Challenges of Minority Women Education in India through Open and Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

India has the youngest and largest working-age population and 31.2% of women participate in work force. Despite this, more than 50 million young women remain away from study and work. As per 2011 census report, huge gap exists between male - 82.14% and female - 65.46% literacy rates in India. However, the illiteracy rate of entire population stands to be 36.3%, whereas the minority population stands at 42.7%. India's Muslim minority women literacy rate continues to be lower than their counterparts elsewhere, which is a challenging issue. Women education is very crucial in solving socio-economic problems in order to create a conducive environment for better life.

The advent of ODL system opened the opportunity of higher education to all sections of the society, including minority women. Perhaps it is one of the major initiatives for their empowerment. The gender parity index indicates continuous improvement over the years as a result of increase in women participation and acquisition of higher education through both modes of regular in general and ODL system in particular.

The present paper focuses on the challenges and opportunities of women education of specific group of population, who constitutes 72% among minorities. An attempt is made here to point out the obstacles and suggest possible intervening measures to improve the status of minority women whose mother tongue is Urdu, an Indian language spoken by a majority of Muslim population in India. Despite many intervening measures by Government and private initiatives, their education remains a real challenge due to prevailing conservative and orthodox atmosphere in the community especially northern States of India. Further, a case study is presented with outcome of intervening measures initiated at Maulana Azad National Urdu University through its distance education programs.

Key words: **ODL,** Muslim Minority, Urdu medium, Women Empowerment, etc.

Introduction

Higher Education is a public good and a strategic necessity for all levels of national progress. It is the basis for research, innovation, skill growth, creativity and the driving force of dynamic and vibrant societies. Every citizen is supposed to have access to it without any restriction. In Indian context, the State has to ensure right to education, without any discrimination for its citizens. The demography dividend of country enables the country to become the human resource capital of the world.

As per the UN report, education for women is the single most effective way to improve the lives and health of a family and betterment of a society at large. According to the World Bank, a minimal increase in share of women education boosts annual per capita income. The national average of GER in Higher Education is 25.8% (AISHE Report, 2017-18) and women is 25.4%. However, women constitute 47.6% of total enrolment.

The Women in India are still considered as second class citizens in general and it is much more so in Muslim minority groups. It is the main reason for least access to largest section of minority women in higher education. The lack of provision of education to women in their mother tongue leads to a more vulnerable situation for all problems of society, such as child mortality, fertility, population growth, poverty, militancy, violence, trafficking, etc. The education of these women is very crucial as they can be regulated or controlled and therefore, it should be encouraged beyond the walls of the society.

The existing backwardness in education of Muslim minorities was reported in detail by Sachar Committee constituted by the Government of India. The educational attainment of these Muslims at secondary level is 17%, as against the national average at 26%. Only 50% of them who complete middle school are likely to complete secondary education, as compared to 62% at national average. There is a drastic dropout rate with large gap in enrollment from primary to higher education among the Muslim minorities. This report has also drawn attention to the low levels of educational attainment among Muslim women.

The minorities in India constitutes 20.2% and Muslims constitute 14.2% of the total minority

population (Indian Census data 2011). However, Urdu speaking population constitute about 72% of minority group largely from Muslim community. At The gender ratio among Muslim population is at a healthy rate at 1000 males for 951 females as compared the national average of 1000 males to 900 females. Closer analysis of state-wise data on enrollment in higher education shows the ratio range from 14% to 61% of females

The access to education of women is expanded very widely in the country through open and distance learning system in recent past after the introduction of the New Education Policy, 1986 which advocated for liberation of higher education in India. The open and distance learning has begun a whole new world of opportunities for women education which make women to gain the self-confidence, tackle different problems of life, become economically independent, make better choices, resolve family or community issues satisfactorily, stand for her rights, mentor her children and contributes for nation's empowerment.

The various policies of the government aim to enhance the educational needs for large section of minorities, who are deprived of opportunities with a focus on women education for ensuring an equitable share in country's growth. The Government of India established the Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU) in 1998 to cater to needs of the higher education to the larger section of Urdu speaking population particularly Muslim minority women. The motto for the MANUU for all these years is 'reaching the unreached' though its focus on women education.

