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Socio-economic profile of women learners of the ODL system with special reference to KKHSOU in Assam

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Abstract: One of the main objectives of the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) System is to increase the participation of people in higher education and to accelerate the growth and development of a country. Today, the importance of education for women is realized worldwide because higher education for women is vital for the social, economic, political and educational advancement of a country. The ODL system has been providing opportunities of higher education to thousands of women who are deprived of education for reasons more than one. Already, several women, coming from diverse backgrounds, have enrolled in this system and completed their education successfully. They differ in their age, residential area, religion, employment status, family background, social status, previous educational level and so on. In spite of these differences, they have been taking the advantage of the ODL system to fulfill their educational needs and goals. This paper examines the attainments of the post-graduate women learners who took up general and professional courses at the Master's degree level through the ODL mode at Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Assam, the only state Open University of North East India, to explore how higher education had brought changes into their personal as well as social lives. Besides, why these women learners had opted for the ODL mode in place of the regular conventional mode is also explored through this paper. Based on the analysis of the data collected through a questionnaire a few suggestions to enhance the educational opportunities for women through the ODL mode are also placed.

Keywords: Socio-Economic Profile, Women Learners, ODL Mode, Educational Opportunities, Distance Education

Introduction

Higher education is considered a necessity for the growth and development of a nation as it produces human resources. Higher education helps the learners in their acquisition of knowledge, wisdom and skills besides developing their potentiality to the fullest extent. Higher education provides expert knowledge, fosters intellectual growth, inculcates cultural awareness and ensures personal growth. It benefits the people in obtaining economic independence, enhancing their decision-making capacity, gaining good health, realizing greater sense of discipline, fostering better communication ability, ensuring political participation, enhancing the sense of accomplishment and making life better by upgrading their standard of living. Thus, the role of higher education is gauged by its role in preparing the learners to face the challenges of life and society boldly. At the end of the post-graduate education, a student becomes capable of drawing his/her own conclusion and finding solution to problems yet to be solved. The National Policy on Education (1986) stated, "Higher education provides people with an opportunity to reflect on the critical social, economic, cultural, moral and spiritual issues facing humanity. It contributes to national development through dissemination of specialized knowledge and skills. It is, therefore, a crucial factor for survival." (NEP 1986, p. 14) Therefore, the purposes and contexts of higher education in a country has been a matter of serious critical enquiry for quite some time and the inclusion of more and more women in the ambit of higher education can be seen as very encouraging for a developing country like India.



In 21st century, higher education in general plays a crucial role as it prepares the human capital for the society. Schultz (1971) measured the contribution of education to the development of economy of the United States of America. He stated that education was found to be 3.5 times more attractive than investment in physical capital. Similarly, in a recent study conducted by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, conducted by Torpey (2018) revealed that though it is hard to quantify the full value of education, it makes sense investing on education. The study also found that earning is increased with the increased level of education with respect to every successive degree. So, the more one learns, the more one earns. McIntosh on the other hand stated that higher educational qualification helps women to earn more and he pointed out that “Women with more education earn more, on an average, than women with minimum level of education.” (McIntosh, 1973, p. 28) But the case of India is not like the developed countries of the world. In India, a major section of the women are not yet getting higher education, though they are an integral part of its human resources.

In this above-mentioned context, the report of All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) is worth mentioning. As per the AISHE, 2018-19, the total enrolment in higher education is 37.4 million, where 19.2 million are male and 18.2 million are female, female constituting 48.6% of the total enrolment. Again, the population who has completed the tertiary level in India is only 4% in an average, where male is 5% and female only 3%. (WIDE, 2018) On the other hand, regarding the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India, which is calculated for 18-23 years of age group, the picture is different in the year 2018-19. The GER of India is 26.3%, where for male population, it is 26.3% and for female 26.4%. The following Table 1 shows a comparison of GER in Indian higher education from 2013-14 onward.

Table 1: GER of India in higher education

Year	Male	Female	Total
2013-14	23.9%	22.0%	23.0%
2014-15	25.3%	23.2%	24.3%
2015-16	25.4%	23.5%	24.5%
2016-17	26.0%	24.5%	25.2%
2017-18	26.3%	25.4%	25.8%
2018-19	26.3%	26.4%	26.3%

(Source: AISHE, 2018, 2019)

In Table 1, the GER for female is slightly higher in 2018-19, but till 2017-18, it has been lower than that of male. The data also shows that there is a continuous growth of GER for women in India. In 2018-19, the percentage of female has increased sharply and surpassed male which has contributed to the increase in the national GER. It is a very good sign for the higher education sector of India.

It can also be observed that the enrolment of female in higher education in India is more in general course (i.e. Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Commerce, etc.) than in the technical/professional courses (i. e. Computer Science, Medicine, Engineering, Law, Management, skill based courses, etc.). Technical/Professional education is defined as higher educational programmes that are designed for the learners to acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies specific for a particular occupation or grade or class of occupations or trades. The NSS 71st Round (2014) data provide a vivid picture of the enrolment status of both male and female in general and professional courses across India. The Table 2 below depicts the scenario.

