



Bridging Gender Inequality through Distance Education: A Study on Women Empowerment

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Abstract

Education plays a transformative role in enhancing women's socio-economic status and empowering them to participate actively in decision-making processes. However, gender inequality in access to higher education remains a persistent challenge in India. This qualitative study explores the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a strategy for women empowerment. Drawing on secondary sources and thematic analysis, the study examines barriers to women's education, the conceptual framework of empowerment, and the potential of distance education in overcoming socio-cultural and economic constraints. The findings suggest that ODL provides flexible, accessible, and cost-effective learning opportunities that significantly contribute to women's empowerment, although structural and technological challenges remain.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Distance Education, Gender Inequality, Open Learning, India

1. Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged as a fundamental human right and a key driver of socio-economic development. It plays a crucial role in enhancing individual capabilities, expanding opportunities, and enabling active participation in social, economic, and political spheres. As emphasized by the United Nations Population Fund, education empowers individuals by equipping them with knowledge, skills, and confidence to make informed decisions and contribute meaningfully to society (UNFPA, 1994) [2]. In this regard, education is not merely a means of acquiring literacy but a transformative process that fosters critical thinking, self-reliance, and social awareness.

Despite significant global advancements in educational access, gender inequality continues to persist, particularly in developing countries like India. Historically, women have been marginalized within patriarchal social structures, which have restricted their access to education and limited their participation in economic and public life. Deep-rooted cultural norms, gender stereotypes, and socio-economic constraints have contributed to the systematic exclusion of women from educational opportunities. Consequently, women often experience lower literacy rates, reduced access to higher education, and limited employment prospects

compared to men.

Education, therefore, serves as a powerful instrument for challenging and transforming these entrenched inequalities. It enables women to transition from passive recipients of social norms to active agents of change who can assert their rights and make independent decisions. As noted by Kishor and Gupta (2009) [12], education significantly improves women's socio-economic status by enhancing their income-earning potential, increasing their participation in decision-making processes, and improving their overall quality of life. Educated women are more likely to invest in their families' health and education, leading to intergenerational benefits such as reduced infant mortality and improved child development outcomes.

Furthermore, education contributes to broader societal transformation by promoting gender equality and social justice. It helps dismantle discriminatory practices and empowers women to challenge oppressive structures. For instance, educated women are more aware of their legal rights and are better equipped to advocate for themselves and others within their communities. This empowerment extends beyond the individual level, influencing community development and national progress.

However, access to conventional education systems remains

limited for many women due to various socio-cultural barriers. Factors such as early marriage, household responsibilities, financial constraints, and mobility restrictions often prevent women from attending formal educational institutions. In such contexts, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) emerges as a viable and innovative alternative. ODL provides flexible learning opportunities that allow women to pursue education at their own pace, time, and place, thereby accommodating their multiple roles and responsibilities.

The flexibility of ODL is particularly beneficial for women who are unable to engage in full-time, campus-based education. It eliminates geographical barriers and reduces the need for physical presence, making education more accessible to women in rural and marginalized communities. Additionally, advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have further enhanced the reach and effectiveness of distance education, enabling women to access quality educational resources remotely.

2. Conceptual Framework of Women Empowerment

Women empowerment is a complex and multidimensional concept that extends beyond mere economic independence to include social, political, and psychological dimensions. At its core, empowerment refers to the process through which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where such abilities were previously denied. It involves enhancing women's capacity to exercise control over their lives, access resources, and influence decision-making processes within both private and public spheres.

Agarwal (1994) ^[1] conceptualizes empowerment as a transformative process that enables disadvantaged groups, particularly women, to challenge and alter existing power relations that perpetuate inequality. This perspective highlights the structural nature of gender inequality, emphasizing that empowerment is not only about individual advancement but also about collective change in societal norms and institutions. It underscores the importance of access to resources such as education, land, and employment, which are essential for women to assert their rights and improve their socio-economic status.

