

Open And Distance Learning To Empower Rural Women: Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at explaining the scope of using ODL materials for women empowerment in the rural areas through enhancing literacy, business skill and social awareness. The paper also identifies possible barriers in using ODL tools to enhance women literacy and business skill and recommends some possible corrective measures. In this case, the possibility of partnership with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), role of technologies has been verified. Experience of BOU's (Bangladesh Open University) Secondary School Certificate (SSC) programme and COL-BOU project on entrepreneurship skill training for rural women have also been explained in the paper.

Keywords: Rural women empowerment, literacy, business skill, open and distance learning, GO-NGO partnership.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a populous (130 million, 2000) developing country (US\$ 370 per capita, 2002) with huge people living under the national poverty line (around 45% of Bangladesh's population is classified as poor and around 23% as living in absolute poverty) and high illiteracy (male 49%, female 71% among people with age 15 and above, 1998). The overall population density was 875 persons per sq km (2,267 persons per sq mile) in 2000. More than three-fourth of the population (80%, 1998) live in the rural area. About half of the rural population is female.

Although around half of rural manpower is female, they are in backward condition economically, socially and politically as they cannot participate in income generating activities due to several constraints like lack of literacy, lack of business skill, social and religious restrictions, dependency on males, responsibility of bearing children, etc. In past, the rural women didn't have access to business credit

because they didn't have resource endowment and thus they couldn't provide anything as collateral. However, credit sourcing is no longer difficult as recently several micro-credit programmes have been initiated by some Government Organisations (GOs) and also by a number of NGOs where the rural women can get funds without any collateral and can enhance their economic condition by utilizing these funds properly. However, getting capital is not all. They need to know how to utilize the capital and extract the maximum benefit out of that. Otherwise, they will not be able to continue with their businesses. Since for micro-credit, the interest rate is relatively high, the rural women must extract more revenue (at least capital + the interest + a margin) to survive. Therefore, it is the crying need for the rural women to have literacy and proper business skill for their survival. Recently, government undertook several schemes for enhancing female education. For example, free education for the female students up to higher secondary level, stipend for the female students up to secondary level, etc. These initiatives certainly had significant impacts on female education and thus widely appreciated; however, a large section of rural female, especially the adults, cannot be included in those programmes. Due to the socio-cultural and family specific constraints, the rural adult females are unable to participate in the conventional on-campus literacy schemes. Also, there is no management skill training programmes offered by the government for them. Although some NGOs have some skill training programme for the rural women, these are very limited as compared to that required. Open and distance learning (ODL) tools can be used successfully to provide literacy and business skill training to a wide range of rural women.

This paper aims at explaining the scope of using ODL materials for women empowerment in the rural areas through enhancing literacy, business skill and social awareness. The paper also identifies possible barriers in using ODL tools to enhance women literacy and business skill and recommends some possible corrective measures. Starting with a brief introduction in Section-1, Section-2 of the paper describes the socio-economic characteristics of the rural women in Bangladesh, Section-3 explains kinds of ODL materials to be used for training the rural women, and Section-4 explains case studies. Experience of BOU's (Bangladesh Open University) Secondary School Certificate (SSC) programme and COL-BOU project on entrepreneurship skill training for rural women have also been explained in the paper as case studies. In this case, the possibility of partnership with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the role of technologies have been verified

RURAL WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

In the rural areas, women are more disadvantaged than men. The overall situation of rural women is as follows:

Role-playing in family: Usually, the head of the family is man. Females are just housewives. Their main responsibilities are bearing and raising children, preparing foods for the family members, working in the family farms, etc.

Resource endowment: Most of the rural poor families do not have any fixed asset. Even if some families have some fixed assets (land, for example), females do not have much authority on the family assets. That's why they cannot use assets as collateral to get loan from commercial Banks.

Income earning activities: Most of the females are not involved in marketable production activities. Their production activities are not counted in monetary terms in family income accounting. They have to depend on the males' income. Even if they have opportunity to engage themselves in production activities outside the family, family structure does not allow them to do that. Their activities are mostly limited at the family level and thus, are not monetised. However, under micro-credit programmes, recently rural women have started undertaking projects by their own.

Literacy: Most of the adult rural women cannot even write their names, though government's recent initiatives such as 'free education for females', 'food for education programme', etc. have enhanced the literacy rate among the young females.