Table 2: Percentage distribution of students pursuing General and Technical/Professional courses (in percentage)

Course					
General	Male	Female	Technical/ Professional	Male	Female
Humanities	49.9	50.01	Medicine	35.3	64.7
			Engineering	75.2	24.8
			Law	63.9	36.2
Science	59.5	40.05	Management	62.3	37.7
			IT/Computer Course	61.1	38.9
Commerce	56.6	43.4	ITI/ recognized vocational	82.8	17.2
			Others	51.1	48.9

(Source: NSS 71st Round), NSSO, Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation.

Interestingly, from Table 2, it can be observed that the female enrolment is higher in the Humanities and Medicine rather than in Engineering, Management, Computer courses or IT based courses and other recognized vocational courses, where male still play a dominant role. It also means that most of the female learners are general degree holders which is a hurdle in their way towards securing a proper employment in the present techno-based or industrial society.

Another important finding of AISHE, 2018-19 is that per 100 male students, the number of female students has increased from 85 in 2014-15 to 95 in 2018-19. The following Table 3 shows the enrolment of women in the Master's Degree courses from 2014-15 to 2018-19.

Table 3: Enrolment of female per 100 male some important PG level courses through regular mode

Course	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
M.B.B.S.-Bachelor of Medicine & Bachelor of Surgery	95	97	99	101	106
M.A.-Master of Arts	154	165	169	173	180
M.B.A.-Master of Business Administration	58	61	62	70	75
M.Com.-Master of Commerce	145	148	158	168	179
M.Sc.-Master of Science	147	157	167	171	174
M.Tech -Master of Technology	64	64	67	55	54

(Source: AISHE 2018-19)

From the above data, it can be surmised that the female participation is very high and has also increased steadily in the general courses, such as M.A., M.Com and M.Sc in the last 5 years, and in those courses, the enrolment is higher than that of the male. But, the enrolment of women in the professional/technical courses such as MBBS, MBA and M.Tech is much lower than the male.

As per NITI Aayog Report (2019-20), the Gender Parity Index (18-23 years) in India in higher education is 1. It has increased during the last 5 years from 0.92 in 2014-15 to 1 in 2018-19. The report also states that, in Assam, the GER in higher education (18-23 years) is 18.7% and the Gender Parity Index (18-23 years) is 0.95. According to AISHE, 2018-19, there is relatively higher share of male enrolment than that of female across the different levels of higher education in most of the states of India. So, there is much to do to increase the GER of women in higher education, so that the nation can be benefitted from that. The women, who are deprived of higher education in the conventional system because of societal and gender-based pressures, need to enter the mainstream to become a part of the knowledge-based society and to take part in the nation building process. Realizing the importance of education for women, the first Prime Minister of India, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru 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 Nobel laureate and renowned economist Professor Amartya Sen,

while expressing his concerns for social development, also stressed that, “Educational backwardness has many adverse effects on the freedom and well-being of people in general and women in particular, on mortality and fertility, rates on pressure for social change.” (Sen, 1994) Therefore, it is of utmost importance to raise the educational levels of women. As women are deprived of higher education in the conventional system, an alternative way to educate them is the need of the hour. Here Open and Distance Learning (ODL) may provide that alternative platform for the female learners of the nation.

ODL and its benefit for women

Of late, across the whole world, ODL has emerged as a useful alternative and supplement to the conventional system of education. Talesra (2004) opined that ODL is an educational novelty to meet the ever-increasing and diversified educational needs of the society. It represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of the learners. Similarly, Siddiqui (2004) pointed out that ODL, as a tool for expansion of higher education, has been catering to the needs of a different sets of target groups with different sets of programmes and courses. It is a type of education that occurs while location, time, or both separate the participants. Again, Kumar et al (2008) argued that ODL is primarily concerned with higher educational requirements of housewives, working people, adults, workers and the aged people to supplement their knowledge base. In fact, ODL offers learning opportunities to all categories of women to uplift their educational qualification and thereby to contribute for development of the country. It has helped the underprivileged women to mobilize their capacity, develop innate potentialities, exert control over resources and raise their status and standard of living.

Many other authors have also hinted at the benefits of ODL for the women. For example, Srivastava and Reddy (1996) has pointed out that distance education plays a very important role in women's development as they are constrained by time, space, resources and socio-economic disabilities. It enables them to learn at their own pace and take up vocations and skills for economic, individual and social developments. Comfort Olufunke Akomolafe (2006) found that ODL creates opportunities for women's education today to learn throughout their lifetime and that an educated woman is a better mother, wife, social mobilizer or citizen. But the point is that despite the ample opportunities through ODL, there are still millions of women who are illiterates due to ignorance, cultural hindrances and poverty in urban, rural and remote areas. Bozkurt et al (2019) did a study on the experiences of the female learners of Anadolu Open University Faculty Program. They did an online survey where learners were asked to share their stories leading to their participation in ODL. The authors highlighted the voices of 16 women and they found that, given the right condition, ODL can be an agent for social justice, as it has the power to break down barriers to education and consequently, democratize societies. Likewise, Tichaona and Chipso (2012) examined the extent to which ODL is an alternative university education for women at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). They concluded that lack of university education for women could be a drawback for the production of the human capital and a letdown to national development. In yet another study conducted by Martha. it was found that Programmes at a distance can reach substantial numbers of women, in societies where women lack equal opportunities for participation in conventional forms of education and training. Distance education can increase women's points of access to education. Commonwealth of Learning (2017) also reported of the Baseline–Endline study by the GIRLS Inspire team's 'Reaching the Unreached' project to examine the implications of skills training and education for women's and girls' empowerment and sustainable livelihoods through ODL in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. The study found that empowering Women and Girls highlights three key areas that affect women's and girls' ability to make strategic life choices: employment opportunity, education and decision making.