Objective:

The main objective of the current study is to evaluate the status of women in higher education especially from the unrepresented large minority Muslim community, whose mother tongue is Urdu.

Methodology:

The current study is based on the accessible secondary sources of data. The statistical data has been collected from various available sources including earlier studies. This study is relevant considering gender inequalities in educational attainment of women. The data has been explored to assess and evaluate the actual condition of women presence in higher education in general and backwardness of larger section of minority women in particular, whose spoken language is Urdu.

The 2011 Census of India data on educational level by religious community and gender has shown that 42.7% of Muslims in India are illiterate, which is higher than national average of 36.9%. The female literacy of Muslim stands at 50.1% which is the lowest among other minority communities such as Christians (76.2%), Sikhs (63.1%), Buddhists (61.7%) and Jains (90.6%) against the national

average of 53.7% as per the Census Data of 2011.

All India Religion Census Data 2011

Religion	% People	Estimated (Crores)	% Illiteracy	Female Literacy
All	100.00	121.00	36.93	53.7
Hindu	79.80	96.62	36.39	53.2
Muslim	**14.23**	**17.22**	**42.72**	**50.1**
Christian	2.30	2.78	25.65	76.2
Sikh	1.72	2.08	32.49	63.1
Buddhist	0.70	0.84	28.16	61.7
Jain	0.37	0.45	13.57	90.6
Others	0.66	0.79	49.65	33.2

Source: Census of India – 2011 and MHRD Report of the Standing Committee of the National Monitoring Committee for Minorities Education, 2013.

The quantitative data and information collected from various reports bring out a qualitative analysis on the educational status of Muslim minorities.

Muslims are India's largest religious minority, yet the census and the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) data indicate that Muslims occupy India's economic, social and political margins. In spite of affirmative action measures are in place, they are unable to compete well in education sector. The average success rates of Muslim minorities to the coveted Indian Civil Services Examinations (CSE) conducted by the Union Public Service Examinations (UPSE) still stands at less than 5% because of their lesser educational attainment at university level. The representation of Muslim women among the successful candidates in CSE is very negligible.

The special provisions have been incorporated in Indian Constitution for the education and economic interests of weaker sections of society in general and minority women in particular to protect them from social injustice and all forms of social exploitation. The socio-economic characteristics and under-representation of women influence their learning styles to a very large extent in some academic programs or courses. The study mainly focuses on women participation in higher education and also explores the barriers they confront in fulfilling their aspirations.

Women Participation in Higher Education:

Analysis of higher education in India based on All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reveals that majority of women enter into higher education at postgraduate and certificate level programs and courses. However, the Muslim minority population has more male members than female students. Further, the sources of data indicate that only 7.6%

of urban Muslim women have had graduate-level education from 72% of literate women, which indicates that they are more disadvantaged than any other deprived social categories. This evaluation is being done based on the last three years AISHE data for overall enrollment in higher education with specific reference to open and distance learning education.

AISHE Data:

Parameter		2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Regular - Female		46.2	46.8	47.6
Distance - Female		46.3	46.9	41.9
GER - Overall		24.5	25.2	25.8
GER - Male		25.4	26.0	26.3
GER - Female		23.5	24.5	25.4
GER-Muslim Minority		4.7	4.9	5.0
Muslim Minority - Overall	Male	53.18	52.69	51.13
	Female	46.82	47.31	48.87

Barriers to Women in Fulfilling Higher Education Aspirations:

The key hurdles in women's education in India is due to the normative gender roles defined by the society. Muslim young women are facing even more barriers in access to higher education than other under-represented social categories. For these women, the higher education is more important, as social stigma surrounds around a dependent woman and the need to feel self-esteem and sense of self-worth being with an independent identity.

The main barriers that confronted these young women are economic, social and physical related issues, such as:

1.   Financial Constraints,
2.   Lack of Safety
3.   Gender Bias,
4.   Social Control in Family & Local Community,
5.   Mainstay of Cultural Influences and Gossip,
6.   Dearth of Facilities
7.   Access and Distance

In view of the above factors, women mainly prefer distance learning due to flexibility and individualization with multiple demands to meet their time and other requirements. However, minority women combine their learning experiences with family tasks and thereby contribute to more equal opportunities and also value the services in a different way. It is expected to have a greater impact of distance education on minority women to improve their academic qualification, while at work, and undertake family responsibilities, while pursuing higher education. This will enable to play a greater role as an invaluable member of society.

