



Gender Equity for Human and Educational Development in Asia

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ABSTRACT:

In the present globalised world, education plays the central role for building a knowledge economy, which is also the priority area in educational policies across the globe. Therefore, the benefits of education should be available to all irrespective of age, class and gender. However, the fact is that lack of gender equality and the prevailing gender discriminations have posed a great challenge in maintaining the balance in Human Development indicates towards a process of enlarging people's choice, helping them to lead a long and healthy life, and enabling them to become educated so that they can enjoy a descent standard of living. In the context of Asia, there are some very high and high human development countries such as—Korea, Japan, China and Singapore where women are more privileged in terms of accessing educational opportunities which is not so apparent in case of the women in medium and low human development countries like—India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Against this background, education is the only way to transform the lives of the women in general. Of late in Asia, ODL has emerged as one of the most viable mechanisms for ensuring gender equity by providing a more justified approach to the education for women. This paper is an attempt to examine the present status of Gender Inequality Index in some select Asian countries and to explore how Gender Inequality plays an important role for Human Development. Finally, this paper shall identify some best practices adopted by some mega open universities of Asia for reducing Gender Inequality and accelerating the capacity building among women.

Keywords: Gender Equity, Gender Inequality Index, Human Development, ODL for Women

1. INTRODUCTION:

The issues of Gender Equity and Human Development are integral to the discussions over the challenges pertaining to the status of women in society and their realization of human rights. A society, where people co-exist, also mirrors

the diversity of their activities. However, a welfare society can be a reality only when its people are knowledgeable and ready to share their beliefs, love, respect, cooperation, tolerance, affection and compassion towards the other fellow members. Since the dawn of civilization, masculinity and femininity are the

two determining concepts that suggest the varied role for men and women, as if the duty of a man should be related to war, and the duty of a woman should be restricted to the four walls of a household. This creates differentiations among all members of the society which further problematises the processes of gender divisions causing exploitations and demarcations between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots, men and women. However, the logic of gender division has been being used to suggest demarcations of responsibilities and powers between men and women on the basis of division of labour, physical strength, fitness and so on. Thus, women across all cultures and societies are prone to the biasness on the basis of sex and gender, and they remain relatively kept deprived of accessing equal rights as enjoyed by men. However, for mobilizing the progress of a society, there is an urgent need for maintaining perfect equality between men and women in every aspect of their lives.

If we consider the issue of Human Development against the multifaceted and multilayered progress taking place in the context of some Asian countries, it seems that countries such as China, Malaysia, Korea, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong are becoming the world's largest manufacturing hubs due to their high rate of economic growth and enriched educational standards and recognition. This has further led to the growth of economic mobilization, educational development and so on in such countries. In contrast to these developed nations, some other Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are striving just to ensure quality education, economic mobilization and social peace and progress for its citizens. It is against this background, that this paper seeks to make an important disclaimer that it is through processes of bringing gender equity through education that Human Development in the true sense can be ascertained which would also lead to an equitable living in a developmental perspective. Moreover, the same has been sought to be proven with reference to some of the best practices relating to women's education in some mega open universities of Asia such as—

Shanghai Open University, IGNOU, Bangladesh Open University, Allama Iqbal Open University and Korea National University. Our point is that with the help of best practices, these open universities have been able to render a great service to reducing the prevailing gender gaps in education.

2. OBJECTIVES :

The main objectives of the study are to

- Examine the present status of Gender Inequality Index in some select Asian countries
- Explore how Gender Inequality negatively impacts Human Development, and
- Identify the best practices adopted by some mega open universities of Asia for reducing Gender Inequality and enhancing capacity building among women.

3. METHODOLOGY:

This is a desktop research conducted with the help of some reports and secondary data available at the web resources of Open Universities in Asia and Commonwealth of Learning. While preparing this paper, descriptive research methodology has been used. Subsequently, analysis has been done based on the data extracted from the secondary sources of information. The sources like World Development Report 2017, 2018; Global Monitoring Report 2017; India Human Development Report 2011; Human Development Report 1990, 2010, 2016; Economic Survey 2016; NFHS-I, II and III; Report of 11th Five Years Plan, 12th FYP; Census of India 2011; SDGs Report 2016 etc. are also conducted during the course of this paper.