The brief literature review carried out above are reflective of the usefulness of the ODL system for the education of women as it has become a useful mode of obtaining degrees by a large number of women learners who are staying in far off and remote areas and for whom accessing universities on regular

basis is a far cry. In India, distance enrolment constitutes about 10.62% of the total enrolment in higher education, of which 44.15% are female learners. The Table 4 below provides a Level wise distribution of enrolment of both men and women in both regular and ODL modes.

Table 4: Level wise Enrolment in Regular and Distance Mode in India

Level wise distribution of enrolment						
Level	Distance mode			Regular mode		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Ph. D.	28	25	53	95015	74102	169117
M. Phil.	-	-	-	11623	19069	30692
Postgraduate	454640	544447	999087	1306690	1736745	3043435
Undergraduate	1616601	1083611	2700212	13586745	13542118	27128863
PG diploma	57060	42331	99391	64495	60825	125320
Diploma	70948	59246	130194	1732260	836941	2569201
Certificate	20053	22765	42818	55074	64805	119879
All	2219330	1752400	3971755	16851902	16334605	33186507

(Source: AISHE 2018-19)

At Postgraduate, Undergraduate, PG Diploma, Diploma, Certificate level, the share of distance enrolment is 28.8%, 77.8%, 2.9%, 3.7% and 1.23% respectively. If we look at the male-female ratio at each level, we see that the ratio of male is higher than female in almost every level, except in M. Phil, Postgraduate and Certificate levels. Ph.D. level has 56.18% male and 43.82% female. PG Diploma students' enrolment is 54.09% for male and 45.91% for female.

It is against the deliberations on the need and contexts of ODL that this paper intends to study the profiles of the female learners who took up post graduate courses through the ODL mode in an Indian state open university like KKHSOU located in Assam.

Need and Significance of the Study

Assam is situated in the North Eastern region of India which comprise total eight states namely, Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Sikkim. It covers a total of 8% population from the population of India. However, the state of education in this region is a serious matter of concern as thousands of learners, including women, are still deprived of their much-needed education. If we take the case of Assam, the literacy rate, according to the Census of 2011, is 73.18%, where male literacy is 78.81 and female 67.27% with a gap of 11.54%. Again, in terms of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), the state has comparatively poor GER of 18.7%, where, the GER for male is 19.1% and for female it is 18.3% only. The GER of Assam is also poor compared to many other North Eastern States like Sikkim (53.9%), Manipur (33.7%), Meghalaya (25.8%), Mizoram (25.7%), etc. (AISHE 2018-19) Besides, it has been observed that the female GER is lower in Assam compared to many other North Eastern states and is much below the national average (i.e. 18.3% against the national 26.4%).

The following Table 5 provides a clear picture of male-female enrolment in post-graduate and above courses in Assam and all India.

Table 5: Enrolment in Post-Graduate and above levels in Assam and India

Level		Assam	India
Ph. D	Male	2970	95043
	Female	1970	74127
	Total	4940	169170
M. Phil	Male	192	11623
	Female	272	19069
	Total	464	30692
Post graduate	Male	26709	1761330
	Female	38720	2281192
	Total	65429	4042522
PG Diploma	Male	1694	121555
	Female	1564	103156
	Total	3258	224711
Total	Male	31373	1977928
	Female	42254	2458475
	Total	73627	4436403

(Source: AISHE 2018-19)

From Table 5 it is seen that enrolment of women in different levels of education is lower than men except in the PG level, both in Assam and India. A comparison of the enrollment of both male and female in PG and above levels of education, through both regular and distance mode in Assam is also shown in the following Table 6 which helps to realize the scenario of higher education for women in Assam.

Table 6: Comparison of enrolment in PG and above level programme through regular and distance mode

Level		Assam	
		Regular	Distance
Ph. D	Male	2970	----
	Female	1970	-
	Total	4940	-
Post-graduate	Male	13127	13582
	Female	17545	21175
	Total	30672	34757
PG Diploma	Male	681	1013
	Female	737	827
	Total	1418	1840
Total	Male	16778	14595
	Female	20252	22002
	Total	37030	36597

(Source: AISHE 2018-19)

The data shown in Table 6 indicates that the enrolment in regular mode is higher for both male and female in a state like Assam. Though, the distance enrolment is lower, it is indicative of the fact that this mode has been making progress within a short period of time compared to the regular mode, which also indicates the popularity of the mode (the distance mode started in 1970s only). It is also seen that the female enrolment is higher in PG courses in both the regular and distance mode.

