

Reasons Behind the Selection of Open and Distance Learning by Women in Punjab Province of Pakistan

Uzma Munawar*
Nasreen Akhter**

Abstract

Women in Pakistan have social problems in the way of acquiring higher education in many parts of the country. Distance Education (DE) system performs major role in providing higher educational to those who are unable to access the educational facilities because of any personal or cultural constraints or because of living in deprived areas. Because of the policies of Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, distance education has its legal recognition in Pakistan like other parts of the world. Therefore, women in Pakistan are also enjoying benefits of this system to boost up their educational position in cases where they feel unable to attend the formal institutions. The aim of current study was to discover the reasons that incline women to study through distance education system rather than attending the formal institutions with rural and urban differences. This study was conducted following the survey method using a sample of 410 women from Southern Punjab in Pakistan. Tool of study was a questionnaire on 5-point rating scale. Data was analysed using mean scores and t test statistics. Results indicated that females adopted this system due to flexibility in its procedures. They were happy that they continued their studies along with performing their social and domestic responsibilities. Distance education provided chance to women to struggle for the uplift of their career without disrespecting their family values and disturbing customs of their families in Pakistan.

Keywords: Distance education, Women education, Women empowerment, Education

Introduction

Women in rural areas of Pakistan are deprived of minimum facilities of education. On the other hand, traditions play vital part in our rural sight to obstacle the women empowerment and liberty for attending institutions that are sometimes located at far flung areas from the living places. Distance education play role to facilitate people especially in deprived areas. It is a type of educational process in which the students acquire instruction through utilizing web, TV, radio, or mail. There is no need to attend

* Research Scholar, Preston University Kohat.

** Assistant Professor, Department of Education, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, E mail: drnasreenakhtar01@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)

regular classes and has face to face interaction with the teacher. According to Akhter (2014) distance learning is appeared as the group of tutoring practices in which distance learners study without attending their institution on regular bases. This system facilitates all without differentiation of gender, race and locality.

Dodds (1998) described distance learning as a system of education that provides instruction by correspondence through different tools like print media and electronic media. It plays a key role in access of education for all genders without any discrimination. It is beneficial for those who have no access for regular classes in universities. This mode of education is helpful for people in attaining a degree without disturbing their work responsibilities or some other obligations.

The formal system of education in Pakistan covers only limited female population. Women are the centre of civilization of the country. Taking into consideration the place of women in society, women need education to accomplish their activities in well-mannered ways. But, it has observed that they are not well equipped to perform their obligations due to low education or no education. The greatest problem in the way of women education is; how to provide education to the overwhelming majority who has remained outside because of not getting permission to attend formal institutions? In this regard, Allen and Seaman (2007) explain that along with formal education, women should be provided the opportunities for non-formal education which aims at arousing awareness of their pitiable condition and the need for increased skill for efficiency, a change of outlook, mode of thinking, living and adopting conducive behaviour to social justice.

Mostly education plans and policies emphasize on “education for all without any gender discrimination”. The distance education system is one of the educational systems which is trying to achieve these policies and targets in real sense. In Pakistan, distance education is certainly playing a fundamental role in development of education at higher level. Safdar and Hussain (2010) pointed out that distance education increases female students’ attraction and involvement in education at higher level from different areas of the country. Buksh (2013) stated that this system of education plan routed from institutions and apply in scattered areas. Numerous students especially female want to continue their education but do not able to get admission in regular institutions because of personal and official instincts. They cannot pay high amount of fees of regular institutions. Moreover, some cannot travel to attend institution that is far away from their residence. Distance education provide alternate source of education that is flexible in shape of time, distance and money as compare to other systems of education for such female or male students.

Majority of population in Pakistan lives in rural areas. Although, gender discrimination is one of the major issues related to low status of women in Pakistan (Akhter, 2011) but female have poor social position especially in the rural society. Rural

society do not give due importance to female education. They consider it only a source of wastage of money and time because they have weak and sometimes no proper educational facilities in their accessible range. Mostly individuals particularly in rural areas believe that only education for males is essential. Due to this reason, there is a great disparity among male and female literacy rate in Pakistan especially in rural and remote areas.

According to population survey by Government of Pakistan (2007), literacy rate of Pakistan is 61%. Literacy rate of female is only 32%. The situation of women literacy is more bitter in rural areas of Pakistan (29%). UNESCO (2007) stated that gender disparities of literacy unpleasantly has alarming situation in Pakistan. Male literacy is more than 65% and female literacy rate is under 40%. Behind it, the reason is social limit for female. Parents bear the costs of education for their sons but they do not spend money on their daughters (PHHS, 2005). Other reasons like unavailability of institutions, long distance of institutions from home and social taboos pressure are also counted behind poor educational status of women in Pakistan. There are many studies that put conclusion about social obstacle, financial issues, and non-accessibility of female education in Pakistan.

