

# Investigation of Problems faced by Female Learners in Higher Education: A Study on KKHSOU in BTAD Areas of Assam

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## Abstract

Although tremendous success has been achieved in Attaining Education for All (EFA) in India, yet gender disparity in access and retention still exists in many of its states. Assam has recorded reduced gender gap in primary and secondary education, but gender disparity still exists in higher education due to large variation among the various categories of population based on gender, urban and rural habitations, rich and poor and uneven distribution of institutions of higher education. Higher education is not equally available to the different sections of society. The worst sufferers of this situation are the girls compared to their male counterparts. Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) is a region of Assam which was carved out from eight districts of Assam. In terms of education, BTAD is a backward region. According to the Census Report 2011, the female literacy rate of Assam is 67.27 percent and female literacy rate of BTAD is 59.70 percent. This paper advocates the use of ODL to ensure gender equity in higher education. It firstly investigates the problems faced by the female learners of BTAD areas in pursuing higher education under KKHSOU. Secondly, the paper also attempts identify the remedial solutions for such problems. The analysis revealed that ODL has brought tremendous hope for the female aspirants of higher education.

*Key words: BTAD, Female learner, Higher education, ODL.*

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## **1.0 Introduction**

In a developing society, education is accepted as a means of social mobility, equality and empowerment. Gender equity in education has been an issue of concern for India even after 70 years of its independence. Keeping this in view, there has been a thrust on the education of girls since independence in order to bridge the gender gap in education in India. However, despite the Directive Principle of the Constitution of India for free and compulsory education upto the age of fourteen, the girls comprised of 48.2 percent of the total children who were enrolled at the primary stage and 47.5 percent at the secondary stage by the end of 2015 (Educational Statistics At a Glance 2016). The Census Report of India (2011) indicates that the literacy level among women has risen from 7.93 percent in 1951 to 65.46 percent (male literacy is 82.14 percent) in 2011. Though there seems to be a remarkable increase in the percentage of literate women over the span of 64 years (1947 - 2011), yet it is far below the world average, which is 79.7 percent (in 2011) and also female literacy rate is far from the ultimate goal of making all women literate. Assam is one of the eight states of North East India. With a geographical area of 78,438 sq. kms, Assam provides shelter to 2.6 percent population of the country (*Statistical Hand Book of Assam 2015*). The education attainment of women of Assam can be analysed through female literacy rate and female enrolment rate in different stages of education. According to Census Report 2011, the literacy rate in the state of Assam is 73.18 percent. Male literacy rate is 78.81 percent and female literacy rate is 67.27 percent. Again female enrolment in primary level is around 49 percent. In middle level, enrolment rate is around 45 percent. The corresponding figure for higher secondary and junior college is around 38 percent (*Statistical Hand Book of Assam 2015*). Thus, Assam being among the Indian states that have recorded reduced gender gap in primary and secondary education, but the aforementioned disparities still exists in higher education, as Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of higher education for female is 16.6 percent where as average GER of India for female is 24.5 percent (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2016). There may be many reasons for these differences. The social conditions such as conservative attitude of the parents', prejudice against the girls' higher education, early marriages of the girls, utility of girls at home in order to help their mothers in their household chores and to look after their younger siblings when parents are away to work, economic backwardness of the rural communities

and lack of educational facilities (Devi, 2013, p.66). The inadequacy in the number of colleges that are available, especially in rural setups, is one of the major challenges in Assam with regard to access to higher education. Many students in rural areas have to travel long distances to access higher education. This has affected girls more than boys with most parents preferring to keep their girls at home (Saikia, 2013).

In recent years, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), the only State Open University of the North East, has provided educational opportunities to the learners with a successful rate. In view of all the four districts of BTAD having KKHSOU study centers, the study was conducted to investigate the problems faced by the female learners of B.A. and M.A. programmes offered by KKHSOU in ODL mode in the four districts of BTAD area and to identify the remedial solutions for such problems.

## 2.0 Review of Literature

A large number of studies have been so far to examine various issues related to female education in Open and Distance Learning systems. In a study by Taplin Margaret (2000), it was found that low grades, personal problems and difficulties with getting study materials on time caused the female learners of higher education to consider dropping out. Taj (2005), in her book titled *Current Challenges in Education*, concluded that the inflexible formal educational system did not reach all sections of the society. The formal education system by itself, cannot truly correct social disparities nor can it provide equitable opportunities for all. Phukan, B. (2003), investigated to identify the problems affecting the Plain Tribal Women Education in Kokrajhar District. He found that financial condition, illiteracy and ignorance of the people hindered the education of tribal women. Another study conducted by Gogoi and Hazarika (2009) title "Awareness and Attitudes of the College Students towards Open and Distance Learning" revealed that college going students of Assam are still not very much aware of the ODL system. Besides, there exists significant difference between male and female, rural and urban as far as their attitudes towards ODL systems was concerned. Malik (2010) in her study entitled "Role of Distance Education in Expansion of Female Education in Higher Level in Pakistan" found that Distance Education played a vital role in the expansion of female higher education in Pakistan. Distance education proved to be a blessing for those females who due to some personal or social compulsion