The above statistics reveal that the overall inclusion of girls and women in higher education in the state of Assam is poor compared to boys and men. This situation demands an alternative avenue for providing higher educational opportunities to the people irrespective of sex, age, geographical location, prior

educational qualification, so that equality can be maintained in every sphere of the society. ODL could be the solution for ensuring an equitable society that will meet the pluralistic needs and demands of the women folk in a right and ordered way. Higher education, particularly at the Master's Degree level, provides expertise along with knowledge and wisdom and prepares the learners to the future world. It gives employability to the learners and makes them self-confident, self-aware, self-reliant and self-sufficient. The profiles of learners in higher education have also become largely varied. One of the major issues in the higher education sector in India is the inequality in access and participation among certain community groups. There are so many reasons for that. Therefore, the significance of this study lies in the fact that it can be used to find out whether or how far and to what extent ODL is able to sensitize the people towards education in Assam. The researchers believe that through a study of the socio-economic, religious and cultural background of the women learners in the ODL system, it can be examined whether the objectives of access, equity, affordability of the system have been actually achieved. It is also important to evaluate whether the ODL system has been successful in narrowing the gap in women's participation in Post-Graduate level courses through the ODL mode. As such, this study will test how far the equal opportunity of education is being made available to the women through the learners selected for this study. In this regard, information related to age, caste, religion, residential area, marital status, family background, economic and employment status, aspiration from the course, reasons for choosing an ODL course, etc. are considered to be relevant to study how these traits influence the educational attainment level of women.

Objectives

This paper seeks to address the following objectives

1. To study the socio-economic background of the women learners who studied Master's degree in KKHSOU.
2. To examine the individual woman learner's objectives to pursue the Master's degree programmes in KKHSOU through the ODL mode
3. To know the preferences for ODL mode over the traditional face-to-face mode on the part of the female learners.
4. To provide necessary suggestions to the policy makers by identifying the shortcomings of education for women that would enhance the opportunities for women to get higher education through the ODL system.

Methodology

The Research Method

This study adopts Quantitative Descriptive Survey Study method for the research. As the study explains the present state of affairs regarding the enrolment of women at the postgraduate level in the ODL system as well as their socio-economic background to find out which women mostly enrolled in higher education through the ODL mode, descriptive study method has been chosen for the study.

The population

Assam has three types of institutions of higher education in the ODL mode. First one is a Regional Centre of the National level open university-Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU); the second one is the state level open university namely, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU); and the third one is the Directorates of Distance Education (DEIs) of Dual Mode Universities namely Gauhati University, Dibrugarh University and Tezpur University. Besides, there are a few private universities which provide education through the ODL mode. However, the present study is based on an investigation of the socio-economic profile of the women learners who have acquired Master's Degree through the ODL mode. As such, the population comprises the learners from KKHSOU who have passed Master's Degree courses, namely-MA in any subject (History, Geography, English, Hindi, Education, etc.), MBA, MCA, MMC and MSW in the years 2014, 2016 and 2018 (M.Com is introduced

in 2018 only). For the population, KKHSOU is selected as it is a state level open university. As the institution has enrolment from all over the state of Assam, so, the entire state is covered in the study. As the first batch of Master's Degree programme of KKHSOU was out in the year 2014, it is taken as the base year. The pass out years have been taken alternately as 2014, 2016 and 2018, so that the coverage area of learners can be extended. Moreover, it is not possible to cover too many learners in a single study. On account of this, the population of the study comprise all the women learners who have passed Master's Degree courses in the years 2014, 2016 and 2018 from the KKHSOU, Assam.

The Sample

Purposive sampling technique is used to select the sample for this study. Due care was taken in selecting the sample so that a representative sample of Assam can be obtained for the study. Each selected learner of MA, MBA, MCA, MMC and MSW courses (of the year 2014, 2016 & 2018) was provided with a questionnaire requesting to respond openly. A total of 322 questionnaires were sent to the learners. Among them, 150 to the learners of MA courses (50 for each selected years), 120 for MSW course (40 for each selected years as there were less number of pass outs), 13 for MBA, 22 for MCA and 17 for MMC courses. Very few women learners of MBA, MCA and MMC courses had cleared the final exams in the selected years, so, the questionnaires were sent to all of them. Out of the total questionnaires sent, only 125 filled-in questionnaires had been received back. Among them, 55 of MA, 9 of MBA, 8 of MCA, 10 of MMC and 43 of MSW courses were received.

The courses selected for the study are both of general academic and professional/Technical in nature (such as, MA is a general academic course, MCA is a technical course, MMC, MSW and MBA are professional courses). The implication is that these varied courses would help to analyze the accessibility and preferences of courses by the women learners, coming from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. In Indian higher education system, after completing an under-graduate course of 3 or 4 years (general course=3 years, technical=4 years), a student can pursue a Master's Degree course (Post-Graduation) of 2 years in a specific subject, whether it is a general academic or technical course.

Preparation of Data gathering Tool

This study sought to verify the objectives by collecting evidences from the learners through a self-structured questionnaire prepared on the basis of supportive documents and literatures pertaining to DE and ODL systems available in various institutes, libraries, State Resource Centre, websites, etc. It was organized in a systematic way to collect evidences on the independent variables, such as, age, caste, religion, location of residence, marital status, family's economic background, socio-economic and educational background of the learners, reasons for not getting higher education earlier, not getting a job (if unemployed) and reasons for joining ODL courses, etc. For standardization of the tool, the Questionnaire was administered among a few learners for taking a trial as pilot study. The tool was then modified accordingly. The reliability and validity of the prepared tool is ensured through expert opinion for maximum effectiveness.