Literature points out that the conventional model of face to face education was the only choice particularly for students of higher education in past. But, now many universities of the world are effectively running distance learning programs and millions of students across the world are benefitting from the blessings of DE mode of education. The concept of girls and women education have been met with a lot of resistance for a long time in history globally. Aderinoye (2005) described in his research that ODL in Nigeria plays its role in national development especially for women. It is an important key to women empowerment. Study demonstrated that ODL took changes in attitudes, standards, and behaviour of women in their society. Through distance education, educated women become able to make choices about their present and future.

Khatoon (2010) observed the extension of educational services for women by distance education at higher level in Pakistan. The results exposed that distance education performed important part in the extension of women education at higher level for those who have some personal or social impulses to go in educational institutions for up gradation of their education. Distance education is flexible especially for women to enhance their educational status. Grabe, Dutt, and Dworkin (2014) observed that developing countries have serious issue of gender disparity. In developing countries, large number of women have been facing social, political and environmental problems. Unawareness of education is a major reason behind these types of disparities. Education is the basis for the all type of advancement in any nation and ODL has been progressively promoted as a key solution for the deprived groups like women. It has emerged as an

instrument for accessing higher education for females. ODL has been breaking all divisions in the education system based on sex, age, race, space, wage, and time etc.

Ahsan (2007) discussed position of distance education and problems for women in enrolment at higher education institution. In his views, distance education is a growing need of nation. It covers obstacles to discourse large-scale educational problems for women. Therefore, it is important to consider it as alternative way of the education. In the light of above discussion, it is concluded that DE mode is effective for women empowerment and solving issues of backwardness of women in all sections without discrimination. Therefore, present study was conducted in Pakistan to analyse distance learner women' opinions about factors to select the DE mode of education.

Statement of the Problem

Topic of current study was "Reasons behind selection of open and distance learning by women in southern Punjab Province of Pakistan". Researchers were interested to study factors responsible for promotion of ODL in Pakistan and explore benefits of distance learning mode of education for women in the country.

Objectives of the Study

Objectives of the study were;

1. To study factors responsible for the promotion of distance learning in Pakistan.
2. To explore benefits of distance education for women in Pakistan.
3. To find out differences between perceptions of rural and urban distance learners regarding the factors responsible for promotion of distance learning in Pakistan.
4. To find out differences between perceptions of rural and urban distance learners regarding the benefits of distance education for women in Pakistan.

Research Questions of the Study

This study targeted to search answers the following research questions.

1. Which factors motivate women to join distance learning in Pakistan.
2. Why distance education is beneficial for women in Pakistan.
3. Does factors for promotion of distance learning in Pakistan are same for rural and urban women.
4. Does distance learning is equally beneficial for rural and urban women.

Methodology

This research focused to investigate the reasons behind selection of Open and Distance Learning by women in Southern Punjab. Therefore, this study was descriptive in nature by method. Design for the study was "survey research". For convenience, this study was delimited to master level female students of Allama Iqbal Open University who belonged to Southern Punjab region of Pakistan during 2016 to 2017. It was assumed that factors behind selection of distance learning mode can be best identified studying the

case of distance learners under study, and their perceptions about the expected benefits in future can help to predict the motivating factors for promotion of ODL in Pakistan.

Research Tool of the Study

A close ended questionnaire was tool of the study. It had 41 items on 5-point Semantic differential rating scale (1 to 5). Its validity was determined through expert opinion method. For the sake of determination of reliability, the tool was distributed to a sample of 30. Its' reliability was noted as 0.79 (Cronbach's alpha) after analysis of data of pilot study. But after collecting data of final study from the sample of 410, value of r was 0.921 for all items ($r= 0.881$ for the 13 items related to benefits of DE for women and 0.849 (r) for the 15 items regarding factors responsible for distance learning for women).

Population, Sample, Data Collection and Data Analysis

The population of the study was female students of M.A. program of AIOU from Southern Punjab Region enrolled in Spring and Autumn semesters during 2016. A sample of 600 students from four districts (Bahawalpur, Rahim Yar Khan, Multan and D.G. Khan) of Punjab was selected. At sampling stage, study centres in approach of researchers were chosen adopting convenience sampling approach. After reaching the study centres, all available women while attending the workshop were requested to provide data. Six hundred women were requested to provide data but 410 agreed to participate in the study. Therefore, sample of the study who provided data of the study was 410 (142 rural and 268 urban) women enrolled in MA programs in AIOU during 2016. Data of the study was analysed applying mean score and t-test statistics on data. Mean score was used to conclude respondents' acceptance/agreement to the statement. T-test was applied on data to find out mean difference between rural and urban groups regarding factors behind promotion of DE mode and effectiveness of DE mode for urban and rural groups.

