

## **Women Right to Education & Distance Education System's Impact on Rural Women Learning: Current Challenges and Future Strategies with Reference to the Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

*Usually in developing countries, rural people have less opportunities and access to formal education system of the state due to fewer budgets, lack of awareness, lack of infrastructure, facilities and rapid increase in rural population as compared to general public. Pakistan is the 2nd largest populous country in South Asia having 147,748,707 people in rural areas. According to the provisional results of the 7th Population and Housing Census 2023, the total population of Pakistan is 241,499,431 out of which 116,445,831 were women population. It's evident that we cannot ignore the women education for participation in social and economic development by reason of its strength in Pakistan. So in order to meet educational needs of such a large number of women in rural areas, distance learning is the best alternative methodology to ensure quality education in Pakistan. The study will analyse the extent to which current distance education programmes and policies address the educational needs of rural women and challenges faced in the implementation of distance education programs. The study is expected to introduce dynamic approaches in the context of distance education and highlights the scope of distance education programs and effectiveness of this approach, compatible with the ever-changing need of global educational world. The study gives suggestions to overcome the challenges faced, development and implementation of various projects for rural women learning in order to fill literacy gap between rural and urban women.*

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**Key Words:** *Distance Learning, Rural Women, Development, Catalyst, Women Empowerment*

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### **1. Introduction**

Society can be reformed through scientific method and education. Pakistan, since independence, strives hard to make advancements in the field of education in order to make it accessible to all the

classes of society. Pakistan is the second largest populous country in South Asia having 61.18% people in rural areas. (Khan,2023) So in order to meet educational needs of such populated area, distance learning is the best alternative methodology to ensure quality education in Pakistan. Distance learning generally refers to the learning where learner is physically separated from the instructor and coordination is maintained through postal or electronic media.

The term distance education refers to approaches wherein teacher and students were physically separated from each other in terms of contact not in terms of coordination. Everyone has access to education without any limitation of time and place. According to Perraton (2000) distance education is defined an organised educational activity that is based on using teaching materials in such a way that limitations in term of time, place, pace and methodology were minimised.

In accordance with the provisional results of the “Seventh Population and Housing Census 2023” in Pakistan, there are 49.02% female population. The rural literacy rate was 58.9 % as compared to urban there exists an outsized gap between rural and urban literary rate. So above mentioned statistics make it clear that women in Pakistan is a significant proportion of the society and it will be unrealistic to think about country’s progress without meaningful participation of women. Education is the most powerful tool used all over the world for training, standardising and empowering women in order to spend a meaningful social life and enhancement of economic status as well.

## **2. Right to Education as Fundamental Right**

Right to basic education occupies eminent position among fundamental rights granted under the constitution of almost all the democratic states. Just like all other states right to education has also been recognised under Article 25-A of the constitution of Pakistan 1973 as fundamental right by inserting the following clause. *“The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law”* (Butt,2011)

**State further make commitments to providing education by inserting Article 37-B in “constitution of Pakistan 1973” that is as under,**

“Remove illiteracy and provide free and compulsory secondary education within minimum possible period.”

By keeping in view the above said provisions of the constitution, it obliges state to provide free and compulsory education to all by employing all human, technical and financial resources to fulfil this obligation in order to provide educational opportunities to all by relying upon formal and non-formal means as well. (Iqbal & Mukhtar , 2004).However, despite State continuous efforts to eliminate gender disparity in education being signatory of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “International Covenant on Social and Economic Rights” “UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women, sustainable development goals, Education For All (EFA) 2015 and various constitutional and sub constitutional legislations that stresses on equity in education for all without any discrimination, in rural areas women as compared to men have low levels of formal education. (Abimbola & Omolara et al, 2015)

## **3. Crucial Issues in Rural Female Education**

Access generally means opportunity to be educated. It deals with the availability of educational opportunities on the one hand and ability to be educated on the other hand. According to Human Rights Watch sexual abuses were hampering female access to education. Socio cultural barriers were also hampering women access to education. For instance, in Afghanistan girls were banned from school thereby denying their right to education under Taliban regime. Right to education is recognized as fundamental right has been suppressed with reference to female education. In most of the rural areas, Government makes policies for citizen's education by ignoring peculiarities associated with female education.

Poverty has always been considered as a hurdle to be educated. Most of the villagers were spending life below poverty line. So in village's women works in equal with man in fields or as domestic servants to earn livelihood. Therefore, they have no time as well as income to join formal education system. In some parts of Pakistan there is tradition of early marriages that is the reason of low literacy in rural areas. There exists lack of awareness about values of education. Education is at their least priority among all the priorities.