Nature of data

The data for this study were collected through both open-ended and fixed-response type items. The types of data collected for the study are as follows.

- i) Profile of women learners: data collected on women learners under independent variables like age, sex, religion, caste, marital status, educational qualification, location of residence (rural/urban/semi-urban), mother- tongue, family background, etc.
- ii) The Course in which the learner enrolled, duration, years of enrolment and pass out
- iii) Reason/s for not getting higher education earlier and choosing the ODL programme
- iv) Employment status, reason for not getting a job (if unemployed)

Collection of data

The data was collected from primary sources, i.e. the distant women learners who passed a Master's Degree course from KKHSOU and who are the actual beneficiaries of the ODL system, by floating the questionnaire among them. The secondary data sources include the official records, documents, etc. of ODL universities and various research reports, reports of govt. and non-govt. organizations, articles in journals, magazines, etc.

Strength of the Study

The study is considered useful for certain reasons. It would help to increase the capacity of KKHSOU to provide post-graduate education to all types of women learners. Necessary measures could also be taken by the policy makers so that all types of women, irrespective of class, class, socio-economic background, etc. would be encouraged to be enrolled in the system for their higher qualification.

Limitations of the study

The present study is limited to the respondents who are selected from the KKHSOU of Assam only. Besides, only the women learners who have passed a Master's Degree courses from the said university have been selected purposefully.

Analysis of data

The paper is based on the analysis of available empirical data quantitatively. The collected data are analyzed methodically as simple statistical techniques of analysis, such as, percentage calculation were adopted to interpret the results. The outcomes are represented with the help of charts, tables, etc.

Results

Districts covered by the study

At present, Assam has 33 districts. For this study, the districts namely Kamrup (Metro) and Kamrup (Rural) have been taken as one district (undivided, formerly they were part of one district). Total 20 districts of Assam were represented by the learners in this study, though efforts were made to represent all the districts. However, the districts are chosen from all the four directions, i.e. North, South, East and West of the state. So, it is a representative sample from entire state of Assam. The district-wise representation in the present study is shown in the chart below.

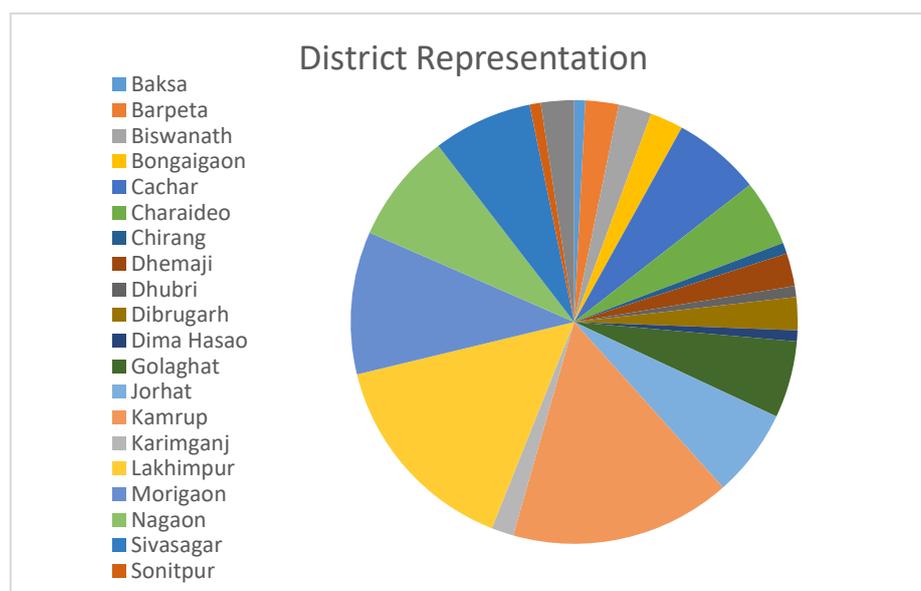


Fig.1: Chart showing the representation of districts of Assam in this study

The districts with the number of respondents are-Baksa=1, Barpeta=3, Biswanath=3, Bongaigaon=3, Cachar=8, Charaideo=6,Chirang=1, Dhemaji=3, Dhubri=1, Dibrugarh=3, Dima Hasao=1, Golaghat=7,

Jorhat=8, Kamrup (R & M)=20, Karimganj=2, Lakhimpur=19, Morigaon=13, Nagaon=10, Sivasagar=9, Sonitpur=1 and Tinsukia=3.

Location of residence of learners

It is found that out of 125 learners, 39 (31%) are from urban areas, 28 (22%) are from semi-urban areas and 58 (47%) are from rural areas. It means that a major percentage of the learners come from the rural areas, which is nearly half of the total respondents. The following Table 7 and Figure 1 depict the same.