were not able to attend regular institutions/universities in order to enhance their educational status. In a study on "Women Status in Assam" conducted by Devi (2013) revealed that women of rural areas of Assam are so much cocooned by various social customs and taboos, that they often do not want to bring changes in their own traditional lifestyle.

### 3.0 Educational Status of Bodoland

Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) was created on 10th February 2003 as result of an agreement between the Government of India, Government of Assam and the leaders of the Bodo movement. The region was carved out of eight districts of Assam namely Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, BARPETA, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang, and Sonitpur. The total land area of BTAD is 8821.68 square kilometers, of which 8792.54 square kilometers constitute 99.7 percent in the rural area, whereas only 29.14 square kilometer (0.33 percent) under the urban settlement. It is divided into four districts namely Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri (GOI Census Report).

Educationally, BTAD is a backward region. According to the Census Report 2011, the literacy rate in the state of Assam is 73.81 percent. The male literacy rate is 78.81 percent and female literacy rate is 67.27 percent. Compared to it the literacy rate in BTAD is 67.12 percent. Male literacy rate is 74.28 percent and female literacy rate is 59.70 percent (*Statistical Hand Book of BTC*, 2015-16).

**Table 1** Female Enrolment in High School and Higher Secondary (Regular mode) in BTAD

Area	Female Enrolment in High School	Female Enrolment in Higher Secondary School/Junior college
BTAD	41,260	14,115

The gap between female enrolments in High School and Higher Secondary level reveal the fact that large number of female students in BTAD area discontinue their studies after high school level. It is obvious from the above tables that conditions of higher education for female are not encouraging in the BTAD area. There may be many reasons for this gap. However, the data obtained

from Table 1, reveal the fact that women are 'educationally disadvantaged' group of society in BTAD area.

## **4.0 Methodology**

### *4.1 Data source and methodology*

An interview schedule have been canvassed to a sample size of five hundred and forty three female learners of B.A. and M.A. Programme from the nine study centers of four study centers BTAD. The study is delimited to female learners of B.A. and M.A. Programme of KKHSOU only.

### *4.2 Sample selection*

All four districts of BTAD have altogether 18 study centers of KKHSOU, which offer B.A. Programme. Out of these 18 study centers, only six study centers offer M.A. Programme. The investigator has selected nine study centers randomly for the study.

In this study, the total population of female learners of B.A. and M.A. Programme during the period 2014-17 is 2,173. Since the study is basically on the female learners, 543 (25 percent) female learners were selected randomly as a sample of female learners to be interviewed for the present study. Out of these 543 female learners, 503 (25 percent of 2013) are from B.A. and 40 (25 percent of 160) are from M.A. Programme.

## **5.0 Data Analysis and Results**

*Research Question 1: What are the problems faced by female learners in acquiring higher education through KKHSOU in BTAD area?*

Objective 1: To investigate the problems faced by female learners in pursuing higher education.

Findings with regard to the above research question and objective have been summarised in the following tables

The main focus of the objective one was to find out whether female learners were given equal opportunities to access the programs offered by KKHSOU. Access in this case implies the facilitation of women and girls to get education (Ofoegbu, 2009). There are many problems affecting women and girl's access to

higher education. In the present study discussion will be on the problems related to the following issues.

- (1) Residence and access to study centers
- (2) Study environment at home
- (3) Academic Support accessed by female learners in KKHSOU in BTAD area in the form of counselling sessions

The results of the study are based on the response gathered from the questionnaires received are as below:

- (1) *Residence and access to study centers*

**Table 2(A)** Data representing the percentage of female respondents coming from different locality

Locality	No. of Respondents	Percent
Urban	87	16
Rural	456	84
Total	543	100

*Source:* Field survey

From the Table 2(A), it is very much clear that the percentage of respondents from the rural area was 84 percent while that of urban area was only 16 percent. This may be due to the reason that majority of the people of BTAD area live in rural area. According to 2011 census, percentage of rural people in BTAD area is 95.6 percent (source: Statistical Handbook of BTC, 2014-15). Another reason is that there is a shortage of conventional institutions of higher education.