Building upon this understanding, Kabeer (1999) ^[11] provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing women empowerment through three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. Resources refer to the material, human, and social assets that enhance women's ability to make choices. Agency, which is central to empowerment, involves the capacity to define one's goals and act upon them. This includes decision-making power within households, participation in community activities, and the ability to negotiate and influence outcomes. Achievements represent the outcomes of these choices, reflecting improvements in well-being and quality of life. Among these dimensions, agency-particularly decision-making power-is widely regarded as a key indicator of empowerment, as it directly reflects a woman's ability to exercise autonomy and control over her life.

Similarly, Malhotra *et al.* (2002) ^[13] emphasize the role of social inclusion and participation in the empowerment process. According to their perspective, empowerment is achieved when women are able to actively engage in social, economic, and political institutions and influence decisions

that affect their lives. This includes participation in governance, access to education and employment opportunities, and the ability to hold institutions accountable. Social inclusion not only enhances women's visibility in public spaces but also contributes to the redistribution of power within society.

In addition to structural and institutional dimensions, empowerment also encompasses psychological aspects. Saraswathy *et al.* (2008) ^[6] highlight the importance of self-awareness, self-confidence, and personal growth in the empowerment process. They argue that empowerment begins with an internal realization of one's potential and capabilities. This internal transformation enables women to overcome feelings of inferiority and dependency, fostering a sense of identity and self-worth. Psychological empowerment is particularly significant, as it influences women's willingness to challenge societal norms and pursue opportunities for advancement.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that women empowerment is a holistic process that integrates economic independence, social participation, and psychological development. It is not a one-dimensional outcome but a dynamic and ongoing process that requires supportive institutional frameworks, equitable resource distribution, and changes in societal attitudes. Empowerment, therefore, must be understood as both an individual and collective journey toward achieving gender equality and social justice.

3. Open and Distance Learning (ODL): Concept and Evolution

The concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) emerged as a significant innovation in the field of education with the establishment of the Open University in the United Kingdom in 1969. This development marked a turning point in educational history by introducing a system that aimed to democratize education and make it accessible to a wider population, particularly those who were unable to participate in conventional, campus-based learning. ODL emphasizes flexibility in terms of time, place, and pace of learning, allowing learners to tailor their educational experiences according to their personal, professional, and social commitments (Rowntree, 1992) ^[16]. This flexibility is especially beneficial for marginalized groups, including women, who often face multiple constraints in accessing traditional education systems.

The philosophy underlying ODL is rooted in the principles of openness, inclusivity, and learner autonomy. Unlike conventional education systems that impose rigid entry requirements and structured schedules, ODL seeks to remove barriers to education by providing open access to learners regardless of their age, prior qualifications, or socio-economic background (UNESCO, 2002) ^[19]. This inclusive approach has made ODL an effective tool for expanding educational opportunities and promoting lifelong learning.

In India, the ODL movement gained momentum with the establishment of the first Open University in Hyderabad in 1982. This initiative was followed by the creation of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1985, which has since become one of the largest distance education institutions in the world. IGNOU and other open universities have played a crucial role in extending higher

education to diverse sections of society, including women, rural populations, and working individuals (Satyanarayana & Meduri, 2013) [17]. Over the years, several state open universities and dual-mode institutions have been established across the country, offering a wide range of academic programs at undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral levels.

ODL is characterized by several distinctive features that differentiate it from traditional education systems. One of its key characteristics is open access, which eliminates strict entry requirements and allows learners from varied educational backgrounds to enroll in courses (Farrell, 2003) [9]. This feature is particularly important in addressing educational inequalities and providing second-chance opportunities for those who were previously excluded from formal education.

Another important characteristic of ODL is its learner-centered approach, which places the needs, interests, and pace of the learner at the center of the educational process. This approach encourages self-directed learning and fosters greater independence among learners (Rowntree, 1992) [16]. Additionally, the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has significantly enhanced the reach and effectiveness of ODL. Technologies such as online platforms, digital resources, and virtual classrooms facilitate interaction, collaboration, and access to quality educational content (UNESCO, 2002) [19].