Strategy:

A strategy is designed and adopted to identify those priorities which are most important for young minority women in enhancing the access and also confronting several barriers that hampered their ability to realize their higher educational aspirations to the full.

According to Census of India 2011, a majority of Muslim minority and Urdu speaking population lives in urban towns (18.23%) than rural villages (12.41%) compared to total living population in respective areas. However, the majority are employed (57.3%) in two categories of professions, which include household and other workers category consist of service, manufacturing, trade, commerce etc., and their participation in these professions is very higher than national average. The UNICEF's statistics reveal that 47% of Minority Women in India are married by the age of 18 years and the AISHE statistics specify that the specific age group is the basis for calculation of GER and also the main criterion to differentiate the regular and distance mode delivery of education and useful parameter for depiction of flexibility of lifelong learning opportunities.

The literacy rate among Minority Women continues to be low when compared with their male counterparts in both urban and rural areas in spite of reduced gender gap. As per the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the country's unemployment rate is higher in urban areas rather than in rural areas. The mean age of marriage in females is reported as 19 years as per the 2011 Census of India.

The mandate of the MANUU is to offer the programs and courses through Urdu as medium of instruction, since the majority of Muslim population speaks and considers Urdu as their mother tongue. Moreover, Urdu is a language born and nurtured in India as a connecting link between the diverse spoken languages in the country. It is mainly used for both trade and communication and also became most popular literary and highly soothing language accepted by the nation.

The present strategy is a case study based on outcome of intervening measures initiated at Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), through its distance education programs to address the objective.

Women Enrolment in Open & Distance Education Programs of MANUU from 2015-16 to 2017-18:

Year	% of Minority Women Enrolment								
	Total	U	R	E	UE	M	UM	20-30	> 30

2015-16	48	21	27	22	26	19	29	30	18
2016-17	49	29	20	16	33	18	31	35	14
2017-18	50	29	21	10	40	18	32	38	12
U = Urban					**R = Rural**				
E = Employed					**M = Married**				
UE = Un-Employed					**UM = Un-Married**				

The above data clearly indicates that a marginal growth is evident in the Minority Women Enrolment at Directorate of Distance Education, MANUU, Hyderabad.

In this paper, four parameters are considered to evaluate the enrolment pattern in distance education.

1. Regional Dimension – Urban / Rural
2. Working Status – Employed / Un-Employed
3. Marital Status – Married / Un-Married
4. Age Group – 20 – 30 Years / > 30 Years

The analysis of above data of regional dimension indicates that there is an increase in urban enrolment. This may be due to easy access to safe and better facilities and also increase in urban population. The decline in rural enrollment may be due to migration of rural population for better quality of life or lack of access to better resources with changing trends of educational delivery. Whereas, in respect of the working status of students under distance mode, the enrollment among the employed reported to be declining which may be due to career obligations and an increasing trend among unemployed to expand their employment avenues and also acquisition of new knowledge and skills in emerging scenario. There is a marginal growth in percentage of enrollment among un-married due to extended support of parents to pursue further education and enhanced mean age of marriage. Further, age group dimension is playing a major role in distance education enrolment due to pattern of growth in employment and also career progression options.

These dimensions enabled the authors to draw the main confronting barriers for women in general and minority women in specific, in pursuing education through distance mode that are helpful in formulating a strategy.

The barriers may be classified into external and internal features. The external barriers are due to personal aspirations and internal barriers are due to personal relations.

External Barriers include:
1. Inability to manage limited time.
2. Difficulty in meeting deadlines.
3. Low participation in class-room discussions.
4. Institutional access and facilities
5. Insecurity in making frequent travel to learning centers for face-to-face.

Internal Barriers include:
1. Pressure from work commitments.
2. Struggle to balance house hold work and studies.
3. Nursing mothers in managing their babies.
4. Health related problems.
5. Spouse and family relations

The above barriers can be addressed by the institution offering the distance education program by the provision of learner support center, which facilitates the clearing the external barriers through provision of special relaxations and facilities for women students for fulfilling the personal aspirations. However, the internal barriers, may be removed by providing special counseling centers that address the women personal preferences with the surrounding environment.