4. NEED FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT:

The concept of Human Development plays an important role in sensitizing the people towards the gender-related issues, simply because of the fact that Human Development has become the basic agenda for all countries of the world following the Economic Liberalisation in the Twentieth century, for example, in China in 1980s, in India in 1991 and so on. As a follow

up activity, various laws, policies and actions under the means of social and human security have been implemented to ensure the welfare of the people residing in different countries. The fact is that, some countries like Singapore, Japan, India, China, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Bangladesh, have been trying to provide 'sophisticated education' or 'world class education' to its citizens following mobilization of economic resources of these countries. Eventually, countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and China have made tremendous progress and have emerged as High Human Development countries of the world. However, if we observe more minutely, there are some countries, which are still under-developed in terms of educational attainment, employment and so on. Our point here is to discuss how one of the main causes of such a situation can be attributed to lack of gender equity and the prevailing inequality in the under-developed countries because of which Human Development in the true sense remains very different in such countries.

Nobody can deny that there are big gender differences between the sexes in various developmental sectors where men are more privileged than women. Even, in various workplaces, women are also oppressed by their own superior female counterparts. Again, against some privileged classes of people with an access to all the facilities and opportunities in some developed countries, the people in the underdeveloped and developing countries are forced to remain deprived of most of such facilities. Apart from this, even in the developed countries, a segment of the population which are internal migrants or who settled in the urban areas for livelihood also suffered a lot in terms of accessing quality education, health facilities and other modern sophisticated amenities. For example, in China and Hong Kong, although their Gross Enrolment Ratio is more than 40 percent and 72 percent in the year 2016 (The World Development Report, 2017), a segment of the elite class in the urban areas are mostly benefitted in accessing developmental opportunities than the migrants from the rural to urban areas.

In fact, in every developmental sector, women are often deprived of the opportunities unlike men. Their works are under-valued and rarely recognized economically. In Asia as a whole, women are deprived mostly in terms of education, health, and employment; and most women are engaged in the unorganized sector. In a traditional society, the working capacities of women are subordinated and de-recognised by the male members as well as by the heads of the households. The activities of the poor women like cleaning, cooking, rearing the child, working in the paddy fields, taking care of the husband and elders of the family, and other types of household works are often under-valued and rendered invisible. In a traditional society, it is believed that a man should play the major role in the family, because he is the breadwinner, while the woman must be a career and nurturer. Women, particularly in the rural areas, often face restrictions while taking decisions on their own economic choices, because they do not have the control over the resources. It has also been found that in the employment sector, there prevail great sexual divisions of labour following which women get lower wage than men. Whereas, the fact is that men, not women, are mostly engaged in the employment of organized sectors. These have been some of the customary practices prevailing in any society, and it imposes a subordinate status to women.

But, for a long term benefit and making people productive, everybody should respect the principles of democracy where everyone—irrespective of one's gender, has the right to enjoy equal rights and opportunities, equal access to the various resources constitutionally guaranteed to all. The implementation of the rights under the social sectors such as—right to education, right to employment, right to equal pay for equal work, right of access to health services, right to participate in the political life of one's community, etc. have been launched for bringing in the necessary upward mobility of the different sections of the people in the country. Besides, for the long-term benefit and development of a country, economic security, social security, educational security, the security of life etc. among all citizens are very essential.

Therefore, it is a right time to rationalize critically the share of women's contribution into the developmental aspects of a society or the nation that will ensure the Human Development Indices in the country.

In order to achieve a gender-neutral society, inclusive growth and formation of human capital, various attempts have been made from time to time in many developing countries of Asia. In 2015, the Heads of different governments and high representatives from various countries met in the meeting held at United Nations Headquarters in New York and adopted the document titled *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* adopting a new set of global Sustainable Development Goals which would transform the world in the next 15 years. There are 17 Goals to be achieved by 2030 for sustainable development. The Goal 4 is targeted to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all. The Goal 5 is targeted to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls to reach their full potential, which requires elimination of all forms of discriminations and violence. Interestingly, in this goal, it is reported that until 2013, there were about 757 million adults (aged 15 and above) unable to read and write, of whom two thirds were women. Again, it was found that in terms of the recognition of women's work, between 2000 and 2014 in 59 countries, women spent 19% of their time each day on unpaid labour versus 8% for men. Thus, these situations have posed a challenge particularly in front of the developing and underdeveloped countries so that necessary steps could be taken for ensuring gender equity.

5. HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND ITS INDICES:

Human Development, commonly defined as the process of enlarging people's freedom and opportunities and improving their well-being, proposes to lead a meaningful life which can help a society to develop economically, educationally, socially, culturally and so on. It also means that the people of a society must be

educated and are able to contribute to the economic development with a good health. In fact, Human Development indicates toward making the people productive as human resource and human capital. Subsequently, the ideas of Human Resource Development have come to signify enlargement of people's choices, enhancement of their skills, capacities, attitudes etc. However, for this, the people must be well acquainted with the need-based skills, be aware of their basic rights and duties, possess the power of critical thinking, have the capacity to judge what is right and what is wrong in the surroundings, and so on. In this context, it is well defined by HDR, 1990 that Human Development is a process of enlarging people's choices, leading a long and healthy life and becoming educated and enjoying a decent standard of living. For estimating and ranking of Human Development, various Indices have been introduced over the years in different Reports such as Human Development Index (HDI), Gender Development Index (GDI), Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), and Human Poverty Index (HPI).

However, in 2010, the GDI, GEM and HPI were removed from HDR, and 3 new Indices such as Inequality—adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI), Gender Inequality Index (GII) and Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) were introduced in a wider perspective. Gender Inequality Index (GII) is being used to measure inequality in achievement between men and women in terms of three dimensions: reproductive health in terms of maternal mortality ratio; empowerment that includes women's share of seats in national parliament and higher education; and Women's share in the labour market or women's labour force participation rate. Thus, the use of GII helps us to understand the status of women and gender divisions between the haves and have-nots among the people from all over the world.

6. GENDER EQUITY FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT:

Gender Inequality is one of the major hurdles for ensuring the socio-economic mobilisation of a country. When the value or rank of inequality

increases, the loss of human development also increases. Again, the countries with higher gender inequality also experience more uneven distribution of Human Development. In fact, gender equity is essential for ensuring gender equality. The Human Rights of UN 1945, CEDAW 1979, Beijing Platform for Action 1995, are the platforms, which tried to advocate gender justice according to the people’s ‘need’s to ensure equal rights, obligations and opportunities. Gender equity is a mechanism through which gender equality may be achieved. Therefore, for assessing the level of empowerment among women, there is the need for analyzing each indicators of GII so that the real picture in terms of gender equality can be ascertained.

For improving the rank of Human Development, all countries of the world shall have to ensure gender equality in terms of education, health and employment, which shall provide a decent standard of living. Again, everybody has the right to enjoy equal rights and opportunities, which are constitutionally

guaranteed to all. Therefore, gender equity is an urgent need for ensuring the positive social transformation of a nation. In order to promote gender equity, various policies, Constitutional Rights and Acts, various programmes and schemes under social security are implemented for providing gender equity as well as empowering the women particularly so that they feel socially secured and economically protected in their day to day life.

7. RANK OF SELECTED COUNTRIES OF ASIA AS PER THE INDICATORS OF GII:

As we have already mentioned, this paper is restricted to the study of the educational status of women in Asian perspective by taking the indicators of Gender Inequality Index (GII) only, developed by United Nations Development Programmes. With the help of these indicators, an analysis could be done to gauge the stark reality of prevailing gender inequality in different countries of Asia. Table 1 shows the status of the Asian Countries in terms of GII.

Table 1: Human development and Gender Inequality Index of Selected Countries of Asia (2015 data)

Selected Countries of Asia with HDI Rank	Rank of GII	MMR (deaths in 100,000 live births)	Share of women in national parliament (in percentage)	Population with at least some secondary education (percentage 25 and above)		Labour Force participation rate (percentage 15 and older)	
				Female	Male	Female	Male
Singapore (5)	11	10	23.9	75.5	81.9	58.2	76.4
Japan (17)	21	5	11.6	93.0	90.6	49.1	70.2
Korea (18)	10	11	16.3	88.8	94.6	50.0	71.8
Malaysia (59)	59	40	13.2	75.4	79.1	49.3	77.6
Sri Lanka (73)	87	30	4.9	80.2	80.6	30.2	75.6
Thailand (87)	79	20	6.1	40.9	45.8	62.9	80.2
China (90)	37	27	23.6	69.8	79.4	63.6	77.9
Indonesia (113)	105	126	17.1	42.9	51.7	50.9	83.9
Philippines (116)	96	114	27.1	72.8	70.3	50.5	78.8
India (131)	125	174	12.2	35.3	61.4	26.8	79.1
Bangladesh (139)	119	176	20	42.0	44.3	43.1	81.0
Pakistan (147)	130	178	20.0	26.5	46.1	24.3	82.2
Afghanistan (169)	154	396	27.4	8.8	35.4	19.1	83.6