Flexibility in learning schedules is another defining feature of ODL, enabling learners to balance their education with work, family, and other responsibilities. This makes ODL particularly suitable for women and other disadvantaged groups who may face constraints in attending regular classes. Overall, ODL represents a transformative approach to education that promotes accessibility, equity, and lifelong learning.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a focus on secondary data analysis to explore the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in women empowerment. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this study as it enables an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena such as gender inequality, access to education, and empowerment processes. Rather than relying on numerical data, qualitative research emphasizes meanings, experiences, and interpretations, making it appropriate for examining the multifaceted dimensions of women's empowerment.

The study is primarily based on secondary sources of data, including academic literature, policy documents, research articles, and reports published by reputable national and international organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), and other scholarly institutions. These sources were carefully selected to ensure credibility, relevance, and comprehensiveness. Secondary data analysis provides a broad perspective on the issue by incorporating diverse viewpoints and findings from previous studies, thereby enriching the analytical depth of the research. It also allows for the synthesis of existing knowledge and identification of patterns, trends, and gaps in the literature related to women's education and distance

learning.

To systematically analyse the collected data, the study employs a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method that involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns or themes within data. This approach enables the researcher to categorize large volumes of textual information into meaningful themes, facilitating a clearer understanding of the underlying issues. In this study, the thematic analysis was conducted through a process of careful reading, coding, and categorization of relevant information extracted from the selected sources.

Three major themes were identified during the analysis. The first theme focuses on the barriers to women's education. This includes socio-economic constraints, cultural norms, early marriage, gender discrimination, and limited access to educational resources. These barriers highlight the structural inequalities that prevent women from accessing formal education, particularly in developing countries like India. The second theme examines the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in women empowerment. It explores how ODL provides flexible, accessible, and inclusive learning opportunities that enable women to overcome traditional constraints such as time, mobility, and financial limitations. The third theme addresses institutional and socio-cultural challenges associated with ODL. This includes issues such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of technological access, gender-insensitive program design, and persistent societal attitudes that hinder women's participation in education.

The use of thematic analysis allows for a comprehensive interpretation of the relationship between distance education and women empowerment. It helps in understanding not only how ODL contributes to empowerment but also the limitations and challenges that affect its effectiveness. By integrating insights from multiple sources, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the subject, highlighting both opportunities and constraints.

Overall, the qualitative research design adopted in this study facilitates a holistic exploration of the topic. It enables the researcher to capture the complexity of women's empowerment and the role of distance education in addressing gender inequality. This methodological approach ensures that the findings are grounded in existing knowledge while offering meaningful insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers interested in promoting inclusive and equitable education systems.

5. Objectives of the study

1. To examine the concept and dimensions of women empowerment in the context of education.
2. To analyse the status of women's education in India, with reference to gender inequality.
3. To identify the barriers affecting women's access to higher education.
4. To assess the significance of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in expanding educational opportunities for women.
5. To evaluate the contribution of distance education to women empowerment in social, economic, and personal domains.
6. To examine the challenges and constraints of ODL systems in the context of women's education.

6. Research Questions

What are the key concepts and dimensions of women empowerment in relation to education?

What is the current status of women's education in India in terms of gender inequality?

What are the major barriers affecting women's access to higher education?

What is the significance of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in expanding educational opportunities for women?

What is the contribution of distance education to women empowerment in social, economic, and personal aspects?

What are the major challenges and constraints faced by women in the ODL system?

7. Gender Inequality in Education in India

Despite notable progress in literacy rates over the past decades, gender disparities in education continue to persist in India. According to the Census of India (2011), the female literacy rate stands at 65.46%, which is significantly lower than the male literacy rate of 82.14%, reflecting a substantial gender gap in educational attainment. This disparity is not merely a statistical difference but a manifestation of deep-rooted socio-cultural and economic inequalities that systematically disadvantage women (Kishor & Gupta, 2009) [12]. Although policy initiatives and educational reforms have attempted to bridge this gap, structural barriers continue to impede women's access to higher education.

One of the most critical barriers to women's education is the prevalence of early marriage and teenage pregnancy. In many parts of India, girls are married at a young age, often before they can complete their secondary education. According to UNICEF (2012) [20], a significant proportion of women in India are married before the age of 18, which disrupts their educational trajectory and limits their opportunities for higher learning. Early motherhood further compounds this issue, as young women are expected to assume domestic responsibilities, leaving little time or support for continuing education (Warner *et al.*, 2012) [7].