**Table 2(B)** Geographical Distribution of Learners

Distance of Study center from Residence	No. of Respondents	Percent
Up to 10 km.	202	37.2
10 to 30 km. (less than 30 km.)	244	44.9
30 to 100 km. (less than 100 km.)	70	12.9
100 to 400 km. (less than 400 km.)	24	4.4
More than 400 km.	03	0.5
Total	543	100

*Source:* Field survey

Interest of learners in distance education can well be judged with their attendance at PCP. However, distance between learner's residence and the study center where PCP is arranged directly affect on the attendance of the learners. Table 2(B) reveals that only 37.2 percent of the female respondents had to travel less than 10 k.m. distance from the residence for attending PCP. Again, majority (44.9 percent) of the female had to travel 10 to 30 k.m. distances. Thus, it can be seen from the data that 62.8 percent of the respondents had to travel more than 10 km from their residence to reach their study centers.

**Table 2 (C)** Data representing the responses of the female learners of KKHSOU, regarding the convenience of the location of the study center

Opinion	No. of Respondents	Percent
Convenient	216	39.8
Not convenient	327	60.2

*Source:* Field survey

A network of study centers is of vital importance to a distance education institute for providing useful support to the students in their learning pursuits. Each study center should be located in such place that it is easily accessible for all type of learners. The facilities of study centers should be extended to small towns and remote areas. From the data in the Table 2(C), it can be observed that according to majority (60.2 percent) of the female respondents, the location of the study center is not convenient for them. The low response from the female in terms of access to their study centers shows the challenges that women face even when opportunities are provided

(2) *Study environment at home*

Majority of the female learners of ODL mode are adult learners, many of them are married and some are working women. They have to carry out different domestic responsibilities along with their study. The important question is whether they get the facilities and environment to carry out their study at home. Though the study environment at home may include many issues, in the present study, the infrastructural facilities and domestic responsibilities, the women have to carry shall be examined.

**Table 3(A)** Available space/infrastructure for study at home wise classification of the respondents

Available space/ infrastructure	Available		Not available	
	N=543	Percent	N=543	Percent
Separate room/corner place in a room/Separate space for study	202	37.2	341	62.8
Separate writing table and chair	186	34.2	357	63.7
Electricity	391	72.1	152	27.9

Source: Field survey

Here in Table 3(A), it is found that large number of respondents (62.8 percent) does not have separate space for their studies. Only 37.2 percent respondents were fortunate enough to have space for their studies in their home. Data in the table also focused that only 63.7 percent of the respondents did not have table and chairs for their study. A comfortable space and proper infrastructure for study are definitely the factors affecting the concentration in the learning process. Respondents doing their studies with the help of self learning material have to put more efforts in the learning process. Findings from the above tables reveal that majority of the female learners of higher educational programs of KKHSOU do not have proper infrastructural facilities for study at home.

**Table 3(B)** Data representing the types of household chores the learners have to manage

Sl. No.	Type of household chores	Total number of respondent	Percentage
1	Look regularly for the family	286	52.7
2	Help others in cooking	220	40.5
3	Help parents/husband/brother in paddy field	259	47.7
4	Look after domestic animals	403	74.2
5	Take care of elderly people	161	29.6
6	Take care of small baby/children	105	19.3
7	Take care of family business	207	38.1

Source: Field survey



Alongwith their study, the female learners have to manage different types of household chores. Table 3(B) reveals that 52.7 percent of the female learners have to cook regularly for the family whereas 40.5 percent have to help others in cooking, 74.2 percent of them have to look after their domestic animals etc. Thus, majority of the female learners have to carry out various domestic responsibilities along with their study. Devi, M.T (2013) in her study "Women Status in Assam" and Narzary, S. R. (2016) in his study "Identifying Bodo women through Educational Empowerment", also found that domestic responsibilities were the greatest constraints in the educational empowerment of rural women in Assam.

(3) *Academic Support accessed by Female learners in KKHSOU in BTAD area*

**Table 4(A)** Data Representing the Responses of the female learners of KKHSOU, regarding the quality of counseling in the study center:

Opinion	No. of Respondent	Percent
Very Good	32	5.9
Good	165	30.4
Not Good	274	50.5
Cannot say	66	12.1
Total	543	100

*Source:* Field survey

Data from the Table 4(A) reveal that according to 50.5 percent of the female respondents, the quality of the counseling, offered in Personal Contact Programme (PCP) of KKHSOU, was not good. On the other hand 36.3 percent (5.9 percent & 30.4 percent) of the respondents responded positively about the quality of the counseling. 12.1 percent of the respondent did not comment as they were not regular attendant of PCPs.