Source: (UNDP HDR, 2016)

From Table 1, it is evident that out of 188 countries in the world, countries such as Singapore, Japan, and Korea are able to achieve their rank in terms of Human Development Index in the category of Very High Human Development status. Countries like Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and China are able to achieve their rank under the category of High Human Development, and countries like Philippines, Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are found under the category of Medium Human Development countries of the world. A country like Afghanistan and its status in terms of education, health or life expectancy and employment or economic condition of the people is comparatively poor compared to the other countries of Asia making it a Low Human Development category country.

If we throw light on the progress on the three dimensions or the indicators of Gender Inequality Index (GII), it is seen that still there is a wide disparity in the rank of GII among the countries of Asia; the rank of the disparity in the selected countries is varied from 11 to 154. The countries achieving good or high rank in terms of HDI have also gained better rank in terms of GII. It means that in these high human development countries, there is less inequalities between men and women in terms of accessing quality educational opportunities, ensuring good health condition, making them conscious in their political powers, and also ensuring their work force participation rate.

Besides, from Table 1, it becomes clear that Afghanistan has high maternal mortality rate compared to many developing countries in the world. The MMR in Afghanistan for pregnancy-related causes is about 396 against per 100,000 live births. This situation has posed a great hurdle in creating the people in Afghanistan as human capital.

In terms of the percentage of women in the national parliament, the percentage is still poor in entire Asia (the average of the selected countries as a whole is not more than average 16 %) than the countries of the developed or

industrialized world like Norway, Iceland, Finland etc (average 40%).

If we look at the population above the age of 25 and older, it seems that countries like Japan and Philippines have more percentage for the female than the male in getting secondary education from the year 2010 to 2015. Countries like India, Pakistan and Afghanistan have wide range of deviation between the sexes, as there are lower numbers of female compared to male who are able to access some secondary education.

Generally, it is assumed that education plays a crucial role in contributing to employment, but from Table 1, it is found that although the number of women in countries like Japan and Philippines is larger, in terms of work force participation rate, the number of female contributors is lower than that of male in all the countries of Asia. It may be because of the fact that the people received education just for fulfilling their ambition as degree takers, and the education they received did not actually equip them with the required need-based livelihood skills. In addition, the range of discrimination between the sexes is extremely higher in the low human development and middle human development countries than the high and very human development countries of Asia.

Thus, the figures of Table 1 have proved that there is wide range of discriminations between male and female mostly in the employment sector, as well as in women's representation in national parliaments. Such inequalities in terms of Gender Inequality Index has posed a challenge in front of nearly all countries of Asia for taking immediate action for ensuring sustainable economy and providing equal opportunities to all to further ensure inclusive growth and development, and to have a gender-equal society for all.

8. ROLE OF EDUCATION FOR HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT:

No one should deny the fact that education plays a prominent role in mobilizing the human

resources by accelerating their capabilities and skills into a productive direction. A country can be developed only when its people are engaged in some vibrant and productive activities, which is possible through quality and need-based education only. However, in countries like India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the working forces are not properly engaged, and eventually the problems like unemployment, underemployment and brain drain are rising day-by-day. Even, if we see the Gross Enrolment Ratio, a country like Korea has more than 95% at tertiary education level, (HDR 2016) whereas a low middle income country like Afghanistan has not more than 9 percent GER. Eventually, it will lead to lower level of development of this nation. Besides, more than 70% women in some developing countries of Asia are engaged in the unorganised sectors (Economic Survey, 2016), as most of them work for their day-to-day living, which remain uncared and unrecognised. Therefore, it is the right time to see whether the education they are receiving is need-based and appropriately skill-oriented, and whether it is capable of offering them a life with a standard living. Therefore, it is an urgent need to explore the various educational avenues and also to find out how such avenues or best practices of educational institutions in different countries can help women to become empowered. Therefore, governmental interventions in the educational sector plays a prominent role in upgrading the higher educational institutions as the think tanks for ensuring socio-economic mobilisation to the people of a country.

