



## Women Empowerment through Professional and Technical Programmes : A Case Study of IGNOU

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### ABSTRACT :

The aim of the present paper was to analyse the role of the open and distance learning (ODL) system in women empowerment. This study examined the post-certification achievement of the female learners - from both individual and social perspectives. The learners from the professional MBA programme and from the technical MCA programme were sampled to analyse the changes in the achieved social and academic aspects of female learners at IGNOU. The findings of the study are based on surveys and interviews with 308 respondents (38% of the total numbers involved), and the findings demonstrated that the IGNOU ODL system has indeed - though in different ways - benefited these women who have engaged and completed the MBA or the MCA programme at IGNOU.

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

The first Prime Minister of India Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once said, *“To awaken the people, it is women who must be awakened; once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves”* (quoted in Pillai, 1995; p. 62).

The importance of women's education was first realized in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Now much later, UNESCO has underlined the importance of access by girls and women to technical and vocational education for economic and social development, and they organised a conference on this issue in 1962. After this, various forums and conferences have been organised on these issues and have set some goals. In particular, some Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were set at the Millennium Summit of world heads of state in New York in 2000 that included MDG-3 to *‘Promote gender equality and empower women - Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015* (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>).

The present study focused on the MDG-3 goal in the Indian context and investigated women empowerment through the open and distance learning (ODL) system in India. According to the most recent 2001 census data, women account for 48.26% of the 1028.6 million population of India. About 27% of these are 15-29 years old. The literacy rate among women has improved from 7.83% in 1951, to 54.16% in 2001. However, there remain still 228 million women considered to be illiterate (<http://www.censusindia.net>). Only 6% of women who completed secondary education (35% of the total population who enrolled in Class 1) entered higher education. It is clear therefore that a large number of women are still outside the existing higher education system in India. Data show that women in India represent about 50% of the adult population, but only 33% of the labour force. They perform nearly 66% of all working hours, receive only 10% of the world average income, and own less than 1% of property. Very few women are in a position to influence political thinking or the decision-making process (Pillai, 1995).

The empowering role of women's education affects not only the lives of the women, but also the lives of their children and other dependents – such as the aged. Education - especially professional and technical education - is also likely to enhance women's economic independence by equipping them with the skills necessary to take up paid employment opportunities. At the national level, educating women has resulted in improved productivity, improved income and economic development, as well as in a better quality of life, leading to a notably healthier and better nourished population (World Bank, 2001a).

Recently, the demand for skilled labour has risen significantly as a result of globalisation, changes in technology, and as a result of the re-organization of work. The process of skills development in the informal sector in developing countries is more important since formal training institutions do not have the capacity to train a large number of aspirants. Therefore, open and distance education becomes an inevitable tool for providing skills-based education and training.

Research evidence also shows that “women with more education or higher qualifications earn more, on an average, than women with minimum level of education” (McIntosh, 1973, p.28). All over the world, the movement for improving the status of women has always emphasised education as the most significant instrument for social change.

## 2. METHODS :

### 2.1 The Role of ODL in Achieving the Millenium Development Goals :

Very few research studies have been conducted on the present theme. A general finding from a brief review of these studies indicates that more women have recently achieved getting their first job - mostly in education as teaching faculty - and most of them were married (McIntosh, 1973). Kanwar (1995) stressed the need for increasing the upward mobility of women in distance education institutions. Meanwhile women students continue to face problems

while studying through the ODL system. Rathore et al (1996) revealed that lack of student support system creates problems for women learners in ODL system. Bhalalusesa (2001) found that there are factors like the faraway locations of the study centres that make studying more difficult for women than men.

Taplin (2000) found that the female students at IGNOU reported severe bottlenecks in pursuing their studies due to their social commitments, and a similar finding was visible through their academic results. Sharma (1996) argues for empowerment of women - and not concessions to women - through increased effective use of the distance education system. Studies by Woodley (1995) and by Gaba (1999) have found that the career paths of graduates have been markedly changed after completion of their respective programmes. Taplin & Jegede (2001) found that most students studied through the ODL system for self-satisfaction and for this improved employment status.

To understand the development of improved status for women through ODL, we have concluded that there is a timely need to data-mine the performance of women pursuing academic programmes through the ODL system at IGNOU, and determine the real changes and achievements, if any, in their social and economic profiles.