Access to capital: Since the rural women do not have free access to the family assets, before they couldn't source liquid or physical capital because the financial institutions asked collateral. However, recently a number of NGOs and some government specialized/non-specialized financial institutions have initiated micro-credit programmes from which the rural poor women can get financial support without any collateral to undertake their own or family enterprises.

Entrepreneurial skill: The rural women can now undertake their own micro-projects with the financial support provided by NGOs and GOs. Already a large number of women are running their businesses under various micro-credit programmes. However, they have to frequently face uncertainty with their

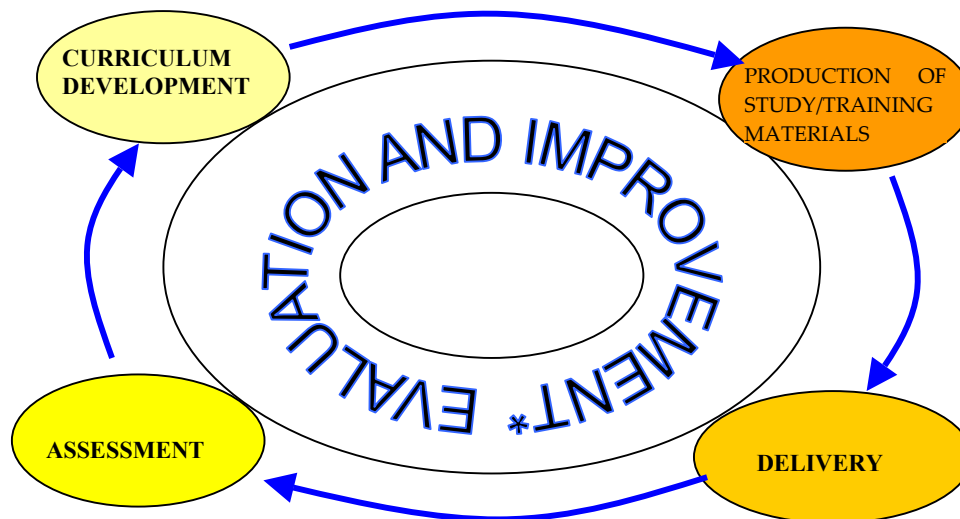
businesses, which may emerge as a great threat to the viability and sustainability of the micro-credit programmes in the long run. The major deficiency of the rural poor women is the lack of entrepreneurial skill. They suffer a lot for this deficiency when they run their business. In most cases, the rural women move by 'learning-by-doing' principle, which is sometimes costly for them and also for the funding agencies.

Access to technologies: The rural poor women do not have access to modern technologies due to the lack of affordability and accessibility. However, they have little access to radio broadcasts.

ODL PROGRAMMES FOR THE RURAL WOMEN

Designing ODL programmes for rural women

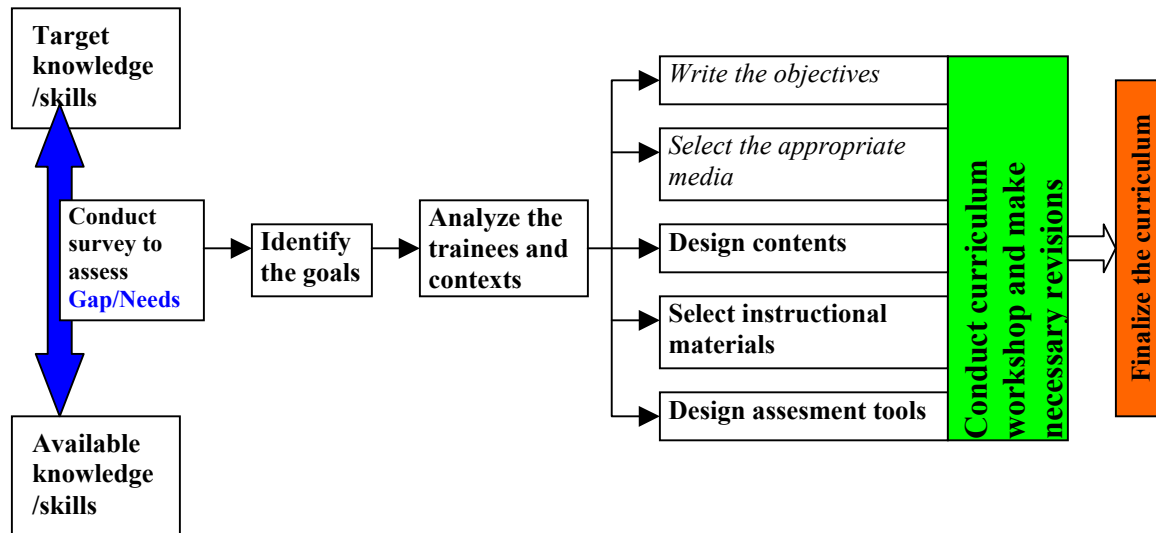
It is really a tuff job to design and develop a study/training programme for the relatively illiterate rural poor women. Anyway, the following steps must be carefully followed:



The steps are interlinked each other. Continual evaluation and improvement of each and every step is necessary for better meeting of the objectives. Delivery step is very important in case of the rural women. It may not be equally beneficial to apply the common delivery methods for the rural women of all areas of the country. Due to cultural differences, location and also due to the variation in the accessibility to the media, the common delivery may not be appropriate.

Curriculum development

Curriculum development is the most important step in the process of designing a study/training programme. The following steps may be followed at this stage (adapted from S A Sultana and M A Kamal, 2002):



Development of the ODL materials for rural women

Since the rural women do not have access to most of the technologies as well as media that are used in ODL system, the study/training materials for the rural women should be different from the materials developed for the usual ODL programmes. Although a number of media and technology as in the following table (adapted from Dekkers, 2000) are used in ODL system, most of them cannot be used by the rural women.

Open Learning Delivery Matrix

Teaching/ Learning Method	Type of Media							
	Synchronous			Synchronous/Asynchronous	Asynchronous			
	Face-to-Face	Video	Audio	Online	Tape	Email	Print	CD Room
Lecture	X	X TV	X RADIO	X	X	X		
Tutorial	X√	X	X	X	X	X		X
Seminar	X	X	X	X	X			
Independent Study				X	X		X TEXTBOOK	X
Group	X√	X	X	X		X	X	

'X' indicates the possibility of the media used for the corresponding teaching method in ODL. However, for the literacy programme, printed texts may be effectively used with audio-visual materials. The shaded areas indicate the media can be used in the literacy programme for the rural women. For the entrepreneurship skill training programmes, on the other hand, radio programmes and audio cassettes (containing various success stories in managing the small enterprises, threats and ways of recovery, etc.), video cassettes (containing documentary explaining the success and failures in the rural small enterprises, detailed information about training, funding sources, investment opportunities, prospective and existing markets, etc.), flip charts (containing the steps in a business, threats and causes in business, remedies, etc), posters (mostly similar to the flip charts), etc. can be developed. Printed textbooks may not be appropriate for most of the rural women as they are illiterate.

Delivery of the materials

The main limitation of the rural women is that they are not capable to handle the materials mentioned above independently. Collaboration with NGOs and GOs is important especially in the case of delivery. TWO-Stair delivery can be more effective in this case.

- Delivery to the trainee trainers
- Delivery to the rural women

Both kind of delivery may be occurred simultaneously. The TWO-Stair delivery approach has two-fold outcomes: 1. it will enhance the skill of the existing trainers and create new trainers, and 2. it will enhance the literacy level and skill of the rural women.

Assessment

After the delivery of the materials, both the trainee-trainers and the target women have to be assessed by using some appropriate assessment tools. For trainee trainers, self-assessment questionnaires, written assignment, case studies, etc. can be used. And for assessing the target participants, 'check sheet for progress' that may be filled out by the trainers or others by talking to the participant women, recorded interviews of the participant women, etc. may be used.

In all three stages mentioned above, the involvement of the NGOs and GOs is very crucial, especially in the entrepreneurship skill training programmes. Because, they

are working with the rural women directly at the field level and thus they know the most effective way of delivering the training materials to the rural women.

Example 1: COL-BOU Collaborative Project on “Management Skill Training for the Rural Women in Bangladesh Using Open and Distance Learning Materials”.

