

Role of Open and Distance Learning in the Empowerment of Women in Assam: A Case Study of KKHSOU

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1. Introduction:

The Government of India has adopted the National Policy for Empowerment of Women with the objective of ensuring women their rightful place in society by empowering them as agents of socio-economic change and development. Education is the cornerstone of human progress and social development. Education therefore, is the key to empowerment. The former Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi said, "Education is a liberating force, and in our age it is also a democratizing force, cutting across the barriers of caste and class, smoothing out inequalities imposed by birth and other circumstances" (S. Thavamani: 2007). All acknowledge the role of education in empowering the weaker sections more particularly the women. However, in reality, in most societies, education has never been within the reach of all sections of the population owing to a diverse range of socio-cultural reasons. The unequal access to education is a crucial issue in almost all the developing countries in general. In these societies, the conventional face-to-face mode of education had been the dominant means of imparting higher education. Given the constraints of this traditional mode of education in terms of its intake capacity and fixed schedule based style of learning, a sizeable section of the society who would have otherwise opted for higher education stood deprived. A vast majority of this deprived section is constituted by women, who for various social, cultural, economic and physical factors, have not been able to avail themselves of the benefits of higher education. It is in this context, that one needs to take a close look at the challenges and prospects of securing empowerment of women vis-à-vis education, or more precisely, the open and distance mode of education in the context of India in general and the State of Assam in particular. Therefore, the main objectives of this research paper are to:

- understand the women empowerment scenario in Assam and discuss the corresponding role of education particularly higher Education to be played in women empowerment in Assam.

- Identify the barriers impeding women's advancement educationally particularly in the Higher Education sector.
- discuss what role of ODL is expected to play particularly in the higher education sector for the empowerment of women in the state
- make an analysis of the role of KKHSOU in empowering women by providing Higher Education and to make suggestions for increased participation of women in distance education and thereby to empower women.

2. Methodology:

The study will be an analytical and descriptive one, based on secondary data. For the theoretical understanding of the stated problem, various published literature have been consulted i.e. books, research papers and resources available in the website.

3. Understanding Women Empowerment:

The World Bank (2002) defined empowerment as the "expansion of the assets and capabilities of individuals to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives." Alsop and Heinsohn's (2005) define empowerment as person's capacity to make effective choices; that is, as the capacity to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowerment is multi dimensional.

Women empowerment is defined as redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women. It stands for empowering women with information, knowledge, and enabling them to emerge as leaders with confidence to guide their own destinies. Theoretically, women empowerment entails the enhancement of women's sense of self-worth, their right to have and to determine choices, their right to have access to opportunities and resources, their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the homes and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order. Women empowerment is related to gaining control over their own lives and thereby enhances their position in the power structure of the society. To gain control over their lives, it is necessary to develop the inner capacities of women as well as to reduce the gender gap in different spheres of public and private lives.

4. The Need of Women Empowerment in Assam: Challenges

In Assam, the empowerment of women is an important challenge before the Government as well as before the people of the state. In the following, an attempt has been made to understand the condition of women in Assam with the help of some official data in some key areas, which are considered to be important indicators to understand the condition of women in Assam.

Sex ratio: The status of women in a particular society can be studied from the demographic factors such as sex ratio, infant mortality rate, etc. It was noticed that Assam's position in sex ratio (number of females per 1000 males) in 2001 was 17th (935) which has been upgraded to 15th (954) in 2011, which is a positive sign for a nation. (**Source:** Census Report, 2011; published by Registrar General of India).

Educational status: The education is the most powerful tool to bring about a change in the socio-economic status of women. It reduces inequalities and gender gap in the family as well as society. The growth of literacy in Assam has shown an increasing trend over the years from 1951 to 2011 (as per the Census Report) which in fact is a promising development per se. However, the literacy rate of the female over the years, has consistently been less than the male literacy rate as is evident from the following data:

Literacy Rate of Assam over the Years:

Year	Person	Male	Female
1951	18.53	28.01	7.58
1961	32.95	44.28	18.67
1971	33.94	43.72	22.76
1981	NA	NA	NA
1991	52.89	61.87	43.03
2001	63.25	71.28	54.61
2011	73.18	78.81	67.27

[**Source:** Status of Women Empowerment in Assam, by Paramita Medhi viewed in iskv.in/wp-content/themes/.../169cd35b49679e4d5b72e564afcd0b60jkv-3-2s-022pdf, viewed on 24/9/2017]]

Work Participation: For understanding the level of economic self-sufficiency of a particular studied group, the extent of work force

participation vis-a-vis the studied group is considered as an important indicator. Even as the State Government continues to make claims about improvement in various socio-economic indicators of different marginalized sections, women's participation in the economic arena in Assam continues to be abysmal. As per the latest issue of *Women and Men in India*, brought out by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in 2014, the workforce participation rate of females in Assam is only 22.46 per cent, which is not only the lowest among the seven North Eastern States, but also one of the lowest across India.