Besides, for the growth of the national income in near future, the developing countries need to be transformed into a major knowledge economy having adequate and abundance of skilled and trained manpower. Again, when we are talking about quality higher education, access to higher education is still a dream for millions of peoples residing in the world. Besides GER, the need of required higher education avenues or institutional set up against the demand of the population, achievement of global learning etc. by the people in rural and urban areas; providing equal access to learning, justice to cost benefit analysis, research and innovations, use of educational technology,

quality and adequate funds for expansion of higher education, modern up to date education to the internal migrants—are some of the challenges that often create an obstacle in the process of making a knowledge enabled population in some countries of Asia.

However, along with the thrust on the Conventional mode of education, the reasons behind the emergence of Open Universities and ODL institutions are manifold—such as population over-growth, economic liberalisation and globalisation, popularity of global-lifelong learning as well as blended learning, quick expansion of multimedia technology, inclusive growth, need of manpower planning for creating knowledge enabled population and so on. The utilization of on-line learning through ODL makes it an open or global learning in the true sense. Besides, the altruistic philosophy of ODL makes the people functionally literate or digitally skilled. ODL, thus, helps the learners to possess the relevant digital skills that help to promote inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunity for all.

9. ROLE OF SOME OPEN UNIVERSITIES IN REDUCING GENDER INEQUALITIES IN ASIA:

ODL has been an emergent issue worldwide, and it has been able to provide educational opportunities to millions of learners from every nook and corner of the world. At present in Asia, there are 40 Open universities (Kanwar & Balasubramanion, 2016), which provide the witness of massive popularity of the ODL system. In the context of Asia, the ODL institutions have provided myriad educational opportunities to women. The enrollment trend in ODL shows an upward growth in the enrolment of women in the field of secondary and higher education. By taking various educational initiatives, the open universities in countries like China, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Philippines, India, Sri Lanka etc. have greatly succeeded in motivating millions of women learners to upgrade their knowledge and skills so that they can be made aware of their surroundings. This has greatly helped them to move from gaining self-confidence towards

gaining economic sustainability in the competitive market. In this regard, we can cite some of the best practices adopted by some selected Asian Mega Universities, which are as the following:

a. Shanghai Open University, Shanghai, China:

In China, ODL has contributed to ensuring world-class education to the people in China, through massive utilization of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and other online learner support services. For example, Shanghai Open University, formerly known as TV University, has played a crucial role in disseminating knowledge and information among the learners, which also means that this university is able to start a knowledge movement particularly in Shanghai. M-learning is one of the dominant media for educating the people mostly in rural areas in China. As per the data available in its website (<http://iie.sou.edu.cn/en/>), as one of the largest online institutions, Shanghai Open University is able to motivate around 70,000 learners in a year; they are achieving quality and skill-oriented education so that they are able to compete with the fast changing competitive world. This open university has played a prominent role by providing and developing mostly the social skills of the learners, making the people gender sensitised, empowering the women through various skill-based programmes. This university has also given emphasis on educational reforms by making education learner-centered and introducing livelihood services in public interest platform such as ‘help girl’ etc. (http://www.setv.sh.cn/z/recommend02/0/_clt4_jytwy_zt_bnv1_index) which is more practical and functional based learner support service. Besides, there are some other health related awareness services, quality educational opportunities for the workers mostly engaged in the unorganized sectors in China etc. These are considered world-class good practices that will attract millions of learners belonging to the underprivileged sections worldwide. Moreover, from 21st century onwards, China has given emphasis on international mobility, cooperation

and collaborative work through its extensive education system, which shall greatly benefit the Chinese society.

