years. Compared to conventional system of education, distance education is more ‘individualised’ with regard to the learners because one can control one’s own learning situation (Sharma 131). With reference to the above, it is evident that among others, the most benefitted are the women. Since women comprise

the less privileged section of the society, the individualized concept of distance education is a boon for them. They can pursue their education in their self created time zone and space by opting for distance mode. Most importantly, distance learning mode provides ample scope for the women learners to study and at the same time manage their social lives. It has been seen that there is an increase in the enrollment of women learners in KKHSOU since the past few years. One of the primary goals of KKHSOU is to 'reach to the unreached' by overcoming any kind of barriers of age or geographical location and most importantly, to educate the women- especially the homemakers. As women constitute almost half of the total population in a society, it is essential to lay emphasis on women education. Therefore, women learners are of utmost priority to KKHSOU and it becomes quite relevant to analyze the various issues related to them.

II. Statement of the Problem:

As weaker section of the society, women are easily deprived of various advantages that are otherwise available to the privileged ones. With respect to this, it must be noted that the socio-economic life of a person has a great bearing on his/her intellectual life. In terms of the opportunities that are available to women regardless of their diverse socio-economic backgrounds, it becomes relevant to analyze aspects such as family size and pattern, their economic life, their rural/urban background, etc. and the way these factors have influenced their education. However, with the mode of open and distance learning, it has become very convenient for women to pursue their goals of achieving higher education in spite of their assorted socio-economic backgrounds. Through this study, an attempt has been made to analyse the influence of socio-economic background on women learners of KKHSOU.

III. Objectives:

The objectives of this research paper are as follows:-

1. To identify the socio-economic background of women learners in KKHSOU
2. To highlight the socio-economic problems faced by the women learners
3. To assess the effect of KKHSOU on women learners

IV. Methodology:

While carrying out the research, both primary and secondary data were used. Primary data were collected by questionnaires as well as face to face interaction with the respondents. While secondary data were taken from different sources like books, journals, various official records of KKHSOU, etc.

To be specific, the area covered in the research includes several Study Centres of KKHSOU located at different districts, namely, Lakhimpur, Sivasagar, Nagaon, Darrang, Jorhat, Majuli, Cachar, Sonitpur, Kamrup (Metro and Rural), Barpeta, Kokrajhar and Nalbari. The Study Centres have been selected on the basis of two aspects: (a) the Study Centres represent both rural and urban areas, and (b) the Study Centres comprise mostly women learners. As samples, a total of four hundred and thirty three women learners from KKHSOU enrolled in the study centres from the above mentioned districts have been taken for the study.

V. Findings and Discussion:

Generally speaking, some of the common socio-economic problems that the women learners mostly face are early marriage, family responsibility after marriage, ignorance regarding family planning due to lack of education, parents' emphasis mostly on educating the boy child, low family income, lack of motivation for education and employment, household chores as inseparable from women, etc. Many of these issues will be touched upon in the course of our discussion with regard to the study of the respondents' socio-economic backgrounds.

For the purpose of our study, a total number of 433 respondents were examined in terms of various aspects related to target matter. While procuring data from the women learners, effort was made to collect data on various aspects of their social and economic life. For this purpose, they were asked about their family size and pattern, their economic life, their educational level, their rural-urban background, etc. These data were collected so as to acquire an idea of their socio-economic life.

In the succeeding paragraphs major demographic characteristics of the women learners have been analysed. Among the characteristics included in the discussion are variables such as educational level of the respondents, their family income, marital status, size of the family,

number of children, etc. A probe into these characteristics shall help in understanding the background of the women learners in a better way.

Age distribution:

The age-wise distribution of the women learners is presented in Figure 1. The age of the respondents varied from a minimum of 18 to a maximum of 52.