Villagers have settled their gender priorities in educational context, they prefer to choose boy for schooling and girl as income earning substituted to overcome the financial burden and to meet man education expense. The old-fashioned myths is also a hurdle such as educated girls are more problematic for uneducated families or by educating female her marriage timing may be delayed that results in failure to marry etc. Child labour is also a factor in rural areas that hamper the access to education.

#### **4. Why Distance Education a Beneficial Approach for Rural Women Learning?**

Human rights realization and gender equality guarantees is crucial to sustainable development. Rural poor women have less community support for learning as compared to male and were most marginalized in the context of educational access for changing their lives in developing countries. A large proportion of rural female even not acquire minimal level of learning because of poverty, son preference, gender violence and sexual exploitation. Most of the rural women were forced to flee their schooling even under metric due to early marriage, reproductively; socio-economic barriers or household tasks. There may be a different scenario in urban areas. Distance education is termed as friendly to women because of absence of formalities associated with conventional learning system such as inflexible timing; mismatched schedules and long conveyance issues. So distance learning is best strategy for women on the following grounds:

Learner and teacher were physically separated that eliminates social barrier or restrictions Flexible approach: female can study at their own place and time limitation overcome

Cheap Education: In rural areas income resources limited, reduces costs of education

No Physical Interaction with tutor: Religious restrictions satisfied.

No Age Limit of Learning: Gives a second chance to the drop out or forced to leave school.

#### **5. Distance Education System Prevailing in Pakistan**

Distance education has become an important educational activity in developing countries especially in Pakistan and its history goes back to 20<sup>th</sup> century. Distance education process in Pakistan is used to educate open learners at all level including adult, teachers, in service learners and higher education as well. But the most common use of distance education process is rural areas. (Demirtürk, Distance education for rural people in developing countries) There is a wide literacy rate gap between rural and urban areas, as 76% literacy rate in urban whereas, 51% literacy rate of rural areas in Pakistan. (MOFEPT, 2023) The varying reason behind this gap is that a low proportion of children attend school, of whom some drop out and others never attended school due to, infrastructural issues (e.g. shortage of normal schools and trained teachers within schools), access to school, co-educational insecurities, non-flexibility of formal education system, gender discrimination, poverty etc.

Keeping in view the above mentioned causes of low literacy rate, the distance education is the best solution to it due to lack of the vulnerabilities associated with formal education system, the reason behind this is that, it is flexible, cheaper, informal, easy to access, free of co-educational insecurities. Distance education approach is best alternative methodology for filling or Lessing literacy gap between rural men and women.

As far distance education institutions in Pakistan were concerned Allama Iqbal Open University being the pioneer in distance education was established in 1974 under Act of Parliament by following Open University in United Kingdom as a model. As far as study material is concerned it relies mainly on correspondence material consisting of self-learning study kits, text books, study guides, audio-video cassettes, slide presentations as supplementary material and Satellite transmissions on PTV-2 ,Online teaching programs on radio and television, Lecture delivery through video conferencing, Tutorial instructions at study centres, training workshops and assignments evaluated by teachers etc. Since then various universities such as Virtual University of Pakistan, Modern Institute of Information and Management, Pakistan Institute of Modern Studies and Agha Khan University were offering distance education learning to. (Tahir,2015).

## **6. Distance Education Curriculum and Subjects**

All over the world distance education subjects, plans and curriculum varies depending upon countries educational needs, social and cultural characteristics of the country as well. In some countries there were open universities as institutions of distance learning such as Singapore, Pakistan and Thailand that aims at to educate both full time as well as part time learners. As far as Techniques of distance learning were concerned, some countries use radio and television techniques for instance radio-television universities in China and Turkey. Some have to rely upon regional centres such as Australia with aim to teach remote area isolated children. By keeping in view the particular needs of Pakistan there were 3 learner groups in Pakistan

- Primary and Secondary School Learner Group
- Adult graduate level learners
- In-service learners

## **7. Role of Distance Education in educating Primary and Secondary School Learners**

Secondary education plays key role in the economic as well as social development of country. Riboud et al states that in South Asia adults that have attained secondary education can get job

more easily as compared to those who had not. There is shortage of primary and secondary schools as well as teachers in Pakistan in proportion to population of the country. Therefore, distance education institutions such as Allama Iqbal Open University not only helps primary or secondary level learners but also graduate, post graduate and in service learners by having contact with qualified tutors all over the Pakistan and thereby levelling educational gap rural men and women.

### **7.1.Women Basic Education Programmes**

Allama Iqbal Open University designed this program to educate rural girls and housewives as well in order to uplift their social standards. Target group of this programme is girls of age 10+ with objectives to design gender sensitive learning material in coherence with rural women needs. It was started in 2001 and was comprises of VI levels. It increased literacy rate in rural areas.