Data given in the table reveal that for 47.7 percent (15.5 percent & 32.2 percent) of the female respondents language used in counselling at the time of Personal Contact Programme was not easy to understand. For the 40.1 percent

**Table 4(B)** Data representing the number of female Respondents of KKHSOU, regarding the responses towards "Language used in counselling was easy to understand"

Response	No. of Respondents	Percent
Agree	84	15.5
Disagree	78	14.3
Strongly Agree	175	32.2
Strongly Disagree	140	25.8
Cannot say	66	12.2
Total	543	100

Source: Field survey

(14.3 percent & 25.8 percent), on the other hand language was not a problem. Majorities (38 percent) of the respondents of the present study were from Plain Tribal Community (Bodo, Rabha etc.). Some respondents were from other communities like Adivasi, Bengali and Bengali Muslims. The medium of instruction in KKHSOU for counseling were Assamese and English, this was the sole reason for majority of the female learners finding difficulty in understanding the lessons explained in the classes.

**Table 4(C)** Classification of the respondents towards the adequacy of the amount of instructor-to-students interactions during PCPs

Response	Male	Percent	Female	Percent
Adequate	52	16.9	59	10.9
Inadequate	124	40.4	347	63.9
Cannot say	131	42.7	137	25.2
Total	307	100	543	100

Source: Field survey

Table 4(C) reveals the fact that according to 63.9 percent of the female, the amount of instructor-to-students interactions during PCPs is inadequate. Again, 25.2 percent of the female choose the response "Cannot say". They mentioned that they did not attend the PCPs regularly.

*Research Question 2: How to solve the problems being faced by female learners?*

Objective 2: To identify the remedial solutions for such problems.

Findings with regard to the above research question and objective have been summarised in the following:

After analysing the problems faced by female learners at higher level of education in BTAD area, through ODL mode offered by KKHSOU, the following remedial solutions are identified.

- (1) BTAD is an economically backward area with 90 percent of its population living in the rural areas. Access to basic services like good road condition, adequate transportation facilities etc., remains a big challenge for most people living in the rural areas of BTAD. Women are the worst sufferers of such situation. In a study (Yasmini, 2011), conducted on ODL policies of a dual mode University of North Bengal, the researcher found that when access to any desired resources is limited, like the number of study centers, the weaker section including women were excluded. In the present study, majority of the respondents were from rural areas and they had to travel long distances to reach their study centers. Thus to increase the accessibility of higher education to the rural women of BTAD, the network of study centers of KKHSOU should be improved to cover the rural areas, by increasing the number of study centers. Hostel facilities should be provided, if possible, so that the female learners can use them especially at the time of examination.
- (2) The challenges for studying by distance are diverse. Learners of ODL know that ninety percent of their studies are self-oriented which means that motivation to study has to come from the student. One factor that can have a tremendous influence on their studies is the study environment at home. For women, pursuing distance courses can be very difficult when they have to juggle studies with household chores and other social and cultural expectations required of them. In the present study, it was found that majority of the female learners did not have the required infrastructural facilities at home and they had to carry out various house hold responsibilities. Muganda, C. K. (2007) found in her study in Tanzania

that by increasing flexibility, ODL can reduce the dilemma of women having to choose between education and other multiple responsibilities. Dzakira, H. (2013, found in his study in Malaysia that domestic responsibilities, insufficient interaction with course tutors ranked highest as barriers to female learners tenacity to ODL. The study suggested that by improving the flexibility of an ODL completion option facilitated the female learners' tenacity. Thus, the policy makers of KKHSOU, must look into the issues and problems of women very carefully and should make higher education programme flexible enough to accommodate the needs of the female learners.

- (3) Women of this study come from rural background and inevitably, possess a multitude of family and household responsibilities. The support system provided must therefore take into account women's requirements that can minimise the negative effects of isolation and the lack of regular personal contact. The focus of this study is on the counselling session provided as a part of support services by KKHSOU. The study revealed that the quality of the counselling session was not effective, language used was not easily understood by majority of female learners and interaction with the class teacher was inadequate. To remove these drawbacks the teachers involved in counselling should be given proper training regarding how to teach distance learners. Interaction with individual learner is important in distance education, so as to remove their learning difficulties and their sense of isolation. Majority of the respondents were from the Bodo community. Thus, for them it is better if course books are written in Bodo medium.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

To improve access for ODL among the female learners in BTAD is a challenging task. There are strong cultural and social factors that still influence the opportunities of women accessing ODL studies in higher learning institutions. The study shows that despite the social and cultural barriers ahead of women in their pursuit for better education, women's perception of the importance of higher education is constantly changing. It is the time to realise that women cannot continue to be suppressed under the pressures of social and cultural expectations. This paper advocates increasing the facilities of accessibility and flexibility of

ODL system to make it more gender friendly so that more women can have equal access to education and empower themselves to meaningfully contribute to the development of this nation.

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