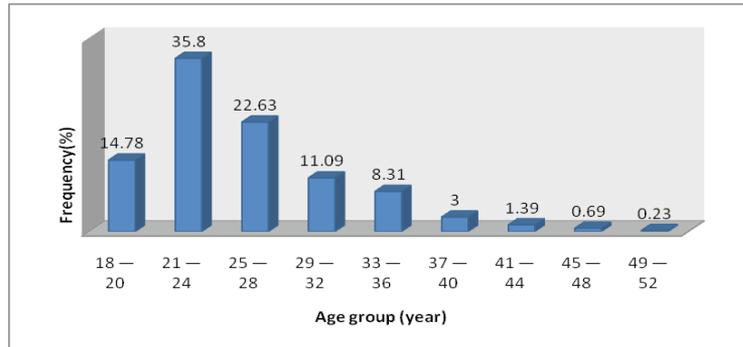


Fig. 1: Age-wise distribution of the respondents

It has been observed from the figure that majority of the respondents (35.80 %) were from the age group 21-24. We have seen a decrease in the number of respondents till it reaches the age group 49-52, where there is only one respondent (0.23%). More than 97 percent of the respondents were below the age of 45 years. Of the remaining three percent, 2.08 % did not offer any response.

Social Category of the Respondents:

Data pertaining to social category of the respondents was collected during the study. The details are presented in the following table. The table shows that the highest number of respondents belonged to OBC/MOBC category constituting 40.41 per cent. The next in the line are the General category respondents with 37.64 percent followed by Scheduled Tribe respondents with 12.24 percent.

Table 1: Social Category of the Respondents

Sl No.	Social Category	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	General	163	37.64
2	OBC/MOBC	175	40.41

3	Scheduled Tribe	053	12.24
4	Scheduled Caste	036	08.31
5	No Response	006	01.39
	Total	433	100.00

Marital Status of the Respondents

Marital status of the respondents is shown in Figure 2. It has been observed that majority of the respondents were unmarried (67.67%). This might be due to the fact that majority of them belonged to the younger age group. However, 31.64 percent of the total respondents were married. Divorcees and widows constitute less than one percent of the total respondents.

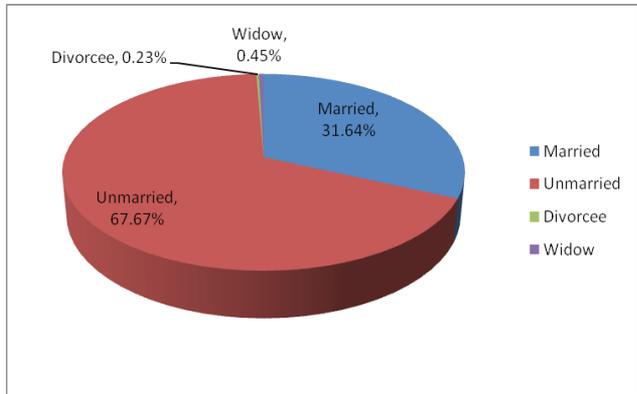


Fig. 2: Marital Status of the Respondents

Family type and size of the Respondents

Data recorded for family type and family size of the respondents are presented in Figure 3. The figure shows that majority of the respondents were from nuclear family.

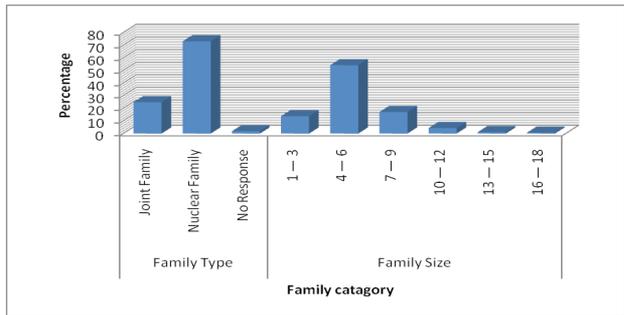


Fig. 3: Family Type and size of the Respondents

Family size of the respondents has great impact on their continuation of studies. Economically weaker families cannot afford to impart education to all their children. Exclusion takes place in respect of females normally. Dropout rate is significant therefore in respect of females, irrespective of urban or rural areas.

Number of children of the respondents:

Of the total 433 respondents, although 137 were married, 34 of them were yet to have any children till the time of interview. Two of the respondents were divorcees while one was separated. They have two children each. Number of children of the respondents is shown in the following table.