### 2.2 The Objectives and Sample Methods of the Present Study :

The objectives of the present study were

- to:analyse the trend of female enrolment in ODL system in comparison to conventional system
- to identify the preferences of the female learners who study through the ODL system in comparison to through the traditional face-to-face system
- to examine the goals of the female learners who enroll in the ODL system, and
- to analyse the post-certification status and achievement of the female learners from individual and social perspectives

IGNOU has introduced various programmes which aim to improve the quality of women's life by empowering them to determine and exercise their life options, and influence the direction of change through their own control over crucial material resources. The present research study investigates the achievement of women empowerment after acquiring graduate-studies certification. For this purpose, we have selected one professional programme - the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme, and one technical programme - the Master of Computer Applications (MCA) programme. These two programmes were sampled to analyse the changes achieved in social and academic aspects by the female learners studying at IGNOU. Both these two programmes - one professional and the other technical in nature - have been offered for many years and are well-established courses. How well they each succeed in empowering women, though, has not yet been investigated and determined. The objectives of the present study aim to close this gap in our understanding, and perhaps identify any shortcomings so that we might improve these courses so as to better serve the female learner population at IGNOU in India.

These two courses are described next. The Master of Business Administration (MBA) professional programme is modular in design. There is an initial stage of the Post-graduate Diploma in Management involving eleven courses. Successful students can then opt to enter a specialisation stream involving five compulsory courses, some elective courses, and a project that entails writing up as a dissertation. For admission, learners must have at least three years' work experience at a supervisory or higher level after having completed an undergraduate course. Moreover, some learners are additionally accepted into this MBA course without the minimum three years' work experience if they have successfully graduated from a professional course such as in like engineering technology, medicine, architecture, law, cost & works, company secretaryship, or a bachelor's degree course

information technology from IGNOU, or having successfully completed any accredited master's degree in any subject..

The Master of Computer Applications (MCA) technical programme aims to prepare students to enter the software industry, as well as academia providing a richer learning environment for teaching and research in the core and emerging areas of the discipline. The master's course consists of 27 compulsory courses, plus one optional stream out of 4 streams, and a further project course of 16 credits in the final semester written up as a dissertation. For admission, learners must have a bachelor's degree in computer science, computer applications, information systems, or information technology. Students who do not have an undergraduate degree in such computer-based courses, but have another degree such as in non-computer-based technology or science are required to pursue an additional compulsory CIC course in their first year. Students who have successfully completed the IGNOU CIC, DCO, or CNOC, satisfactorily may enter the MCA course or graduate with the Diploma in Computer Applications.

The base data selected for the study pertain to the year 2003 with the objective to provide a minimum of three years between their completing the degree and their surveyed present status. The sample data were selected from the student records of those who had successfully completed either of these two programmes. There was a total population of 2853 students who had completed the MBA in 2003 (IGNOU, 2003) of which 485 (17%) were female students, and a total population of 1740 students who had successfully completed the MCA of which 487 (28%) were female students. The study was conducted only amongst female students. We randomly sampled 400 successful students from each programme. The survey questionnaire was then mailed to each of these 800 respondents at their last known address.

### 2.3 Data Collection :

A total of 400 women graduates from each programme were sent the survey questionnaire, and we clearly requested that

they respond within three months. It was decided that three months was a sufficient duration in which to expect them to complete and return the questionnaire. During the specified time, 198 (24.75%) responses were received back. Then it was decided to contact non-responders as far as possible by telephone or by email. This personal contact resulted in an additional 110 (13.75%) responses. Accordingly, a total of 308 (38%) responses were received. Of the 400 questionnaires sent out to graduates from the MBA programme, 107 (27%) were received back by post and 41 (10%) by personal contact. Of the 400 questionnaires sent out to graduates from the MCA programme, 91 (23%) were received back by post and 69 (17%) by personal contact. Thus, a total 308 records were available for analysis.

### 3. RESULTS :

#### 3.1 Basic Data :

The responses from the 308 female graduates from IGNOU showed their background was not completely homogeneous. Many of their parents could be characterized as having low education. 50% of those from the MBA and 42% of those from the MCA had fathers who had not graduated from university.

More than 80% of 308 respondents were 21-30 years old. 58% of those from the MBA and 70% of those from the MCA were single at the time of the survey. About 70% overall of the respondents lived in an urban area, rather than in the countryside.

About 50% of the respondents from the MBA stated that their objective was 'to get higher education', while about 50% of the