Financial constraints and poverty also play a crucial role in limiting women's access to education. In economically disadvantaged households, education is often prioritized for male children, while girls are expected to contribute to household work or income-generating activities (Chaudhry, 1995) [3]. The direct and indirect costs of education, including tuition fees, transportation, and study materials, can discourage families from investing in girls' education. This economic bias reinforces gender inequality and perpetuates cycles of poverty and limited opportunities for women (Agarwal, 1994) [1].

Household responsibilities constitute another significant barrier. Women and girls are traditionally expected to manage domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, and caregiving. These responsibilities often conflict with academic commitments, making it difficult for women to pursue higher education, especially in conventional, campus-based systems (Tremaine & Owen, 1984) [18]. The burden of unpaid domestic labor disproportionately affects women, limiting their time, mobility, and ability to engage in educational activities.

Gender bias within educational practices and institutions further exacerbates these challenges. Discriminatory

attitudes in teaching, curriculum design, and classroom interactions can discourage female participation and achievement (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002) [13]. In some cases, educational environments may not be gender-sensitive or supportive, leading to lower retention rates among female students. Additionally, societal expectations often reinforce the notion that education is more valuable for men than for women, thereby undermining girls' aspirations and motivation to pursue higher studies (Chaudhry, 1995) [3].

Psychological factors such as low self-esteem and internalized gender norms also play a critical role in limiting women's educational participation. Many women develop an inferiority complex due to persistent societal messaging that undervalues their capabilities and potential (Saraswathy *et al.*, 2008) [6]. This lack of confidence can discourage them from seeking higher education or pursuing ambitious career paths. Furthermore, societal expectations that define women's primary roles as wives and mothers restrict their educational and professional aspirations (Kabeer, 1999) [11]. Collectively, these socio-cultural, economic, institutional, and psychological barriers create a complex web of constraints that limit women's access to higher education. As a result, women's participation in higher education remains significantly lower than that of men, which in turn hinders their empowerment and socio-economic advancement. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that not only improves access to education but also transforms societal attitudes and institutional practices to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

8. ODL as a Strategy for Women Empowerment

ODL plays a significant role in addressing barriers faced by women in accessing education. It allows women to balance education with household responsibilities, employment, and childcare.

Studies indicate that ODL contributes to various dimensions of empowerment, including:

- Increased mobility and social participation
- Economic independence
- Decision-making capacity
- Awareness of rights and legal issues (Janaki, 2006) [10].

Furthermore, ODL provides a second chance for women who discontinued education due to socio-cultural constraints. It also facilitates rural women's access to education through ICT-based learning platforms (Farrell, 2003) [9].

9. Challenges in ODL for Women

Despite its numerous advantages in expanding access to education, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) faces several challenges that limit its effectiveness, particularly in the context of women's empowerment. These challenges can be broadly categorized into internal and external constraints, both of which significantly influence the participation and success of women learners.

Internal constraints refer to limitations within the ODL system itself. One of the primary issues is the inadequacy of instructional materials. In many cases, study materials are not designed to meet the diverse learning needs of students, especially women who may require more contextualized and

flexible content. Poor quality or delayed delivery of learning materials further hampers the learning process and discourages continued participation (Dikshit *et al.*, 2002) ^[5]. Additionally, limited access to technology remains a significant barrier. While ODL increasingly relies on digital platforms and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), many women-particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas-lack access to necessary devices such as computers or smartphones (UNESCO, 2002) ^[19].

Poor internet connectivity further exacerbates this issue, especially in remote regions where digital infrastructure is underdeveloped. Unreliable internet access restricts students' ability to participate in online classes, access study materials, and engage in interactive learning activities. Institutional inefficiencies, such as inadequate student support services, lack of timely feedback, and insufficient academic guidance, also contribute to lower completion rates and reduced learning outcomes in ODL systems (Compura, 2003) ^[4].