The report showed that the female workforce participation rate in 2011 in Assam was 23.7 per cent in rural areas and only 14.9 per cent in the urban areas of the State. According to the broad-based employment status of women in 2011-12, of the total female workers in Assam, 64.3 per cent in rural areas were self-employed, 17.5 per cent were earning regular wages as salaried employees, while 18.2 per cent were in casual labor. (Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/.../23795415-women-empowerment-in-Assam> by Pranjal Bhuyan viewed on 24/9/2017.)

5. Extending the Reach of Higher Education: A Crying Need of the Hour:

The brief analysis of the statistics vis-à-vis some key socio-economic indicators above clearly underscores the need of a comprehensive approach towards women empowerment in the State of Assam. While chalking out the broad contours of any such holistic strategy, the primary determinant ought to be education including access to education, which is to be considered the key to empowerment. Education facilitates building of a positive self-image and self-confidence among women and develops their ability to think critically. Education is needed to enhance knowledge, skills, abilities, and capacities and to build self-confidence. Unfortunately, women, by and large, continue to lag behind as they have traditionally stood deprived of all facilities of getting higher learning owing to a variety of social, economic and physical factors such as—early marriage, societal constraints, poverty, health related issues, living in remote areas and transportation bottlenecks, etc.

Despite many reform initiatives, Assam has fared poorly in terms of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education. As per a report on “Annual Status of Higher Education in States and Union Territories 2013” prepared by the industry body-Confederation of Indian Industry, in partnership with the Ministry of Human Resource Development

(MHRD), Assam is placed at 28th in terms of Higher Education (GER) Enrollment Ratio. According to the report, the GER for males is 13.3% and for female is 13.4%. The GER at the All India level is 19.4% while in the State, it is 13.4%.

The said report states that Assam ranks 21st among all states and U.T.s in India with nine Universities. The State has only 1.4% of all universities in the country. In terms of access, Assam has a meagre 13 colleges per lakh population as compared to the all—India average of 23 colleges per lakh population. In terms of average enrolment per college, Assam's figure, which is 1009, is significantly higher than the all India average of 700. The total enrolment of students in regular mode in higher educational institutes in Assam is around 4.16 lakhs according to the report.

Significantly, in terms of all areas relating to access to higher education and Gross Enrolment Ratio, it is generally the womenfolk who have remained marginalized. Thus, there is an urgent need of extending the scope of the Higher Education sector to cater to and fulfil the educational needs of the womenfolk in Assam in order to make them the determiners of their own destinies and help them contribute towards national development.

6. Role of ODL:

Traditionally in the Indian society, women, by and large, could be seen to receive a secondary treatment when it comes to pursuing higher education owing to a variety of repressive social norms and customs. Male-oriented structures and beliefs profoundly affect women's access to education and educational achievements. (Mukhupadhay & Sengupta, 1994). Most women still have to singlehandedly take the responsibility of doing various household chores and have had to compromise on their efforts to fulfil their educational needs and ambitions. The situation is further impeded by the rigidities of the conventional mode of education or formal education, which is based on factors like physical attendance in classes, a fixed period, minimum eligibility criteria in terms of age and academic performance, etc.

In this context, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has a very important role to play in empowering women by making available to them opportunities for higher learning. ODL can help by reaching out to the womenfolk by offering the opportunities of education at

their doorsteps and imparting to them the right skills and training. As explained earlier, women, as it is, suffer from constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic disabilities. Significantly, ODL enables them to learn at their own pace and to take up vocations and skills for economic and individual development. For those women who “missed the bus” for various reasons, ODL gives them a second chance to step into the mainstream of education, including higher education, enabling them at the same time to learn and earn as well to fulfill their family responsibilities.

7. KKHSOU Initiatives:

The Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), was established under the provision of the KKHSOU Act, 2005 enacted by the Govt. of Assam and recognized by the Distance Education Council, New Delhi. The University Grants Commission has empowered the University to award degrees under Section 22 of UGC Act, 1956. It is the fourteenth of its kind along with IGNOU and the only state Open University in the whole of NE India. Among the other objectives, the university holds the promise of providing opportunities for higher education and bringing into its fold the deprived and denied sections along with the fresh learners while at the same time empowering individuals with need based skills and qualifications. The very purpose of the University is to promote education to reach the unreached through the Open and Distance Learning System and the motto of the University is ‘Education Beyond Barriers’ of age, academic background and geographical boundaries. With this mandate, the University is running with more than 200 study centers across the state.

The most important thing about the University is that along with its normal degrees, it has offered wide range of vocational and professional programmes, which will make its learners self-reliant. Some such programmes are—Post Graduate Diplomas in the area of Computer Application, Business Management, Tourism and Hospitality Management, Broadcast Journalism, Mass Communication and Human Resource Management. Some undergraduate programmes like Diploma programmes in Journalism & Mass Communication, Assamese Journalism, Tourism Management, Hotel Management, Creative writing in English and Computer Hardware Networking are unique in nature, which are not common in any conventional university programmes and can also be pursued as add-on degrees.