Table 7: Residence of the Pass out Learners

Learners	Urban	Semi Urban	Rural
Number	39	28	58
Percentage	31%	22%	47%

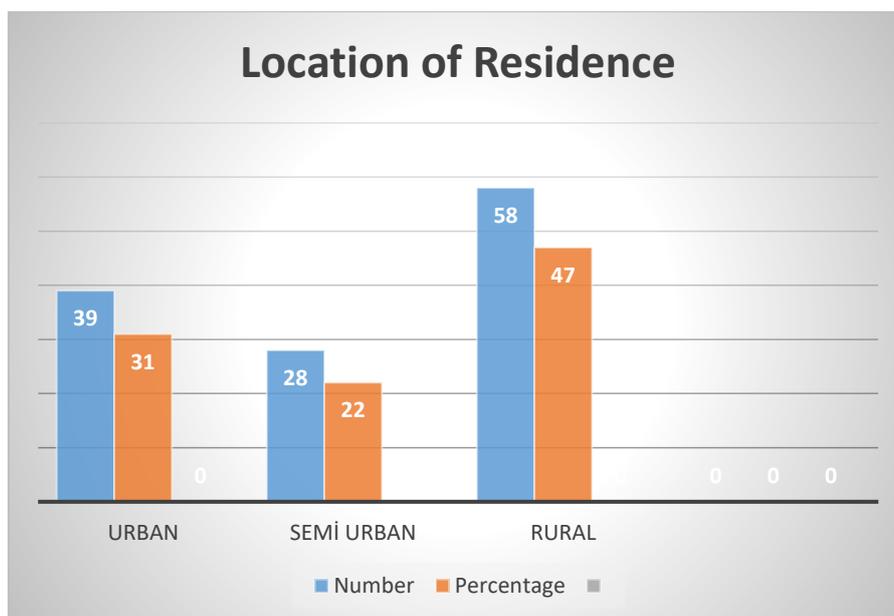


Fig. 2: Chart depicting residential areas of learners

The data signifies that the advantages of the ODL system are taken more by the women from rural areas than by those from urban and semi-urban areas.

Age group of the Learners

Regarding the age of the learners, it is found that, 46% (58) learners are in the age group 31-40 years. Following that, 39% (49) learners are in the age-group 21-30 years, 13% (16) in 41-50 years and 2% (2) in 51-60 years. It is shown in the Table 8 below.

Table 8: Age Group of learners

Age group (in years)	Number	Percentage
21-30	49	39%
31-40	58	46%
41-50	16	13%
51-60	2	2%

From the Table 8, it is understood that the majority of the learners are in the age range of 21-30 years and 31-40 years. They represent total 85% of the respondents. Very few learners are in the age range of 41-60 years. They comprise only 15% of the total respondents.

Marital Status of the Select Learners

Among the respondents, 66% (82) learners are found to be married, while 34% (43) learners are unmarried. It shows that the majority of the learners are married women who have received higher education through the ODL mode.

Religion

Majority of the learners are from the Hindu religion comprising 89% of the samples. Besides, Hindus, there are Muslim (9%) and Christian (2%) learners too. Out of these, 42% belongs to the Other Backward Classes (OBC), 41% to General category, 6% to More Other Backward Classes (MOBC), 6% to Schedule Tribe (ST) and 5% to Schedule Caste (SC) categories. It indicates that Hindu and both General and OBC category learners are over-represented in the Master's Degree programmes at KKHSOU as is evident in Table 9.

Table 9: Religion of the Pass out Learners

Learner T=125	Religion			Caste				
	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Gen	OBC	MOBC	SC	ST
Number	111	12	2	51	52	8	6	8
Percentage	89%	9%	2%	41%	42%	6%	5%	6%

Another implication of the above-mentioned data is that women learners from MOBC, SC and ST categories should be taking the advantages of the ODL system and therefore timely initiatives to be taken to attract such women.

Mother Tongue

86% learners belong to a category whose mother tongue is Assamese. There are Bengali and Bodo speaking learners too, but their number is too less. The mother tongue of a few learners is Nepali which is included in the 'Other' group. Among the learners, 50% received their previous education in the Assamese medium, 49% in the English medium and only 1% in the Bengali medium as can be found in Table 10.

Table 10: Mother Tongue and Medium of Earlier Education of the Learners

Learner	Mother Tongue				Medium of earlier education		
	Assamese	Bengali	Bodo	Other	Assamese	English	Bengali
Number	108	11	4	2	63	61	1
Percentage	86%	9%	3%	2%	50%	49%	1%

From the data, it is seen that most of the women learners have Assamese as their mother tongue and they have taken their earlier education in the Assamese medium. There are very few learners whose mother-tongue is other than Assamese. It is also revealed that though the PG education is provided through the Assamese, English, Bengali, Bodo medium and through most of them took earlier education in the English medium, the interest is less among the women whose mother-tongue is not Assamese, for enrolment in the ODL system in Assam. This is a matter of concern.

Economic Background

The economic background of the learner's family is also revealed by the study as can be seen in the following Table 11.