External constraints, on the other hand, are rooted in broader socio-economic and cultural contexts. Socio-cultural restrictions continue to play a major role in limiting women's participation in education. In many societies, traditional gender roles prioritize domestic responsibilities over educational pursuits for women, thereby restricting their time and mobility (Kabeer, 1999) ^[11]. Economic hardships further compound these challenges, as women from low-income households may not have the financial resources to afford educational expenses or technological tools required for ODL (Agarwal, 1994) ^[1].

Another critical barrier is the gendered division of labour, where women are expected to shoulder the majority of household and caregiving responsibilities. This unequal distribution of work leaves women with limited time and energy to engage in educational activities, affecting their academic performance and persistence in ODL programs (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002) ^[13].

Moreover, ODL institutions often treat learners as a homogeneous group, failing to recognize and address the specific needs and challenges faced by women learners. This lack of gender-sensitive program design can result in reduced engagement and lower academic achievement among women (Dikshit *et al.*, 2002) ^[5]. Therefore, addressing both internal and external constraints is essential for making ODL a truly inclusive and effective tool for women empowerment.

10. Impact of ODL on Women Empowerment

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a powerful mechanism for fostering women's empowerment by enabling access to education in flexible and inclusive ways. One of the most significant impacts of ODL is the enhancement of women's self-confidence and self-esteem. As women engage in learning and acquire new knowledge and skills, they develop a stronger sense of identity and self-worth. This psychological empowerment allows them to challenge traditional norms and assert their voices within both household and societal contexts (Saraswathy *et al.*, 2008) ^[6].

In addition to personal development, ODL contributes to improved economic opportunities for women. By gaining

educational qualifications and skill-based training through distance education, women are better equipped to participate in the workforce or engage in income-generating activities. This economic independence not only improves their standard of living but also enhances their bargaining power within the family and society (Kishor & Gupta, 2009) ^[12]. As a result, women are more likely to contribute to household income and make financial decisions, thereby strengthening their role within the family structure.

ODL also promotes greater participation of women in family and community decision-making processes. Educated women tend to be more aware of their rights and responsibilities, which enables them to actively engage in discussions related to family welfare, children's education, and community development (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002) ^[13]. This increased participation signifies a shift from passive acceptance to active involvement in shaping social and familial outcomes.

Furthermore, ODL enhances women's awareness of important issues such as health, legal rights, and social justice. Access to educational resources and information enables women to make informed decisions regarding their health, reproductive choices, and legal entitlements. This awareness is crucial in promoting gender equality and reducing vulnerabilities associated with ignorance and dependency (UNESCO, 2002) ^[19].

Women who participate in ODL programs often gain recognition and respect within their families and communities. This recognition contributes to a gradual transformation of traditional gender roles, where women are increasingly viewed as capable contributors to social and economic development (Plummer, 2000) ^[15]. Thus, ODL plays a vital role in advancing women's empowerment across multiple dimensions.

11. Findings of the Study

The findings of the study are derived from a qualitative analysis of existing literature and are presented in accordance with the stated objectives.

Firstly, the study finds that women empowerment is a multidimensional concept encompassing economic independence, social participation, and psychological development. It is not limited to material resources but includes the ability to make decisions, exercise agency, and achieve desired outcomes (Kabeer, 1999) ^[11]. Empowerment also involves challenging existing power structures and enhancing women's capacity to control their lives (Agarwal, 1994) ^[1]. Thus, education emerges as a critical factor in facilitating these dimensions of empowerment.

Secondly, the analysis reveals that despite improvements in literacy rates, significant gender disparities in education persist in India. Female literacy rates remain lower than those of males, reflecting systemic inequalities (Kishor & Gupta, 2009) ^[12]. Socio-cultural norms, gender bias, and economic constraints continue to limit women's access to higher education (Chaudhry, 1995) ^[3]. These disparities highlight the need for alternative educational models that can address these structural barriers.

Thirdly, the study identifies multiple barriers affecting women's access to higher education. Key factors include early marriage, teenage pregnancy, poverty, household responsibilities, and societal expectations regarding

women's roles (UNICEF, 2012; Warner *et al.*, 2012) ^[20, 21]. Psychological barriers such as low self-esteem and internalized gender norms also restrict women's educational aspirations (Saraswathy *et al.*, 2008) ^[6]. These findings indicate that barriers are not only economic but also deeply rooted in social and cultural contexts.