Table 2: Number of children of the respondents

SI No.	No. of children	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	1	42	40.00
2	2	46	43.81
3	3	12	11.43
4	4	05	04.76

It may be noted that maximum number of respondents had two children constituting 43.81 percent of the total respondents having children. It was closely followed by respondents having only one child (40.00%). Five respondents were recorded who have four children each.

Monthly income:

The monthly income of the family of the respondents is presented in the following table.

Table 3: Income Range of the Respondents' Family

Sl No.	Income Range	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Less than 1000	01	00.23
2	1000-10000	203	46.88
3	10001-20000	116	26.79
4	20001-30000	40	09.24
5	30001-40000	12	02.77

6	40001-50000	06	01.39
7	50001-60000	01	00.23
8	60001-70000	01	00.23
9	700001-80000	07	01.62
10	80001-90000	01	00.23
11	90001-100000	01	00.23
12	More than 100000	01	00.23
13	NA	43	09.93
	Total	433	100.00

It may be observed that there is one respondent whose monthly family income was less than Rs. 1000/-. Majority of the family's earnings was included in the category of Rs 1000- 10000. This category constituted 46.88 percent of the total respondents followed by the category earning more than Rs 10000- 20000 per month (26.79%). Two respondents were recorded having family income between 1-2 lakhs.

Courses Pursued by the Respondents:

It may be noted that highest number of respondents was from BA Programme constituting 47.57 percent followed by 25.64% from Diploma in Elementary Education programme.

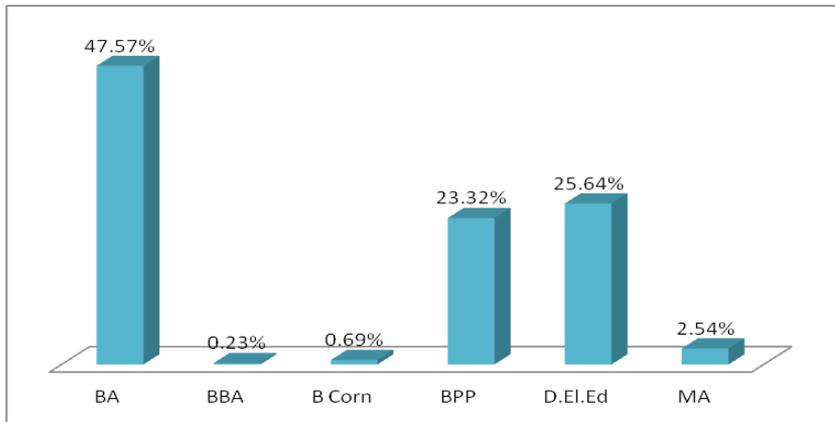


Fig 4: Courses Pursued by the Respondents

Rural -Urban Category of the Respondents:

The rural-urban category of the respondents is presented in the following Table 4. It has been observed from the table that majority of the respondents were from rural background constituting 65.13 percent.

Table 4: Rural-Urban Category of the Respondents

SI No.	Rural-Urban Category	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Rural	282	65.13
2	Urban	151	34.87
	Total	433	100.00

Type of Accommodation of the Respondents:

The types of accommodation of the respondents, whether in rural or in urban areas, are shown in the table below:

Table 5: Type of Accommodation of the Respondents

SI No.	Type of Accommodation	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Official quarter	13	03.00
2	Own House	357	82.45
3	Rented House	55	12.70
4	Not Available	08	01.85
	Total	433	100.00

The Table shows that majority of the respondents lived in their own houses (82.45%). Only 12.70 percent of the respondents lived in rented houses. 13 respondents constituting 3.00 percent were found to be living in their official quarter.