b. Bangladesh Open University, Bangladesh

For empowering women, Bangladesh Open University has taken so many initiatives. It is one of the pioneers among the Asian countries to introduce M-learning for transforming the rural population particularly the women in the positive direction by providing information and making them productive. BOU has been running a variety of programmes under the Open Schooling System, starting from secondary to graduate level. Sadia A. Sultana & Mostafa A. Kamal in their thoughtful article, “Reaching the unreached through ODL—How it contributes to female empowerment in Bangladesh?” have stated that for mobilizing the capacity or empowering the women, courses like Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary certificate have been launched for the women deprived of formal education on due time mostly in the rural areas. SSC has helped and empowered the rural women in various ways, such as—building self-confidence, gaining business skills, becoming aware of the deadly diseases, maternal health and voting right, remaining aware about the Government Schemes and services, getting sensitized about drinking water and sanitation, being encouraged to take higher education etc. The average female participation in the programme is around 40%. Female participation in SSC Programme is significantly high in both at urban and rural areas. This is certainly a need-oriented approach adopted by BOU in uplifting the condition of women in a poor country like Bangladesh.

c. Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan

In order to meet the challenges faced by women in a country like Pakistan, the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIKU), a Mega Open University in Pakistan, was established in 1974 with a vision of providing educational opportunities to thousands of women who are deprived and underprivileged. In their research paper, entitled “Women Empowerment through Distance Education in Pakistan” by Jumani et al.

have stated that within a short period, the University has been able to offer courses from literacy to PhD level. The AIOU is a unique institution in many ways, affording educational facility to all children from 'nine to ninety'. AIOU has come up as the largest University of Pakistan in terms of course enrolment and course programmes as it is offering more than 135 programmes and imparting education to students exceeding 1170379 in number. Due to flexible system, AIOU is playing vital role in the development of the women learners as well as in the national development by promoting female access to education and demoting gender disparity. They also quoted the then VC Dr. Nazir Sangi's statement, where he rightly claimed, "As a distance education institution, we encourage women to get admission in a wide variety of educational programmes we offer. Many of these programmes are designed for women. Because of these incentives, female students are in majority in almost all our programmes. This is indicative of the women's trust in us and the high standard of our education." AIOU is continuously planning to enhance its capability to empower women. Recently, AIOU signed MoU with five-big Iranian Universities to prepare and launch academic programmes for promoting women education and family studies in Pakistan. As per university data, the majority of the learners who enrolled in different programmes in 2011 were female students (661956 out of a total 1170379 enrolment). The ratio of female learners exceeded with 57% from their male counterparts, which is 43%.

d. Indira Gandhi National Open University, India

A Mega University of Asia, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), was established by an Act of the Indian Parliament in 1985. Since its inception, IGNOU has continuously striven to build an inclusive knowledge society through inclusive education. Currently, IGNOU has a learner base of 34, 99,999. (Kanwar & Balasubramanion, 2016). Along with different other courses suitable for both the male and female learners, IGNOU specifically conducts courses like Post

Graduate Diploma in Women's & Gender Studies (PGDWGS) and Diploma in Women's Empowerment & Development (DWED) particularly meant for the female learners. Besides, IGNOU launched courses that are focused on women empowerment and vocational education/training to rural masses in collaboration with the Dhan Foundation, a development organisation, based in Madurai. IGNOU also have been trying to develop courses that are related to community development for the 'capacity building' of rural womenfolk, youth, farming and fishing communities of the remote areas and thereby create employability skills among them. Besides, IGNOU is also trying to boost the condition of Indian women in collaboration with the Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women in India under the Women Empowerment Project (WEP). This will surely empower the women in rural as well as urban areas, as it will bring them together from all spheres of life to fight for their rights or a cause. Since the overall empowerment of women is crucially dependent on economic empowerment, women through these SHGs work on a range of issues such as health, nutrition, agriculture, forestry, etc. besides income generation activities and seeking micro credit. Thus, IGNOU is trying to organize women into effective Self Help Groups and through the medium of IGNOU's training Certificate Programme "Empowering Women through Self Help Groups" prepare a cadre/network of master trainers for the sustainability of these SHGs. As part of the celebration of the centenary of the International Women's Day in 2018, IGNOU has also announced new programmes in gender and women studies (IGNOU Website: www.ignou.ac.in). In a developing country like India, such altruistic steps are going to cause a big change in the lives of the women.