Results and Interpretation

According to objectives of the study, results have given in table 1 to 4. In table 1 results regarding reasons behind selection of distance learning have given. While collecting data for this section, respondents were requested to rate items (1 to 5) keeping in mind the reasons for preferring distance learning rather than formal system of education. Explanation of results of data given in tables has added at the end of table.

Table 1

Reasons for joining distance learning by women

<i>Items</i>	<i>Groups</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>MD</i>	<i>SED</i>																																																																																																																																																																																	
I am not satisfied with current status of education and have aspiration for further education	Rural	3.648	1.222	.103	1.379	.169	.174	.126																																																																																																																																																																																	
	Urban	3.474	1.213	.074					I feel low self-esteem under value of current educational status and I want to improve my qualification	Rural	3.690	1.322	.111	1.273	.204	.164	.129	Urban	3.526	1.197	.073	Distance learning is a self-paced learning for me	Rural	3.838	1.241	.104	1.599	.110	.193	.120	Urban	3.646	1.114	.068	Through improving qualification may be by distance learning, I can enhance my control over family income /resources	Rural	3.486	1.341	.113	.035	.972	.005	.132	Urban	3.481	1.238	.076	I want to enhance employment opportunities for me through improving me	Rural	4.021	1.176	.099	3.374	.001*	.432	.128	Urban	3.590	1.261	.077	I want my contribution in economic growth of my family	Rural	3.662	1.091	.092	-.932	.352	-.103	.110	Urban	3.765	1.050	.064	My economic status has been increasing through improving qualification by ODL	Rural	3.606	1.220	.102	-1.867	.063	-.215	.115	Urban	3.821	1.048	.064	I feel improvement in decision-making capability after getting education through ODL	Rural	3.831	.922	.077	1.036	.301	.104	.099	Urban	3.728	.981	.060	I cannot bear the expenses of formal system of education so I joined ODL system	Rural	3.894	.958	.080	2.487	.013*	.268	.106	Urban	3.627	1.075	.066	There is resistance and hesitation for sending girls in college or university so I join ODL	Rural	3.655	1.215	.102	-.106	.916	-.013	.122	Urban	3.668	1.160	.071	I find lack of support from family for joining formal system of education so I join ODL	Rural	3.768	1.029	.086	2.181	.030*	.275	.126	Urban	3.493	1.303	.080	I can easily perform family responsibilities while continuing education through ODL	Rural	3.578	1.211	.102	-1.497	.135	-.173	.115	Urban	3.750	1.053	.064	I found lack of mobility facilities to formal college/campus so I joined ODL	Rural	3.634	1.152	.097	1.117	.265	.138	.123	Urban	3.497	1.204	.074	I expect to get promotion in my job/ career through ODL	Rural	3.986	.967	.081	2.334	.020*	.255	.109	Urban	3.731	1.093	.067	I have not left my job for my education because of ODL	Rural	3.923	1.118	.094	2.238	.026*	.281
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*Note: M= Mean Score; MD= Mean Difference; SEM= Standard Error Mean; P= Sign.2 tailed at 0.05 level; MD= Mean Difference; SED= Standard Error Difference; *= significant mean difference*

According to Table 1, the data regarding factors responsible for ODL indicates respondents' agreement with all statements. The results revealed women' frustration with their current educational status. In their perception, low self-esteem, low educational status, flexibility of ODL process, wish to increase income by improving the educational status, attainment of better decision-making skills and powers were utmost intentions that inspired women to favour distance learning on formal system courses. Moreover, data also illustrate agreement of women to the fact that formal system of education was not affordable for their families. On the other hand, women accepted that their families also avoid sending their daughters in formal institutions because of social restrictions. Women acknowledged that by joining ODL process, they can perform household duties along attending the non-formal institutions. Moreover, working women can improve their qualification and working status without leaving their current job.

A prominent point observed by this data is that rural and urban groups had significant difference of opinion about some items (see p value of items 5, 9, 11, 14 & 15 in table 1). Comparison of mean difference hints that rural women are more in favour of the statements in comparison to urban ones. This explores that distance education is more favourable for rural community.

A part of this study was related to explore benefits of distance learning for women. Therefore, respondents were requested to rate statements (1 to 5) given in table 2. While providing data of this part, respondents were directed to keep in mind the benefits they have taken or expected to gain after getting their degree by distance learning.