Following the analysis of data with reference to identifying the various aspects of their socio-economic backgrounds, it becomes pertinent to give emphasis on their overall experience as a learner of KKHSOU and why they opted to pursue education in this University. Therefore, majority of the passed out women learners from each of the study centres mentioned above, were asked to opine on the effect of socio-economic factors while receiving education at KKHSOU. Out

of the respondents, majority of the learners positively described about their successful completion of the respective courses in KKHSOU and added that they had a favorable experience at KKHSOU. Most of the respondents highlighted that courses like BA, B.Com, BBA, BPP, D. El. Ed and MA that they pursued helped them in their personal growth as well as enhanced their academic or career prospects. Commenting on the education offered by the University, the respondents expressed their comfort in terms of fee structure, ease of access, learner-friendly study materials, etc. However, some of the respondents affirmed that they faced certain problems like lack of proper communication with the study centres, long distance to and from the study centres, etc.

Explaining their choice for distance education, KKHSOU in particular, majority of them mentioned the socio-economic causes like financial problems, family responsibilities and flexibility of learning while a few others mentioned early marriage and child birth to be the reason for dropping out and enrolling themselves later in the University. Though it is often being said that, women are deprived of education in conventional system due to early marriage, but in our study maximum percentage of the respondents was unmarried. Significantly, majority of the learners agreed that KKHSOU has been able to fulfill their aspirations and needs by providing quality education. The success of an open and distance learning institute lies in their ability to extend educational opportunity to all, including the unreached and underprivileged community of the society. There is a widespread impression that distance education learners are generally adults i.e. above the age group of 25 years. However, our study revealed that out of the age group ranging from 18-52 years, most of the women learners belonged to the age group 21-24 years. Similar findings were also observed by Krishnan, 2004.

Regarding family type and rural/urban category, it is evident from our study that, majority of the learners was from nuclear family and rural area. This proves that K.K. Handiqui State Open University has succeeded in its objective to spread higher education among the rural masses. Despite the fact that majority of the respondents are from rural background, predominance of nuclear families among the respondents is worth noting. Usually we find that nuclear family is a characteristic feature of urban livings only. It is observed from our study that, most of the women learners were from monthly income range group of 1000-10000 which highlights another important point that the economic status of women learners in KKHSOU is below average. This economic factor is one of the reasons that directed them to take up courses in this university.

It must be noted that the employability status of the respondents was not found to be satisfactory. Majority of them were still continuing their education during our study. As such, we could not find out their employability status in a detailed way. However, out of the total respondents, a few were employed in the field of teaching at school level; a few others were engaged in private sector while there were others who admitted of having started their own businesses of weaving or other dress materials.

VI. Conclusion:

The role played by distance education in reaching out to a wider spectrum of the society cannot be denied. From the present study, it is clear that distance education is not only patronized by adult or married group of women; irrespective of age and marital status, younger to older women can access their education through KKHSOU. Regarding the many difficulties and concerns experienced by the women learners, particularly those in rural areas or with low income, KKHSOU as a distance learning institute has emerged as an ideal way for them to access education and fulfill their dreams of higher education. Different responses from women learners in our study revealed that, they could not complete their education in conventional system due to family responsibilities, marriage, child birth, lack of time for regular classes, etc. Despite having these barriers, KKHSOU has provided them a scope to complete their studies and helped them to acquire knowledge as well as improve their status in the society. We have seen how socio-economic background affects women's education in particular especially when it comes to continuation of higher studies. It may be summed up that though the socio-economic backgrounds of most of the learners are ideal for the conventional system of education yet they can cherish the benefit of education offered by KKHSOU and other open and distance learning institutes.

VII. Recommendation

Concession of fees may be given to women learners whose family income is below average. This may reduce their financial problem to some extent. Through its multimedia, KKHSOU can address a few social problems like early marriage and motivate the general public on the importance of women's education. With the help of audio and video production centred on the various socio-economic

problems faced by the women, the multimedia unit of the university can play an effective role to weed out the conventional mindset of the masses and promote women's education for the development of the society. Open house discussion with women learners of various study centers of KKHSOU must be held from time to time and necessary steps must be taken by the university to minimize their issues and concerns. Skill based certificate and diploma programmes especially designed for women learners can be offered by the University in order to contribute towards the socio economic growth of women in Assam. These are only some of the suggestions that have been forwarded keeping in view the above discussion. On the whole, the University has an important role to play in this aspect.

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