Fourthly, the findings highlight that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) plays a significant role in expanding educational opportunities for women. Its flexible structure allows women to balance education with domestic and professional responsibilities. ODL removes geographical and temporal barriers, making education accessible to women who cannot participate in conventional systems (Rowntree, 1992; UNESCO, 2002) ^[16, 19]. In India, institutions such as IGNOU have contributed significantly to widening access to higher education (Satyanarayana & Meduri, 2013) ^[17].

Fifthly, the study finds that ODL contributes positively to women's empowerment across multiple domains. Participation in ODL enhances women's self-confidence, economic independence, and decision-making abilities (Kishor & Gupta, 2009) ^[12]. It also increases awareness of legal rights, health issues, and social responsibilities, thereby promoting active participation in family and community life (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002) ^[13]. Women learners often gain greater recognition and respect within their social environments, indicating a shift in traditional gender roles (Plummer, 2000) ^[15].

Finally, the study identifies several challenges within the ODL system that affect its effectiveness. Internal constraints such as inadequate instructional materials, poor technological infrastructure, and limited institutional support hinder learning outcomes (Dikshit *et al.*, 2002) ^[5]. External constraints, including socio-cultural restrictions, economic hardships, and the gendered division of labour, further limit women's participation (Kabeer, 1999) ^[11]. Additionally, the lack of gender-sensitive approaches in ODL program design places women at a disadvantage.

Overall, the findings suggest that while ODL is a promising strategy for women empowerment, its success depends on addressing both institutional and socio-cultural challenges to ensure inclusive and equitable access to education.

12. Conclusion

The present study highlights that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a significant and transformative strategy for addressing gender inequality in education and promoting women empowerment. Education, as widely acknowledged, is a fundamental tool for enhancing human capabilities and enabling individuals to participate actively in socio-economic development (UNFPA, 1994) ^[2]. In the context of persistent gender disparities, particularly in developing countries like India, ODL offers an alternative pathway that accommodates the diverse needs and constraints faced by women.

The findings of this study clearly indicate that ODL contributes to women's empowerment across multiple dimensions-economic, social, and psychological. By providing flexible learning opportunities, ODL enables women to pursue education alongside their domestic and professional responsibilities, thereby overcoming traditional barriers such as time, mobility, and financial constraints

(Rowntree, 1992; UNESCO, 2002) ^[16, 19]. This flexibility is particularly beneficial for women who have discontinued their education due to early marriage, household duties, or socio-cultural restrictions. As a result, ODL acts as a second chance for many women to re-engage with education and improve their life prospects.

Furthermore, participation in ODL programs enhances women's self-confidence, decision-making capacity, and economic independence. Educated women are more likely to contribute to household income, participate in community activities, and assert their rights within familial and societal structures (Kishor & Gupta, 2009; Malhotra *et al.*, 2002) ^[12, 13]. This transformation not only improves individual well-being but also leads to broader social change by challenging traditional gender norms and promoting equality. In this sense, ODL serves not only as an educational model but also as a catalyst for social empowerment (Plummer, 2000) ^[15]. However, the study also reveals that the effectiveness of ODL as a tool for women empowerment is constrained by several challenges. Internal limitations such as inadequate instructional materials, poor technological infrastructure, and lack of institutional support hinder the learning experience (Dikshit *et al.*, 2002) ^[5]. At the same time, external factors such as socio-cultural norms, economic hardships, and gendered division of labour continue to restrict women's full participation in education (Kabeer, 1999; Agarwal, 1994) ^[11, 1]. These challenges indicate that access to education alone is not sufficient; the quality, inclusivity, and contextual relevance of education are equally important.

Therefore, to maximize the potential of ODL, there is a need for comprehensive and gender-sensitive policy interventions. Educational programs must be designed to address the specific needs of women learners, incorporating flexible curricula, accessible technologies, and supportive learning environments. Improving access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), strengthening institutional support systems, and promoting awareness about the importance of women's education are essential steps in this direction (UNESCO, 2002) ^[19]. Additionally, efforts must be made to challenge and transform socio-cultural norms that hinder women's educational participation.

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