

## Sustainable Development

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#### Hypothesis

ODL does ensure gender parity in education.

#### Research Methodology

Empirical research and secondary sources.

#### Analysis

The fairer sex has almost always had it unfair. Women are a valuable but less valued human resource. At the outset we must mention that most of us do read into this topic as one of disparity against women. The life and times of women have been tough for centuries. This is especially so in countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, African and gulf countries. This is an open secret. Yet, over the years there is a feeling of recognizing and empathizing with women's issues.

The human development report for 1995 declares that **“If human development is not engendered, it is endangered.”** Goal Number Three of the Millennium Development Goals is to promote gender equality and women empowerment.

In recent times, it has been increasingly felt that “an educated woman means an educated home”. This translates to a better quality of life for the entire family. In smaller towns and villages, the opportunities to venture out of the home and learn are few, if not rare. In cities and metros we find women and girls rubbing shoulders with their male counterparts in education and jobs and more often doing extremely well (We avoid the term “doing better than their male colleagues”).

Here, we wish to point out that there is a basic difference between learning and education. Learning is day-to-day and informal. Life itself teaches us lessons. We may have learnt well without ever touching a book in our life. Education encompasses formal as well as informal teaching. We all learn from various situations and our diverse backgrounds. But we also learn from books, magazines, the internet and other formal sources like classrooms and teachers. It is this learning which women have lacked for ages. Hence we need modes of learning which are “gender sensitive”(read pro-women).

We are uncomfortable with the word “gender”. This term itself means some kind of separation or constraint or block between man and woman. However, to be gender sensitive, we need to meet the requirements of the female sex (or in rare cases the male sex). “Open and Distance learning” can be one way to do so.

The world needs a more balanced approach to this problem. While on the one hand Australia lacks male role models because of low number of male teachers, Kenya worries about too many male teachers and hence their girls lack female role models. This problem is more pronounced in developing countries and underdeveloped nations, but it is not totally missing in advanced countries.

Statistics reveals that nearly 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the illiterate people in the world are women. The enrolment ratio for girls is 80% that of boys. Women mostly have attained only lower levels of formal education compared to their male counterparts. Why? There are many socio-economic reasons for this which are beyond the scope of this paper. The United Nations Millennium Development Goal is to “eliminate gender disparity” in all levels of education by 2015.

What is ODL? Online courses, e-mail tests and tutorials, television based classes and computer based lessons are distance learning. Open and Distance learning can simply be defined as an educational program that is both OPEN and offered at a DISTANCE.

ODL are learning techniques meant for those who cannot join a formal classroom for what-ever reasons. It may be non-availability of a particular course in their village or town or city or it could be space crunch or time shortage or finances. ODL can give us the choice of course, time, place, method and technique. But unfortunately access to this is also not always universal. In most cases it becomes a deeper blockage like social or cultural reasons. Many women do not have access to a computer or a cyber café in their towns. Many girls are not permitted out of their homes to access one. In a hilarious report it was said that girls in Africa cannot access the net because they “cannot run” which meant the boys in their class ran faster and hence they could run and occupy all the available computers.

According to us ODL can play the following role to eliminate/cover the existing gender disparity:

1. Information Technology or any other kind of technology does not distinguish between a man and a woman (it is gender neutral). ICT or Information and Communications Technology is indifferent whether it is a boy giving a presentation or an examination or a project. It also does not discriminate between the old and young.
2. ICT can enable a woman/girl to educate herself from the home turf. This would be a boon in a place like Kashmir where people fear venturing out, leave alone allowing their daughters to do so.
3. But if the woman is illiterate, how does she face the written or printed matter? Since the use of computers or other technology tools require computer literacy, non-print delivery methods like television, radio and video will help. This is especially helpful in places where women cannot “travel” to a cyber-café because of societal or cultural taboos or values.
4. To generalize ICT, teachers need to guard that the graphics or illustrations in their lessons include women and girls and not just men. This will remove the erroneous belief that women and technology do not go hand in hand. Cultural and Social attitudes are often unfavorable to women’s participation in the fields of Science and Technology, which limits their opportunities in the area of ICT.
5. The contents of educational programs for both male and female also matters. We also need distance education programs in critical fields like science and technology for women, besides the most frequently run modules on “softer subjects” like humanities.

6. There is a deep-rooted link between poverty and literacy. Open and Distance learning comes to the rescue of women here, as the male child has priority-claim to class-room education.
7. All socio-economic reasons for women remaining out of the class-room can be eliminated when ODL provides a unique opportunity to impart education to large numbers at one time.
8. For all this, we need to recognize that gender disparity can exist even in ODL. More Government policies and programs need to target open and distance learning. We need to extend the skills of gender experts to ODL. Our Education and Human Resource Ministry needs to update and upgrade itself.
9. Awareness has to be created on a societal level and speedy translation of policies into action is needed. The world needs to look upon women's issues, especially education and literacy as an issue that requires urgent and prompt action.
10. International analysis has revealed that female students who enroll in distance learning perform as well as their male counterparts.
11. The main assumption of this paper is that the conventional method of education of classroom teaching and distances to be travelled for the same has imposed natural limitations on women's desire to acquire education. ODL eliminates these restrictions. Distance barrier has now become redundant. In olden times societal roles were clearly divided between the man being the bread winner and the woman being the home-maker. In today's times when women are required to leave the security of this role, ODL gives her the confidence that she can. Here, we must add that gender disparity can also be against men in which case the issues, reasons and solutions can become another topic of research. However the conclusions of this paper can be extended to cover any person who cannot avail formal education.
12. Open and distance learning will be more successful than conventional modes of teaching because it can reach more learners with better quality teaching at lower cost. Hence these modes are being increasingly used in the poor and underdeveloped African countries.
13. Whether on the side of men or women, parity stands for equality of opportunity, participation, learning and this further leads to job opportunities which is facilitated by ODL.

### Conclusion

Therefore Open and Distance Learning is playing a crucial role in gender parity, equality and empowering women .Sustainable development is all about continuity, progress,opportunities and their application in the process of human resource development.

Lastly,

**“We need to remember that education leads to emancipation, liberation, freedom of thought and action.”**

### References

1. *“Role of distance education in gender equality” by Walter Sukati, Institute of Distance Education, University of Swaziland.*
2. *“A case for using ODL to widen access to Tertiary education for women” by Olivia Kwapong , Ghana.*

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