### **7.2.Women Middle Education Programmes**

Allama Iqbal Open University proposed this program to educate rural women of age 12+ and comprised of 3 terms with time period of eight months for each term. There is also skill-oriented courses.

### **7.3.Women Secondary Education Programmes**

It was started in 1985 for rural women and housewives who cannot go outside to attend formal education due to social and religious constrains. This programme was very successful in Gilgit and Northern areas. Mostly the rural women were enrolled for this program.

### **7.4.Basic Functional Education Programmes**

These Allama Iqbal Open University programs can be summarised as follow;

- Target Population: Rural Inhabitants
- No face-to-face interaction, coordination through inexpensive media
- Group learners comprised of 15-20 learners with one group leader under supervision of field worker.
- One assistant Supervisor supervise six groups
- Courses: Child Care, Poultry Keeping, Agriculture etc

### **7.5.Integrated Functional Literacy Programme**

Allama Iqbal Open University designed this program to impart knowledge as well as skill generally and in rural areas in particular to female. These programmes include courses such as embroidery, stitching, making pickles.

### **7.6.Graduate, Postgraduate and Research and Short-Term Educational Programmes**

Now Allama Iqbal Open University is offering a long list of post graduate and graduate programs and PhD as well thereby filling literacy gap. Almost 99 courses are being offered by AIOU in social sciences, computer sciences and management sciences etc. (Sheikh, n.d.)

## **8. Distance Education as an Ideal Approach for In-service Training**

Every year a sensible number of female students complete their secondary school education but a very low number of these were capable to continue full time study due to financial or other issues such as strive to find out work to share their family financial burden. Many of them start jobs without training or less training. So additional training is required to in order to meet job standards. Therefore, distance education is the best approach to cope with in-service issues. Most of the rural women working in farming or other industrial sectors as workers facing a lot of problems because of no training and were interested to learn working skills in order to improve working standards.

In such circumstances distance education institutions can train the rural women in the field of information technology and its official use, health, education, hygiene, use of fertilizers, handicrafts by providing scientific training program via national radio and television. Many short-term courses in these varying fields can improve not only living standards of rural area but also enhance their contribution in social and economic sphere that will help to eradicate poverty and will improve agricultural methodology as well.

### **9. Role of Distance Education in Training/ Promotion and Re-standardising the Working Staff**

At present almost very low proportion of Pakistani women workers were trained on traditional patterns that were in adequate to meet the current demands of today's world economy. There is an emergent need of some additional training for example, Village officers as well as workers were supposed to learn the English language in order to learn the use of modern technology. Therefore, there is strong need of basic language training and information technology (Herein after called IT) training. All the students studying in undergraduate as well as graduate level are in need of IT training in order to take benefit of advancement in different fields and its practical application in their country as well.

### **10. Women Education as Developmental Necessity**

#### **10.1. The Impact of Distance Education on Economic Interest of Country in Rural Context**

Distance education has become the inevitable part of the educational system globally due to its contribution in social as well as economic developments.

Pakistan being a developing country facing the hazards of terrorism more severally in all fields of life, as compared to developed countries from years. These terrorist attacks, Afghan war and social, religious and ethnic clashes have harshly affected Pakistan socio-economic structure and is facing long economic embargo. Countries economic development depends upon both physical and human capital. Education is an important mean to develop, groom and transform human capital. Empirical studies of various developed countries progress make it clear that education has played a vital role in countries progress.

Pakistan is an agricultural country. According to "seventh population and housing census" findings 2023 about 62.27% of population lives in rural areas. The agricultural products namely sugarcane, wheat, rice, Citrus, Cotton and tobacco becomes a major part of countries export products. By recognising the value of agriculture, man power has always been recognised as one of the most powerful resources of a country. Shortage of educational opportunity is main hurdle that hamper

the Pakistani women in realization of their potential. Shortage of basic as well as technical education in the relevant field severely affects the citizen's ability to compete in the international economic world that has undergone drastic changes due to technology developments. For instance, in most of the rural areas of Pakistan, rural women working in equal to men in fields, rely upon traditional methods of cultivating, harvesting and livestock breeding. According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics Report June 2015, Pakistan's reported labour force was 67.04 mn. (Pakistan Labour Force, 2021) According to "Labour force Survey 2020-21" Annual Report by Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, almost 71.28% of labour force is employed by rural areas of Pakistan. According to "The World Fact Book" of Central Intelligence Agency "24% is contributed by agriculture to the total GDP of Pakistan. (The World Fact, 2022) By comparatively analysing the total labour force statistics with total GDP contributed by agriculture, it is evident that GDP contribution is less as compared to labour employed. The reason behind this is the lack of skilled workers in modern technology of agriculture and livestock breeding etc. In the labour market of Pakistan, majority of the workers are less educated or unskilled. There is an emergent need of well-trained women as well as men workers in order to enhance socio-economic development in Pakistan.