Approach:
The approach begins with the challenges encountered by women with the perception for choice of education and subsequent continuation with their choice.

The Directorate of Distance Education, MANUU has initiated several intervention measures to alleviate the traditional deterrent challenges of minority women for access to quality higher education.

The methodology defined the economic, social and physical impediments for entry of women into higher education and the strategy outlined is to fulfill personal aspirations and coping with personal relations after being admitted into the chosen program / course.

The economic issues are mainly related to financial constraints and hardships of the underprivileged young women which are crucial for determining their educational trajectory, which limit the choice of discipline and also the institution. The social issues include, firstly, the safety and security of women against harassment and violence; secondly, embracing the gender bias restrictions imposed by parents; thirdly, deterrence of family, relatives, neighbors and local community with intense social control on physical mobility by creating the emotional disturbance that debilitates to pursue studies; and fourthly, the mainstay of cultural influence and gossip controls the behavior and conduct of women, who are being treated as a potent symbol of wider community dignity and family reputation. These are the crucial factors that the young women from lower socio-economic backgrounds are likely to face the daunting hurdles that may hamper them in pursuit of desired higher education. The physical issues include the dearth of amenities or facilities for women students to meet their privacy concerns with separate toilets and retiring lounges which is also a factor for paring the opportunities to pursue higher studies.

Intervention Measures to facilitate Entry into Higher Education:

Financial Constraints

1. Provision of fee concession
2. Creation of scholarship
3. Facilitation of educational loan
4. Extension of waiver of tuition fee

Social Impediments

1. Establish the Institutional Internal Complaints Committee
2. Cover the Institution with CCTV Surveillance
3. Organize Sensitization Workshops / Seminars   through Community Engagement
4. Celebrate the Women's Day

Physical Deficiencies

1. Construct Separate Toilets
2. Create Women Lounges
3. Provide Transport Access
4. Enable ICT Facility

These various intervention measures are likely to improve overall enrolment of minority women students and to overcome the barriers to the access to education of disadvantaged and marginalized sections.

The other barriers, that women are encountering after entering into higher education system with specific reference to distance education includes fulfilment of aspirations and sustenance of relations.

The women students have difficulties in making time and finding space for their studies to make distance travel and attend sessions, as they play multiple roles in home front, which require flexibility in learning process to meet the personal schedules. The mode of delivery of distance education programs, largely consists of contact sessions, self-study, self-learning material, assignments, guided counseling/ experiments, supplemented with regular face-to-face interactions, chats, discussion forum, telephone contacts, emails, and one-on-one contact with tutors as and when needed / required. Some of the courses can be offered through online learning platform MOOCs for credit transfer.

The personal issues also include the different learning styles for fulfilling the academic aspirations and complex life styles for sustaining the social relations.

Intervention Measures to complete the enrolled Academic Program:

External Barriers:

1. Relaxation in Attendance by 10%, in courses which need compulsory attendance
2. Facilitate ICT for Self-Paced e-Learning
3. Reduce the Frequency of Travel
4. Provide Flexible Assignment Turn in Time
5. Mandate the Participation in Discussion

Internal Barriers:

1. Learner Support Services
2. Women Studies Center
3. Personal Counseling Center
4. Institutional Health Center
5. Child Day Care Center

These intervention measures are expected to create an impact in facilitating the active participation of women to accomplish their academic goals and do guarantee their place in the society with dignity and decorum.

Conclusion:

This study suggests strategies that enable to minimize the barriers for active participation of Urdu speaking women in higher education, thereby minimizes the gender gap in literacy rate among Muslim minority population.

These measures addressing the challenges inspire the parents of marginalized sections to come forward to support for the education of their girl child.

Economically deprived minority young women, who are facing linguistic snags with other than Urdu language can access to higher education very easily.

India still lives in a society, which strongly depends on motherhood of a women, who are the key contributors of holistic development of society.

Finally, the Maulana Azad National Urdu University within two decades has emerged as an educational provider to empower the Muslim women population from across the India by enhancing accessibility to University education through its variety of distance mode programs.

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