Impact of using information and communication technology (ICT) in open and distance learning (ODL) as an empowerment tool for women

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Abstract
According to the World Bank report published in year 2015, Women constitute about 49.6% of the total world population, but they form only nine percent of the total productive work force mainly because women have lagged behind in the higher education. Open and distance education has provided women with an opportunity to redress the situation. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is endowed with high flexibility and can meet the demands of the higher education for women of all persuasions which the conventional education system is unable to meet. Empowerment is an active multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full potential in all spheres of life.

The study examined how Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have influenced the empowerment of women through open and distance learning. The study was qualitative and used a sample of 50 purposively selected women from the Anantapuram district of Andhra Pradesh State. Key information was collected through the interviews for the study. The study found out that, the use of ICT in Open and distance learning has equipped women intellectually and empowered them through acquisition of skills and knowledge. ICT in ODL has rendered women more informed, autonomous and liberated.

Keywords: empowerment, information and communication technology (ICT), open and distance learning (ODL)

Introduction
Open and Distance Learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of non formal education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web. The present study was motivated by the potentially powerful role that ICTs can play in the empowerment of women who study through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in India. The study reviewed literature on ICTs and empowerment of women, drawing upon several studies to identify practices that underlie empowering of women through ICTs in India. The insights developed in this study should be useful both for purposes of effective program development and policy design. ICTs in ODL are increasingly being promoted as a key solution for comprehensive national development, poverty eradication and the empowerment of women.

The Declaration of Agreement in Support of Girls and Women in Information and Communication Technology, introduced at the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis, 2005 stressed that "ICT allows women increased participation in political, social, and economic arenas and supports empowerment for themselves, their families, and their communities". Many open universities have emerged to recruit large numbers of new learners, while, an increasing number of traditional universities have begun to offer their programmes also through distance education (Dimevski and Kokol, 2004) [1]. The use of ICTs has great potential of empowering women. A number of researches done in countries like India, Uganda, Egypt and many others indicate that ICTs have actually empowered certain groups of women that have gone through certain programmes. This paper seeks to find out the impact the use of ICTs has had on a sample of women that have gone through Open and Distance Learning programmes.

Objectives of the Study
1. To study the impact of using Information and Communication Technologies in Open and Distance Learning to empower women in India.
2. To find out the impact the use of Information and Communication Technologies has had on the success of the women under study.

Significance of the Study
The importance of this study is that, results on the impact of Information and Communication Technologies in Open and Distance Learning is an empowering tool for women would provide critically needed information for planning programmes to enhance the attainment of gender equity and empowerment for women.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Open and Distance Learning (ODL)
The growth in open distance learning has been attributed to the advancement in the field of Information and Communication Technologies (Hawkey, 2002) [2]. Before this development teaching and learning was done through printed self learning materials. Because of globalization and ICTs, teaching and learning changed. The present changing economy and the proliferation of modern technologies call for change in demand for education and the approach to teaching and learning and the delivery of education. Current emphasis in Open and Distance Learning is the use of modern Information and Communication Technology. This is done either through integrated media approach, multi-site learning system, and massive open online courses, e-learning or

through virtual classroom. Other methods include written materials, interactive television/radio instruction, videos, audio tapes, and CDS to the learners. The e-mail, the web and video conferencing over broadband network connections are currently being used in to transmit learning materials to students in Open and Distance Learning (UNDP 2002) [3].

Information and Communication Technology in ODL as women empowerment tool

UNESCO (2012) [4] highlighted that there were over 900 million adults in the whole world who were deprived access to education, because they were required to be present in a conventional classroom before they could gain access to quality education. In India women constitute 49.6 % of the population and most of them were marginalized due to the colonial educational bottle neck system and cultural practices. In addition limitations in human, material and financial resources, made it impossible for the traditional conventional approach of teaching in the classrooms to satisfy the demand.

Open and Distance Learning reflects both the fact that most of teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner, and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. The desire to anchor as much as possible to the train of globalization demands that all sectors of society must be literate and this kind of mass education can only be afforded through the use of ICT in Distance Learning.