The distance education curriculum and policies should be designed in accordance with the current needs of the rural areas inhabitants on the policy of not only access but also success by knowledge.

### **10.2. The Role of Distance Education in Rural Women Development.**

In the context of women education distance learning means access to wide range of educational opportunities. For girls below the age of 18 distance education is most accessible system of education that overcomes religious as well as cultural barriers by providing physical separation and flexibility. In families where there is the woman is the sole earner of the family, they can continue their work for livelihood as well as education. For domestic responsible and isolated women's, it's an alternative to formal educational system, that not only provides them education but also the friend circle by socially integrating them in educational perspective.

Distance education enhances women economic contribution by providing flexible system of education by overcoming time and place barriers and enhances in-service women skill and training. By educating women it will be easy to make them independent in their decisions and increase their social entrepreneurship skills as well. For working women or in service women distance education has played vital role in their up gradation by offering short term courses, training programs and workshops thereby reducing cost and travelling burdens.

To summaries the above said discussion, distance education impacts on rural women in following ways.

- a. Knowledge acquisition
- b. Confidence Gaining
- c. Career opportunities were improved.
- d. Enhanced Independent decision-making capacity
- e. Financial Independence
- f. Vision enlarged and Skill updated
- g. Gives secondary chance of education for those who forced to flee education.

- h. Increased female literacy rate
- i. Respect gaining in community.
- j. Empowering women in all fields of life.

## **11. Challenges Faced**

### **1. Coordination Challenges**

As far as infrastructural challenges to distance education programs in Pakistan is concerned, there is slow postal system, unreliable telephonic connections, constant electric energy breakdowns and lack of adequate libraries.

### **2. Social Challenges**

Sometimes curriculum does not match to the social and economic context of learner. The learner lacks adequate study environment and have a feeling of isolation due to absence of nearby co-learners.

### **3. Mismatched Technology**

Distance education technologies are not chosen by keeping in view the accessibility and affordability of the target population thereby affecting the effectiveness of distance education projects. Advanced technologies were too expensive that a common man cannot afford it.

## **12. Future Strategies**

For rural women learning, basic computer courses should be included as compulsory part of secondary education programme. More attention should be paid to provide counselling services to the students. There should be increase in number of female tutors.

1. There is strong need of gender sensitive policy to accelerate the process of education by transforming socio cultural values and economic condition as well in the context of rural women advancement.
2. There is need to develop more vocational and skill imparting programs for rural women and to update the recent programs in accordance with current needs of society. There should be sharing/exchange of courses among different non formal educational institutions in the region to develop cultural understanding and cooperation in the field of education.
3. Distance education technologies in developing countries such as Pakistan should be employed with caution by keeping in view the availability of infrastructure and human resources of rural areas. For instance internet medium is more suitable for distance education in developed countries as compared to developing countries.
4. Comparative study of distance education projects prevailing in most of the world developing countries indicates that a multimedia approach comprises of television, radio and printed material are more effective for educating rural learners.
5. The impact of distance education projects can be increased by creating awareness among rural inhabitants by conducting seminars in rural areas in coordination with the prominent rural inhabitants and village officers. This will serve as a motivational factor by creating awareness.



6. There is absence of students as well as teachers assessment or feedback mechanism for assessing the performance of teachers and learning of students. So a proper evaluation system should be introduced to enhance quality of education.
7. Teachers should be trained in differentiation by recognizing peculiarities associated with female learning. Special attention to be paid to language, there should be bilingual or multilingual approaches in education.
8. Providing access to affordable and reliable internet connectivity.
9. Developing user-friendly online platforms and mobile applications for learning.
10. Offering tailored courses and programs that align with the needs and interests of women in rural areas.
11. Establishing community learning centers equipped with necessary technology and resources.
12. Collaborating with local organizations and community leaders to raise awareness and encourage participation.

Remember, these strategies should be designed to address the specific challenges faced by women in rural areas.

### 13. Conclusion

To conclude, we may say that Distance Education model as followed by Allama Iqbal Open University is successfully raising literacy rate in rural areas. By using this model, the concept of openness and education for all without any discrimination on the ground of cast, sex and creed has been implied that is helpful in filling literacy gap between rural and urban population on the one hand and men and women on the other hand.

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