Apart from these, the University offers some skill based programmes to create entrepreneurs in the vocational areas and to make the learners trained in the specialized areas through its Certificate courses in Computer Application, Mobile Phone Repairing, Maintenance and Repairing of Audio Video Equipments, Maintenance and Repairing of Electronic Domestic Appliance, Scientific Piggery Farming, Scientific Goat Rearing, Scientific Broiler Farming, Scientific Duck Farming, Scientific Layer Farming etc.

Significantly, in one of its recent endeavours towards women empowerment, KKHSOU has proposed to grant a scholarship to those women candidates from Assam who have successfully cleared the Civil Service (Preliminary) Examination conducted by UPSC and preparing to appear in the Mains Examination.

With these innovative programmes and course modules, the University has been successful in providing a platform for its learners and helping them acquire professional skills, thereby making them self-reliant. From all these vocational skill based programmes, the University has significantly contributed towards the empowerment of the women learners particularly in the rural areas of Assam.

8. Findings of the Study regarding KKHSOU as a Facilitator of Empowerment of Women:

1. The basic advantage of KKHSOU is the inherent flexibility in terms of delivering its programmes. The flexibility in terms of time, pace, place, age, occupation certainly gives a new lease of hope to thousands of learners who were disadvantaged by the rigidities of the traditional system of University education coupled by socio-economic and physical constraints at the personal level. Since the Open University is a learner-centered system, it provides education to large and diverse groups of learners in a flexible manner overcoming the rigidities of the formal system of education. In KKHSOU, the students can choose the subjects of study according to their interests. The flexibility in the teaching-learning process is also an additional advantage for the learners. The learners can learn through the course materials, at their own pace and place. To seek further help or information they can attend the counseling sessions in their respective study centres. This facility is particularly helpful for those learners who are working professionals or are engaged in

any economic activity for their livelihood. The inherent flexibility also helps the women learners, whether working women or house wives. Thus, KKHSOU, which came into existence with a popular slogan “Education at your door step”, has literally brought higher education closer to the people.

2. The pursuing of a degree in the KKHSOU is cost effective. It offers courses at an economic rate as compared to the other institutions of higher learning. A student can pursue his/her study while he/she is earning and can learn according to his/her convenience and interest.
3. The University ropes in a wide range of experts to train and teach the learners by promoting the self-learning style of pedagogy.
4. The University has mostly adopted self-learning process with the active guidance of the experts, which will build the confidence among its learners.
5. The Self-Learning Materials are prepared with the help of experienced and expert academicians from the relevant fields. The whole approach is a learner centric one aimed at motivating the learners to learn by way of self-learning.
6. The decentralized network of study centers have helped the women learners to be in touch with the University system. They can meet in the study centres and discuss issues relating to their areas of academic interest. This automatically builds up build their confidence and motivates them to pursue their studies.

Against the inherent advantages as mentioned above, KKHSOU has been able to attract the mass of rural women in Assam to renew or pursue their academic journey.

9. Some Suggestions:

1. There are many challenges that stand in the path of gender equality and empowerment. Women need motivation as well as counseling with the active involvement of experts. They should be made aware about the various programmes of higher education and add on job oriented and skill based programmes for income generation. Merely providing free education up to the graduation level will not yield many results. KKHSOU could intensify its efforts and play a more proactive role in this regard.

- 2 The deep-rooted cultural problems emanating from an undemocratic value system attached with the girl child have to be solved and the participation of women in the educational process should be encouraged.
3. The University (KKHSOU) should try to enhance technical competence among the women and make them resourceful with up-to-date knowledge, particularly in the digital field and soft-skill acquisition
4. The maintenance of quality is a major challenge before the University authority. For imparting its academic programmes and conduct of examinations, the University is largely dependent on the study centres. The University authority should therefore always remain vigilant in this regard, continue, and strengthen its monitoring and quality maintenance initiatives at different levels.

10. Conclusion:

Today, the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has a very important role to play in empowering women by making available to them opportunities for higher learning while surpassing the constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic and physical disabilities, the latter being particularly significant vis-à-vis prospective women learners. ODL can help by reaching out to the womenfolk by offering the opportunities of education at their doorsteps, equipping them with need based appropriate skills and qualifications aimed at personality development, enhancement of decision-making ability, gainful employment and income generation and self-reliance. Significantly, institutions like KKHSOU are endowed with an enormous potential to play a vital and proactive role in the field of women empowerment, particularly to those women who “missed the bus” for various reasons by giving them a second chance to renew their academic journey while also enabling them at the same time to learn and earn to fulfill their socio-economic responsibilities.

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