Table 2

Benefits of Distance Learning for Women

<i>Items</i>	<i>Groups</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>MD</i>	<i>SED</i>
I decided ODL system because I feel intimidated by male. ODL gave me confidence	Rural	3.11	1.47	.124	-1.790	.074	-.264	.148
	Urban	3.37	1.39	.085				
I feel that I am not fit for requirements of my present job. By ODL I am improving my qualification that will enables me to fulfil requirements of better employment too.	Rural	3.50	1.36	.114	1.217	.224	.175	.144
	Urban	3.32	1.40	.086				
I joined ODL to attain degree for my satisfaction	Rural	2.83	1.43	.121	-2.685	.008*	-.371	.138
	Urban	3.20	1.26	.077				
ODL is flexible for me with time and space	Rural	3.26	1.26	.106	1.783	.075	.253	.142
	Urban	3.00	1.41	.087				

Distance learning provided me second chance of learning as I was dropout from formal system due to personal issues	Rural	3.51	1.29	.109	1.081	.280	.137	.127
	Urban	3.37	1.18	.072				
I got respect in family and community by studying through distance learning	Rural	3.70	1.11	.093	2.069	.039*	.268	.129
	Urban	3.43	1.31	.080				
ODL gives more freedom to me for learning according to my circumstances	Rural	4.00	1.06	.090	1.205	.229	.130	.108
	Urban	3.87	1.02	.063				
ODL is eliminating women discrimination in higher education	Rural	3.55	1.27	.107	-.868	.386	-.104	.120
	Urban	3.66	1.08	.066				
ODL is boosting up the position of women in Pakistan	Rural	3.66	1.26	.106	.278	.781	.035	.126
	Urban	3.62	1.19	.073				
Distance learning creates sense of liability in my personality	Rural	3.43	1.11	.093	-2.133	.034*	-.243	.114
	Urban	3.67	1.08	.066				
Distance learning has developed awareness in myself about my (responsibilities, social and legal rights)	Rural	3.39	1.35	.114	-2.107	.036*	-.266	.126
	Urban	3.66	1.13	.070				
Distance Learning has enabled me for getting better employment	Rural	3.64	1.15	.096	1.450	.148	.189	.130
	Urban	3.45	1.30	.080				
Studying by ODL, I learnt to work systematically and feel responsibility to perform tasks on time.	Rural	3.89	1.10	.093	3.390	.001*	.432	.127
	Urban	3.46	1.28	.078				

*Note: M= Mean Score; MD= Mean Difference; SEM= Standard Error Mean; P= Sign.2 tailed at 0.05 level; MD= Mean Difference; SED= Standard Error Difference; *= Significant mean difference*

Table 2 exhibits that respondents agreed with all statements. This explored that women are humiliated by male members. Men think that women are not fit for their job requirements. These damages the confidence of women. By joining distance learning process, women accepted that they felt enhancement in their confidence. They also found themselves more confident because improvement in educational status helped them in upgrading their professional status. Women also accepted that, unless adopting distance learning, a raise in academic status, economic status, confidence and satisfaction was impossible or very difficult. Women were happy that as distance learners, they are working in limits of culture and family traditions without disturbing their family responsibilities and life routines. On the other hand, women accepted that gender gap in higher education is declining because of distance learning. Women accepted that distance education has boosted up their status, improved sense of accountability, awareness about their legal and social rights and responsibilities. A prominent benefit indicated by women was that they learnt to work systematically because studying by distance education process demanded them to work on time following a schedule to get success. On the whole, it is depicted from whole data that women found distance education process

beneficial for them from economic, social and national perspectives. Analysis of results by mean comparison (t- test analysis) indicates that rural and urban groups have significant difference of opinion regarding some items (see p-value of items 3, 6, 10, 11 & 13 in the table).

Table 3 and 4 exhibits summative comparison of scores about the reasons and benefits of ODL for women with rural and urban differences point of view.

Table 3

Rural urban difference regarding benefits of ODL for women

<i>Groups</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>MD</i>	<i>SED</i>
Rural	45.5141	8.28203	.69501	.419	.675	.37229	.88752
Urban	45.1418	8.68910	.53077				

Note: M= Mean Score; MD= Mean Difference; SEM= Standard Error Mean; P= Sign.2 tailed at 0.05 level; MD= Mean Difference; SED= Standard Error Difference

Table 3 presents rural urban differences between scores of groups about the benefits of ODL. Although, mean score of rural group is higher than of urban. But results of t-test indicate insignificant mean difference between groups. This explores that rural and urban female distance learners are united about the benefits of ODL process.