Research Methodology
i) Research design
The study was qualitative by nature. World Bank (2002) [5] argues that qualitative methods can be used to uncover and understand what lies beyond any phenomenon about which little is yet known. This enabled the researchers to collect rich descriptive data from the information rich participants.

ii) Sample
A sample of 50 successful women who had studied through Open and Distance Learning was purposively selected from the Anantapuram district of Andhra Pradesh State. The small but focused sample was used since there was need for comprehensive investigation of the impact of the use of Information and Communication Technologies by the women in Open Distance Learning.

iii) Data collection
The focus group discussions enabled the researchers to collect in-depth understanding, experiences and perceptions of the participants on the use of Information and Communication Technologies and how they had benefitted from them. Emphasis was on emergent discovery, exploration, and description. The study used key informant interviews through social chats, nominal group discussions technique through social chats. The analysis explored three themes; access, freedoms, and resources to communicate, which are analytical categories.

ICT resources used by women in Open and Distance Learning
The study found out that many women had used Internet, Emails, DVDs/CDs, Facebook, mobile phones, Skype and twitter, whats app, digital cameras, television and radio, Laptop and desktop computers, e-books, Educational software, etc.

Some of the success stories of the participants
i) House wife (Studied for a Bachelor of Arts with Sociology subject)
"ICTs in ODL have enabled me to continue in contact with my study circle friends. With the study group we formed during my distance learning we formed a chat group and a group on Facebook where we shared recipes and ways of improving our homes. I have managed to generate some income on a monthly basis even though I am not in formal employment. I bake cakes and with the help of my friends I have a ready market.

ii) Teacher of a Private School (Studied for Diploma in Educational Management)
"I have computerized my whole administrative system and created a data base for all students where fees payments, biodata and results are stored. Time tables and work plans have now been computerized. It is easier to produce a new timetable from a soft copy than from previous hard copies. I used to have a timetable committee for making this but now I can do it using the ICT skills I learnt in ODL. Open and Distance Learning has really helped me progress in my career and ICTs are making my work a lot easier and enjoyable.

iii) Business woman (Studied for Master of Business Administration)
I am a mother of 2 and live with my family. My husband is older than me and has always believed in taking care of me and the family. I always felt that I wanted to do something for myself. The idea of being kept forever worried me. My husband allowed me to join the Master of Business Administration programme because it would it would not affect my responsibilities at home. I used my cell phone to communicate with the programme coordinators and tutors. I was then introduced to basic computers. I found this fascinating. Back home I began to take interest in my husband's business. At first he did not take me seriously. With my newly acquired skills I started doing spread sheets for his accounts. This caught his attention and he started giving responsibilities in his business.

iv) Entrepreneur (Studied for Bachelor of Commerce degree)
I created my Face book page where I obtain information about market prices of the inputs for my food processing activities and for the sale of my produce. I prefer use of my cell phone to the computers because of the ease of transport.

v) Programme Coordinator (Studied for Diploma in Guidance and Counseling)
"I trained as a primary school teacher, got married and started a family. I could not go back to school even though I really wanted to. My husband did not object but I dared not ask. My socialization was that family responsibility took precedence over everything else. I did not want to embarrass my husband by abandoning my family in case he became laughing stock. The introduction of ODL gave me an opportunity to learn from home. I grabbed it and have never looked back. ICTs

facilitated my learning through communication with my tutors and colleagues.

Conclusions

The issue of culture, social attitudes and values has a resultant effect on the utilization of ICTs in distance education. The overall use of ICTs in ODL has empowered women. Internet resources have created a greater awareness of governance issues and technical forms of communication. Therefore, ICTs have a positive impact on the empowerment of women. Hence the use of ICTs in ODL by women should be considered both as a necessity and an opportunity to empower them in this era of globalization. Though the research was limited to women, the functional benefits and advantages of ICTS in ODL can be extended to other vulnerable groups of the society. Lots of informal trading women, itinerant businesswomen, women in the rural areas, working women could be empowered by using ICTs.

Recommendations

Given the current trend towards global partnership and the exclusive nature of programmes of traditional institutions, ICTs in ODL provide better alternatives among women for empowerment and remedies to solve educational, social, health, political, economic and environmental issues concerning them. This way, women would be better equipped for effective participation and performance. Considering the benefits accrued by women who used ICTs in ODL, emphasis should be placed on resource allocation and learning methodologies to expand the education of women in rural communities.

In order for ICTs and ODL to contribute to women's economic empowerment, strategic actions must address the needs of informal sector women and the needs of rural women. ODL should thus focus on programmes that:
- Train women in the use of ICTs for record keeping;
- Link ICT organizations with Women's Rights organizations;
- Use ICTs to provide product, pricing and market information for informal sector women.
- Improvement ICT access to support business linkages
- provide improved e-mail access for rural women;
- Initiate well-supported rural ICT projects geared to women.

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