e. Korea National Open University, South Korea

The Korea National Open University (KNOU), established in 1972, is the largest distance learning institution in South Korea. It offers lifelong education to working adults through its different available programmes. It

offers over 800 different courses a year. Chang Yeul Yang in his article “Korea National Open University” has tried to provide an overall picture of the University. He has stated that the founding vision of KNOU was as the “Open University in Lifelong Society”. KNOU’s role as an open lifelong educational institution is becoming greater than ever, representing a renewable source of the information and knowledge demanded by the 21st century society. KNOU advocates open learning principles leading to the lifelong learning society of the 21st century under three important mandates: *Distance education* specialising in learning methods; *Lifelong Education* that is open to all people; and *Public Education* that promotes lifelong learning opportunities to all. Since its establishment in 1972, KNOU has produced approximately 400,000 graduates, and has a current enrolment of nearly 180,000 students. Students enrolled at KNOU come from all occupations, from homemakers to lawmakers, teenagers to senior citizens, from Seoul citizens to Jeju islanders. Because they can study anytime, from anywhere, the learners can pursue a higher academic career while also progressing in their social career. From this, it may be assumed that KNOU has played a pivotal role in imparting higher and lifelong educational opportunities to those previously excluded from the formal education system for reasons related to social, economic, age, and time limitations. According to EFA National Report Republic of Korea, 2015, the national vision of the university is to enhance women’s economic activities offering some need-based courses mostly through online mode.

10. CONCLUSION:

The various provisions of 21st century world-class education have transformed both developed and developing countries of Asia like never before. However, in many of the poor and under developed countries, maintaining a decent standard of living is still the basic requirement. In order to tackle this issue, the provision for a gender-neutral society and concerted efforts for the women’s education is the need of the hour. Along with the conventional mode of education, which is restrictive in various ways, ODL can

positively contribute to this situation to achieve a gender-neutral society in the true sense. Throughout many countries of the world, the general trend of enrollment suggests that women’s enrolment in education is higher in ODL compared to conventional mode. This is also the testimony of the popularity of ODL among the female learners all over the world. The best practices as well as women’s participation in various programmes of the universities mentioned in this paper have been able to sensitize the women towards an equitable living, which is seen in their willingness to be a part of the educated world. This is undoubtedly a fact in the context of some Asian countries, which are too advanced in terms of HDI. However, some other Asian countries are yet to reach a considerable level of advancement in this regard. In order to maintain a socio-economic balance among the people of the different Asian countries, we need the mechanism to sort out the problems causing gender inequality. Education is the only way to maintain gender equity and the provision of skill-based education is the only solution for transforming the lives of the women learners in general. In this regard, the ODL system is the most viable option to guide or help the Asian countries to move forward. And, the strategies adopted by some of the selected Mega open universities of Asia can be the important milestones for educational attainments on the part of the women learners.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the discussions provided in this paper, the following recommendations may be made for maintaining gender equity and reducing gender inequalities in society.

The open universities must mechanise policies on gender equity to reduce gender gaps and ensure the reach of educational support to those hitherto been excluded from the ambit of education. Courses should be introduced in such a way that would sensitise the women by boosting up their level of self-confidence starting from taking their own decisions to making them aware of their political rights.

- b. The Universities in the developing countries should be having proper Institutional policies for opening up timely and need based educational opportunities to the women learners through a systematically built Learning Management System (LMS) to suit their specific requirements.
- c. For the benefit of all, collaborative exchange programmes and staff exchange programmes among the open universities of both developed and developing countries may boost further cooperation in imparting need-based researches on different aspects of women's education from regional perspectives.
- d. Mobilising the women learners for using digital technologies may be yet another solution to the hard-pressed problem of women's education. In this context, development and adaptation of need-based MOOCs may also improve women's education. The open universities in the developing and underdeveloped countries may learn a lot from the open universities of the developed countries regarding the methodologies of offering MOOCs specially dedicated to women learners.
- e. Public/government interventions for funding education for women, just like in case of advanced countries such as China, Korea and Japan is very important in the context of ODL in Asia. However, in case of Afghanistan, although comparatively the country has a good Govt. expenditure on education, still this country has failed in reaching the educational goals. Such types of problems should be sincerely addressed while implementing the different educational policies.
- f. Sensitising women regarding the localized courses may also mobilize the capacity of women learners belonging to different age groups and enhancing their livelihood and entrepreneurial skills, particularly in the developing and underdeveloped countries. Such courses shall surely make women feel empowered in the present global contexts.

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