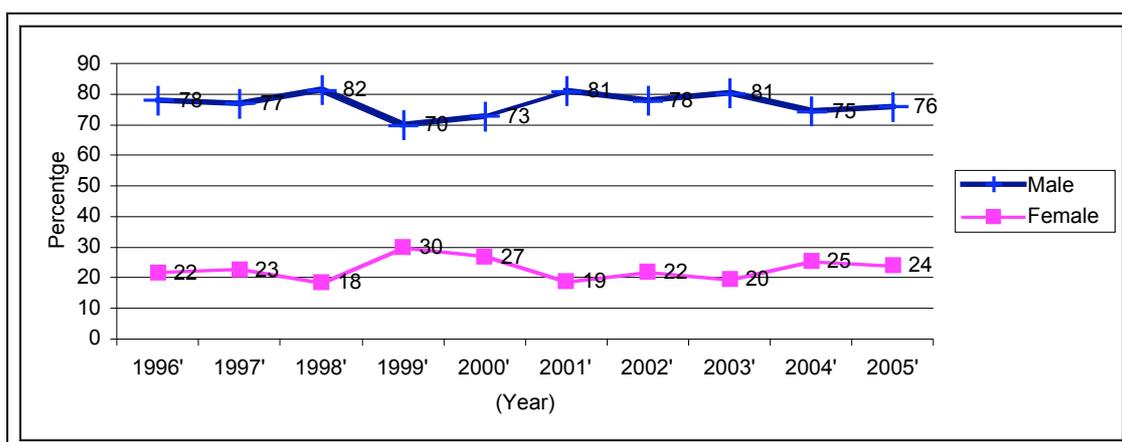


Figure 1 : Percentages of male students and female students in IGNOU (IGNOU, 2006)

Of all those enrolled in 2002-3, 17% of those in the MBA course and 28% of those in the MCA course were female. These figures are about average for the 2002-3 total enrollment at IGNOU. The percentage of female learners was 20% in all IGNOU courses in 2002-3 (Figure 1). However, nationwide in 2002-3, the percentage of female learners was about 42% in distance education (at all distance teaching institutions including IGNOU), compared to 40% in traditional face-to-face education (DEC, 2004).

respondents from the MCA stated 'to get a job'. Other responses were mixed (Table 1).

Table 1 : Goals of Women Respondents

Stated Goal	Programme	
	MBA %	MCA %
Get higher education	30	50
Get a job	50	22
Gain professional competence	18	4
Get promotion at work	2	24
Total	100	100

### 3.2 Stated Preference for IGNOU :

About half (56%) of the respondents from the MBA stated that they preferred IGNOU to other ODL or to traditional face-to-face higher education institutions because of its flexible schedule of teaching. However, a clear majority (76%) of the respondents from the MCA programme preferred IGNOU to other higher education institutions because of its flexible schedule of teaching (Table 2).

Table 2 : Reason for Preferring IGNOU

Stated Reason	Programme	
	MBA %	MCA %
Can study alongside current job	20	10
Could not enter f2f traditional university	24	14
IGNOU has a flexible study schedule	56	76
Total	100	100

### 3.3 Prior Work Status :

Those who had completed their MBA or MCA programme and graduated in February 2003 were originally enrolled in the course between 1996 and 1999 : taking between seven years and four years to complete the course. Many (45%) of the respondents from the MBA programme were *employed* at the time of enrolling, while a clear majority (88%) of the respondents from the MCA programme were fresh students having just graduated from an undergraduate course. (Table 3).

Table 3 : Prior Work Status

Prior Work Status	Programme	
	MBA %	MCA %
Employed	45	5
Self-employed	9	1
Unemployed	20	6
Fresh graduate	26	88
Total	100	100

Further analysis also revealed that the largest group (64%) in the MCA programme were those students who had the BCA degree from IGNOU.

### 3.4 Post-Certification Work Status :

This section presents the status of the women learners at three years after graduating from either the MBA or MCA course. The results are presented according to their status prior to enrolling as follows.

Among those who were fresh students prior to enrolling in the MBA or MCA programme, about half (52%) of the respondents from the MBA stated they were continuing with post-MBA education, 40% had succeeded to get a first job, and 8% stated some other benefit after completion of the programme. Of these 8% who mentioned that they had got some other benefit, one said that her having the MBA degree had led to a desirable marriage. Of the 88% of respondents after the MCA who were fresh students prior to enrolling in the programme, 72% of them had succeeded to get a job, 24% stated they were continuing with post-MBA education (in a traditional face-to-face institution or ODL system), and 4% stated some other benefit after completion of the programme (Table 4).

Table 4 : Post-Certification Status of Those who had been Fresh Students

Post-Certification Status	Programme	
	MBA %	MCA %
Continued education	52	24
Got new job	40	72
Other	8	4
Unemployed	0	0
Total	100	100

Among those 45% who were employed prior to enrolling in the MBA or MCA programme, about half (47%) of the respondents from the MBA stated they had got promotion, and 31% had changed job to a more satisfactory job. In comparison, among those 5% who were employed prior to enrolling in the MCA, 29% had got promotion, 45% had changed job, and 22% continued education (Table 5).

Table 5 : Post-Certification Status of Those who were Employed prior to Enrolling

Post-Certification Status	Programme	
	MBA %	MCA %
Got promotion	47	29
Changed job	31	45
Other	14	4
Continued education	8	22
Total	100	100

In Table 5, of those 47% who got promotion after the MBA, 12% changed job to get promotion, while the 31% who changed job stayed at the same level. And of those 29% who got promotion after the MCA, 18% changed job to get promotion, while the 45% who changed job stayed at the same level.