Table 11: Family's Annual Income of the Learners

Family's annual income	Number of respondents	Percentage
Below Rs.10000.00	3	2%
In between Rs.10000.00 to Rs.20000.00	25	20%
In between Rs.20000.00 Rs.50000.00	47	38%
Rs.50000.00 and above	50	40%

The data reveals that 40% of the learners belong to the category whose family income is more than Rs.50000 per annum, 38% learner's family annual income is in between Rs.20000 to Rs.50000, 20% belongs to the group of in between Rs.10000 to Rs. 20000 and the income of only 2% learners is below Rs.10000 as shown in Table above. In case of 67% (84) learners, the course fee was paid by their respective families, but 33% (41) learners paid the course fees themselves. The above data reveal that the majority of the learners belong to well-to-do families and their course fees was paid by the respective families. But, there are women learners who studied on their own expenses. It may be an indication that women are also interested to pursue higher education.

Educational Background

Most of the learners completed their undergraduate courses before joining the Master's Degree programmes at KKHSOU. Some other learners have also completed Post-graduation courses in other subjects. The statistics is shown below-

Table 12: Prior educational qualification of learners

Course	No. of learners	Percentage of learners
Graduate	108	86.4
Post- Graduate	12	9.6
Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.)	2	1.6
Graduate & B. Ed.	2	1.6
Bachelor of Law (LLB)	1	0.8

The data reveals that 86.4% (108) learners were graduate, 9.6% (12) were Post-graduate, 1.6% (2) had B.Ed. degree, 1.6% (2) were both a Graduate and a B.Ed. degree holder and 0.8% (1) had LL.B. degree. The data shows that there are very a smaller number of learners who had a PG degree before joining the course. These learners took advantages of the ODL mode to get more degrees. But, the maximum number of women joined the Master's Degree courses after completing a under graduate course. Among the learners, no one was found to be a person with special needs.

Employment Status

Regarding employment, 53% (66) learners were employed before joining the Master's Degree course. Among the employed learners, 36% worked in Government sector (run by the government), 46% in private sector and 9% in Semi-Government sector (partially run by the government) and 9% learners were self-employed. The Table 13 below describes the employment status of the sampled women.

Table 13: Employment Status of the Learners

Employment status	Employed	Unemployed	Working sector			
			Govt.	Semi Govt.	Private	Self-Employed
At the time of joining the course	53%	47%	36%	9%	46%	9%
After completion of the course	83%	17%	50%	14%	33%	3%

After completing the course, 83% (104) learners got employment; only 17% (21) left unemployed. Among the presently employed women, 50% (52) are working in Government sector, 14% (15) in Semi-Government sector, 33% (34) in private sector and mere 3% (3) are self-employed now.

Unemployment Status

Among those who were unemployed (59=47%) at the time of joining the Master's programmes, 69% (40) are employed now and 31% (18) are still unemployed. Majority of them (18=45%) are now working in the govt. sector; 38% are working in the private sector, 12% in the Semi Govt. sector and only 5% is self-employed as found in the Table 14 below.

Table 14: Unemployment Status of the Learners

Unemployed when joined	47%				
Now employed	69%	Sector			
		Govt.	SG	Private	Self employed
		45%	12%	38%	5%
Still unemployed	31%				

The employment status reveals that a major percentage of the learners are currently in job. Even those who were not in job earlier, 70% percent of them are having jobs now. This indicates that one of the main objectives of the ODL system to provide earning opportunities to all is nearly fulfilled. The reason for unemployment is stated to be as not getting a job of choice by most of the learners (57%). Some (23%) of them stated that it is due to their personal problems. 13% respondents expressed that the ODL degree is not recognized by the employers. A few respondents (7%) have been still studying either through the ODL or conventional mode.

Reasons for not getting higher education earlier

Most of the women learners (53%) opined that they did not get the required marks for getting admission in colleges and universities. It indicates that though there are relaxations for women's admission in colleges, the provisions may not be adequate. 43% learners got job of their choice and could not take up higher education. 22% learners could not get higher education earlier as they got married early. College was too far for 22% women learners to get higher education earlier. This may be due to the fact that in many Indian societies, girls and women are not allowed to attend far off colleges. In case of 15% learners, the reason was that the family did not support higher education of girls. 14% could not get education due to poverty of the family. 13% learners had to do household works and look after their siblings and hence were deprived of higher education. Mere 6% learners could not avail higher education due to the fear of sexual harassment in colleges. This sharing is shown in the Table 15 according to the degree of occurrence of the causes.

Table 15: Reasons for not getting higher education earlier

Reason	Number	Percentage
Did not get required marks for college admission	66	53%
Got job of choice	54	43%
Early marriage	27	22%
College is too far from home	27	22%
Family did not support girl's education	19	15%
Poverty of the family	18	14%
Had to look after siblings and do household works	16	13%

Fear of sexual harassment in colleges	8	6%
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It is evident from the data that the conventional system has rigid admission criteria making it inaccessible for many women. Some social customs, norms and disbeliefs also act upon it. All these make the situation awful for women.