Table 4

Rural urban difference regarding reasons of joining the ODL by women

<i>Groups</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>MD</i>	<i>SED</i>
Rural	56.2183	9.36276	.78571	1.830	.068	1.78174	.97356
Urban	54.4366	9.38840	.57349				

Note: M= Mean Score; MD= Mean Difference; SEM= Standard Error Mean; P= Sign.2 tailed at 0.05 level; MD= Mean Difference; SED= Standard Error Difference

Table 4 indicates difference between evaluations of respondents regarding reasons behind joining of ODL process. Although, mean score of rural group is higher than urban. But, mean comparison by t-test statistics indicates insignificant mean difference between groups. This explores that on the whole, rural and urban women join ODL process because of similar reasons. This also hints that cultural and social issues and problems related to women in Pakistan are similar in rural and urban areas of Pakistan. Therefore, ODL is equally important for women living in rural as well as urban areas.

Discussion

This study investigated the reasons behind selection of ODL by women. Result of the study shows that distance education is the valuable equipment for women in

Pakistan for the improvement of their educational status. It has gained popularity in Pakistan particularly among female students providing equal opportunities of education to all. Gender discrimination that is an incredible issue in regards to provision of education in Pakistan, distance education is the best solution of such type of issue. It is clear from the results that ODL is a source for female to upgrade their educational and life standard when they especially belong to deprived groups. Therefore, present study has indicated that women in Pakistan are getting benefits of distance learning. On the other hand, women who are affiliated with distance education process in Pakistan have positive opinions regarding the process and benefits of this system. A discussion on notable results of the study has given in the following.

The present study indicated that gender discrimination by families is a huge problem for women in Pakistan. In perspectives of social issues of people living in deprived areas of Pakistan, parents usually prefer their sons and degrade their daughters by behaviour or by discriminating them in awarding less privileges than their sons. Reasons for the gender discrimination by parents include; their negative thinking, low vision, lack of religious knowledge about the teachings of Islam, cultural distinctions and sometimes the financial issues. Previously Olakulein, and Ojo (2006) indicated that women living in Purdah, working women and women belonging to weaker areas can get best benefits from distance learning.

Present study has also indicated that women belonging to such families who degrade them can remove their deprivations and get rights adopting distance learning. In this study, women accepted that gender discrimination was a valuable motivator for them to join distance education. They accepted that unless entering in distance education process, their families could not allow them to improve their educational status because their families restrict them to live at home. Their families were not ready to send them in formal institutions especially for higher education due to their personal thinking, less resources or family intentions. Previously, Abimbola and Omolara (2015) also pointed out that there are enormous opportunities for men for getting higher education through formal system of education. It was pointed out that parents spend on their sons. There are fewer opportunities for females and many social cultural barriers for getting higher education. Therefore, women can avail blessings of distance learning to get right of education directly and other benefits related to better educational status indirectly.

In present study, a result indicated that women joined distance education because of its flexibility in process and opportunities for convenience of women and their families to continue education. This result has its matching with the study reported by Khatoon (2009). No doubt, distance education has opportunities for users to work easily without disturbing their routines and other family members.

A prominent result indicated by this study has resemblance with the study conducted by Akhter (2014). The study indicated that “DE process has cost effectiveness

and flexibility for learners”. In present study major reasons behind selection of distance learning by women gives hints for women intention to adopt flexible process that should not disturb their families, life routine and not become a financial burden for them. Results indicated that distance learners were continuing education along working and performing their professional responsibilities.

Conclusion

Distance and open learning is one of the new trends in education. Factors behind promotion of distance education for women include lack of educational opportunities in deprived areas of Pakistan. But in some cases, besides of having educational facilities at own areas, some women are not allowed to continue their education because of traditions, cultural restrictions, economic problems of family, social issues, family responsibilities and restrictions of formal system that unable women to become empowered. This study has found out that women in southern Punjab have adopted ODL in perspectives of belonging to; deprived areas, economically less empowered families, non-opportunities to attend formal institutions but having urge of getting higher education along with continuing educational facilities. Women expect that after getting higher education they can progress economically under the restrictions of traditions. Therefore, need is to promote ODL in Pakistan but also focus to improve educational standard of ODL courses equal to formal system of education. So, higher education commission in Pakistan needs to extend ODL opportunities for higher education in Pakistan especially in weaker regions of Pakistan. It is also requirement of the age that parents need to change their views and attitudes towards their daughters. Education of a female is in fact education of her next generation. Therefore, media and welfare associations should play their role for the change of minds of people in Pakistan. This is necessary for the uplift of women and progress of Pakistan to meet demands of the age.

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