Among those 20% who were unemployed prior to enrolling in the MBA, a clear majority (78%) had succeeded in getting a job, and the other 22% said they had achieved a benefit but did not specify this. Among those 6% who were unemployed prior to enrolling in the MCA programme, all (100%) had succeeded in getting a job.

In summary, irrespective of their prior status, 39% of those with the MBA changed job with promotion, or found a new first job, 38% got promotion at their prior job, and 15% continued education. And 73% of those with the MCA changed job with promotion, or found a new first job, and 26% continued education (1% unspecified). 3% of these with the MCA who found a new job became self-employed. Of those with the MCA who changed job with promotion, or found a new first job, 60% became a software engineer at a private company (two persons at a new company overseas – one in Singapore, and the other in Malaysia), 30% became a school-teacher, and the 10% found a job unrelated to computer applications. Of those with the MBA, many said they had become disillusioned with their prior job and this was their motivation to study at IGNOU so as to change their job. One had to give up attending a traditional face-to-face university upon marriage, but could complete her MBA studies at IGNOU.

Respondents who had successfully got a job after completion of the MBA or MCA programme said they had got a job within six months after completion of the programme. Many said enthusiastically that the master's degree from IGNOU had helped them to get a job as well as promotion. A clear majority said that the IGNOU degree had been useful and a prerequisite for the new job or promotion – in other words, that the master's degree was valued by employers.

### 3.5 Reported Difficulties :

Our survey also allowed respondents to give us feedback on any other aspects, in particular on areas that could be improved or difficulties they had experienced. Several reported difficulties that should be resolved immediately by IGNOU. They reported that the practical classes at their study centre (SC) were not conducted by suitably-qualified staff, and that sometimes these classes were poorly or not organised. They had visited the designated SC but did not find any teaching or assistant faculty. Therefore, they could not achieve the practical training up to their expectation. Instead they had to attend alternative private classes for learning the required skills. Though some students need additional training in basic skills, and such training may be unavailable at some Scs, it remains urgently important for IGNOU to clarify and improve any shortcomings suggested.

## 4. DISCUSSION :

The above survey and analysis show that most of the female learners benefited after graduating from the MBA or MCA programme at IGNOU. They got jobs or continued education (at IGNOU or at other distance teaching institution or traditional face-to-face institution). Such jobs yielded not only monetary benefits but also non-monetary benefits. It is quite possible that advanced education might lead some to highly desirable jobs that are relatively low paying, but which have the attraction of providing other benefits such as job-satisfaction, challenge, status, and so on.

Economists distinguish such private individual benefits from social benefits where the latter accrue to others than those being educated. The Theory of Human Capital (Schultz, 1961) postulates that the quantity and quality of education an individual obtains contributes to his or her human worth or capital, which leads to greater productive capacity. And, finally, it is assumed that production capacity is reflected in higher earnings over a career period if not immediately after graduation. Obviously, an individual's human capital depends upon various factors in addition to education (such as health, motivation, innate ability, and socio-economic status).

Most studies on the economic benefits of education have tended to concentrate almost exclusively on the effects of education on productivity, or earnings, of men in the workforce, and have given less weight to the economic benefits of women education. It is well established that education also affects the earnings of women. Women with more education or higher qualifications earn more than women with lower qualification. Several studies have shown that when women earn cash income, then their status and bargaining power in the family improves (Swamy, 2004). It may be difficult to measure the economic value of education for those women who are not paid, but they nonetheless contribute their bit to the national economy. For instance, a mother's education can benefit the future educational achievements of her children, and this may be a highly desirable outcome in the long-term as an important indirect economic benefit from education.

To conclude, the findings of the present research study have demonstrated that the ODL system at IGNOU has benefited women who completed the MBA or MCA programme. Of course, the inferences drawn are limited by the size of the sample, the low response rate, and the characteristics of those who did respond. However, there was no indication that the late respondents or non-respondents were especially different from the early respondents, and in this light the findings may be reasonably valid if generalized to a larger or a whole population. To achieve the

Millenium Development Goals through the ODL system, particularly in the Indian context, the focus should be to provide continued education to the following target groups (noting here that most of the women who responded to our survey were urban residents) ;

- the rural female labour force
- the rural female learners who have skills as farmers, or craftspersons, but no formal education, and
- the female learners who for one reason or another dropped out from secondary education (about 64% of women dropped out during secondary education during 2002-03).

To achieve further empowerment for women, the following points could be recommended for action ;

- more publicity & promotional activities for the current ODL system
- collaboration and sharing of resources between distance teaching institutions
- special scholarships and fee waivers for women learners particularly from rural areas

These should be considered alongside improved utilization of IGNOU's services such as Gyan Darshan, Gyan Vani, EduSat and interactive radio counselling, with teleconferencing,

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