Reasons for choosing an ODL programme

The women learners were assessed on the basis of the reason as to why they had chosen the ODL mode. The basic reason for most of the learners (83%) was to improve their educational qualification and fulfill dreams of higher education. As there is no need to attend an ODL institution daily, which in a way saves both time and money, 63% learners got attracted towards it. Relaxed admission criteria in terms of educational qualification and age for admission attracted 62% learners towards the ODL system. As they could study from home according to their own pace and time, so 59% learners enrolled in it. According to 53% learners, the ODL degree is at par with the conventional system and so they opted for it. 52% learners opted for an ODL course as it is cost effective and economic. 51% learners enrolled in the ODL courses for the effective use of their leisure time. 50% learners joined in it due to its flexible course completion time. 48% learners opined that there is scope of learning while earning and as such it is convenient for the employed persons and so they opted for the course. 41% learners chose it as there is availability of professional courses. 38% learners joined the ODL programme to take the opportunity to pursue another course simultaneously. Modern technology used in this system attracted 26% of the learners. 26% learners found it convenient for the persons with special needs (differently able persons). The Table 16 below depicts the preferences for choosing an ODL Programme.

Table 16: Reasons for Choosing an ODL Programme

Reasons	Number	Percentage
To improve educational qualification	104	83%
The degree is at par with the conventional system	66	53%
Relaxed essential qualification and age bar	78	62%
Relaxed course completion time	62	50%
No need to attend an institution daily	79	63%
Convenient for a differently able person	33	26%
Can study from home in own pace	74	59%
Availability of professional courses	51	41%
Cost effective and economic	65	52%
Due to use of modern technology in it	33	26%
Scope of earning while learning, convenient for employed person	60	48%
Scope to pursue another course simultaneously	47	38%
For effective use of leisure time	64	51%

Findings

From the study, it was found that the ODL system plays a significant role in providing higher education to women. The ODL system has emerged as a beneficial alternative to the conventional system for post-graduate education of the women learners. The major findings of the study can be enumerated as the following.

- Most of the women learners enrolling in a post graduate programme come from the rural areas in Assam.
- The majority of them are in 21-40 years of age and are mostly married.
- Religiously backward classes are under-represented in the ODL mode as the ODL institutions are still dominated by the high class Hindu people.

- d. The learners whose mother-tongue is Assamese have over-represented the enrolment status in Assam.
- e. A major share of the women learners comes from the economically advanced families and they come after graduation.
- f. The number of women who joined the ODL mode to get a second Post-graduate degree is very few.
- g. Almost half of the learners were unemployed at the time of joining the PG course; but, after completion, a majority of them got employment, only a few remained unemployed mostly because of not getting a suitable job of their choice.
- h. Most of the women learners could not get higher education earlier because they did not get the required marks for admission in colleges.
- i. The women learners had enrolled in the ODL system mostly to improve their educational qualification.
- j. The characteristics of the ODL system, such as, flexibility in admission, learner centered course delivery system where learners can learn according to their own pace and convenience, affordability, etc. also attracted the women learners towards this mode of education.

Conclusion

Women's education is to be seen as one of the considerable ways of developing a country socially and economically. So, there is a need to place the women in mainstream for the development of their self as well as their society. In this paper, an effort has been made to review and analyze the socio-economic profile of the women learners who carried out their Master's Degree programmes at KKHSOU, Assam. The study reviewed the economic and religious background, marital status and employment status of the learners. It also reviewed the causes of the women's not getting higher education earlier and the reasons for choosing the ODL mode for pursuing higher education. Based on the analysis of the profile of the women learners, this study reveals that the dwellers from the remote areas have not enrolled in the ODL system in large numbers. It also appears that a major percentage of the women learners in the ODL system are rural and most of them are married and middle-aged. The women learners choose an ODL course mostly to improve their educational qualifications and as such the ODL system is becoming very useful in raising the educational standards of the women. It is also disclosed through the study that the ODL system seems to be effective as the learners get a chance to engage in jobs after getting a Master's degree and thus fulfilling its objective of providing earning opportunity to the learners. In conclusion, it can be observed that as ODL is the education for anyone, anytime, anyplace, it should put all possible efforts to enroll more and more women from all the varied groups of the society located in far flung areas to take forward the country to an enviable height. Besides, the study also provides an input to conduct further research to see the exit behaviour of the women learners in order to assess to what extent education would help the women in general to become empowered and live their lives as responsible citizens in a country in the true sense.

Suggestions

Based on the analysis and discussion provided in this paper, the following suggestions and recommendations may be put forward for motivating the women learners towards the ODL system.

- a. More publicity and promotional activities should be organized for the enrolment of all categories of women learners into the ODL system, particularly those belonging to the religious and linguistic minority groups across the state of Assam.
- b. Adequate provisions should be made in the open universities and ODL institutions of the state to attract the women from the remote areas including those from the neighboring states.
- c. Awareness campaigns have to be arranged by the ODL institutions among the women from tribal and other backward classes for enrolling in the ODL system. Even, the ODL practitioners

in the universities should make a provision for visiting the residences of the women learners in order to make them aware of the benefits and the facilities of the ODL system.

- d. There should be studies to find out the reasons of less enrolment of women from the non-Assamese speaking communities and the hilly areas. In this regard, the ODL institutes can also encourage the faculty members and the other stakeholders to do some minor researches in certain areas and also provide support to such researches.
- e. Research studies on the status of women, particularly those who are marginalized and deprived, should be increased, so that necessary measures can be taken for their education and development.
- f. It is also important that women themselves have to be aware of open and distance education practices and motivate others towards this mode of education.

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