Initiated and supported by the Commonwealth of Learning, Bangladesh Open University undertook the project in 1997 aiming at developing necessary management and entrepreneurial skills in the rural women for better management of their businesses as well as contributing to human development, employment generation and poverty alleviation of the country. The project had three phases:

- *Phase-1 (September 1997 to August 1998): Curriculum development*
- *Phase-2 (September 1998 to September 1999): Review of the curriculum and material development*
- *Phase-3 (October 1999 to September 2000): Delivery, evaluation and certification*

Nature of programme and target group

The project developed a non-formal training programme of BOU and delivered through the partnership among COL, BOU and the partner NGOs/GOs. This programme primarily enrolled the trainee-trainers of the rural women, who, in the process of completing the programme, will delivery the training module to the rural women who are or intend to be small business entrepreneurs.

- *Trainee trainers:* The existing or prospective field workers of the NGOs/GOs, the agricultural extension workers and the youths who intend to build up career as trainers. The minimum entry qualification for the trainee trainers was 12 grade schooling or equivalent.
- *Participants:* Rural businesswomen or the women who intend to start rural enterprises.

Contents and methodology

The programme had five courses developed in a participatory and moduler form. Each course is worth of three credits containing a training manual, supplementary audiocassette and sufficient amount of illustrations, charts, posters and visual supports. Besides, the whole programme package is supplemented by a video cassette containing documentaries and cases on the rural female entrepreneurs. The five courses of the programme are titled as:

- Dimensions of rural business
- Planning rural business

- Management and marketing
- Money management
- Rural business skills

The training manual of these courses clearly designs each of the participatory sessions indicating the trainer objectives, participant objectives, training aids, topics for discussions, methods, activities and feedback on activities. It also indicates links with other sessions and suggest criteris for assessing the progress of the participants and evaluating trainer achievements.

Delivery method

The trainee trainers enrolled in the programme had been attached to any center of the host NGO/GO that supervised and monitor their work and organize the women participants in the training programme. The trainee-trainers received the training package from BOU, which includes the training manual, flipcharts, posters, charts, and audio-video materials. BOU also arranged a two-day orientation course for the enrolled trainee-trainers. The trainers then delivered the training materials to the women participants through series of face-to-face participatory sessions and submitted the required assessment works to BOU along with the comments of the center representative.

Assessment and certification

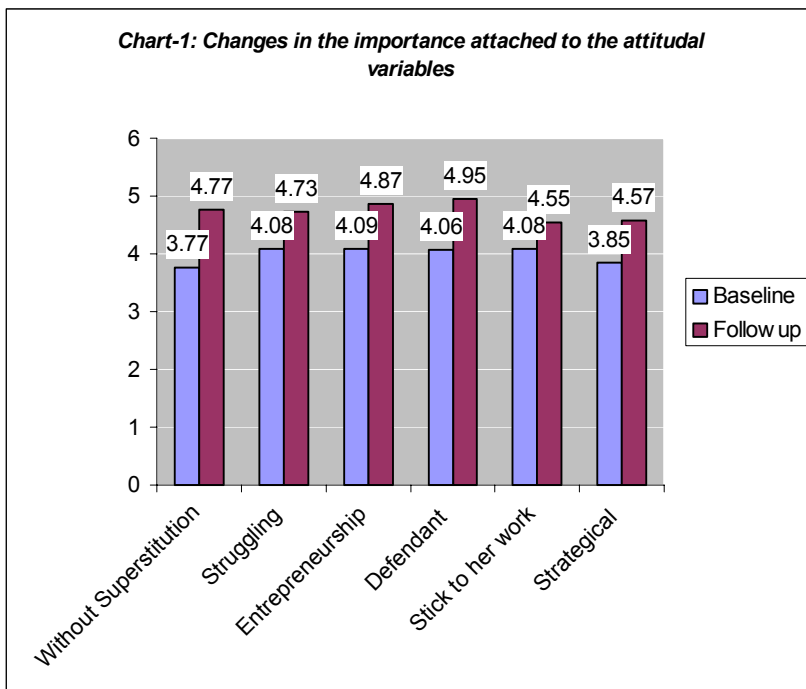
The training manual contains self-assessment questions for the trainee trainers and the checks for the progress of the participants. However, the trainee trainers also had to submit some assessment works to BOU at regular intervals of the training modules. The assessment work included:

- Written report
- Written assessment
- Case studies, recorded interviews

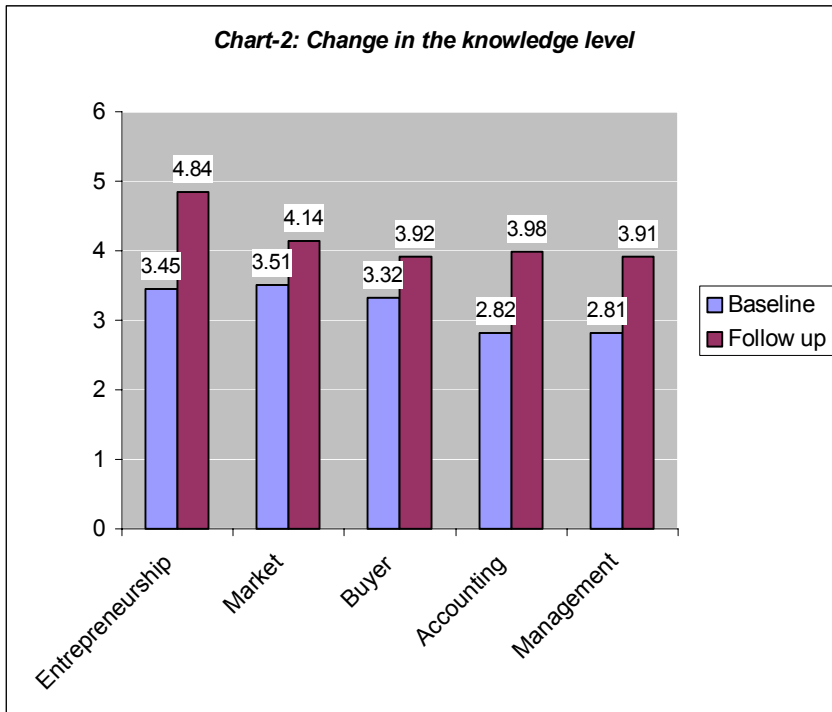
Upon successful delivery of all training materials and submission of assessment works, the trainee trainers were awarded joint certificates by COL and BOU recognized as “Commonwealth Certified Trainers of Rural Business”. Upon attendance in all participatory sessions under the training programme, the participants were awarded joint certificates by BOU and the host NGO/GO, which may help them in obtaining credit and starting rural enterprises.

Evaluation of the achievements from the training programme

After delivering the materials to the 5 trainee-trainers and 100 participant rural poor women divided into five groups each of which was guided by 1 trainer, an assessment survey was conducted preceded by a baseline survey. And upon the completion of the training, a follow-up survey was done on the same group to unearth how the skill training had enhanced the capacity of the rural women in running the small enterprises. The result of the surveys shows that the attitude, skill and knowledge level of the rural women were enhanced after the training. Following charts explain this. In the charts, the values are the mean values of the response scores, where response scores are: 0=not at all, 1=very little, 2=a little, 3=average, 4=quite a lot, 5=a lot.



Source: BOU-COL Baseline and follow-up survey, 2000



Source: BOU-COL Baseline and follow-up survey, 2000

The survey results also show that skill variables such as, 'ability to prepare budget', 'ability to plan', 'ability to collect business-related information', 'ability to open network', 'ability to assess right and wrong' had been enhanced, but 'ability to write letter', 'ability to read', 'ability to count loss and profit, debt, expenditure' had gone down.

In addition, the survey results show that the trainee-trainers have been benefited from the training in terms of knowledge and skill.

Example-2: SSC programme of BOU

To enhance the literacy and the general educational level, Bangladesh Open University launched its Secondary School Certificate (SSC) programme in 1995. Around 50% students of the programme are female. Most of them are from the rural area.

Courses content and textbook: Course contents are similar to those of the conventional SSC courses approved by National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). Based on the approved course contents, textbooks for the BOU's students are written in modular form so that the students can learn the concepts in the course by themselves.

Teaching method :In BOU's programmes, the teacher takes a much more subsidiary role. Here students ask the teachers to solve the problem they have faced in the courses. Tutors acts here just as facilitators. Students not only talk to the teachers/tutors to get answer of their queries, but also they discuss the complex concepts in the courses with the peer students. In that case, teacher help the students start the discussion, maintain the discussion and conclude the discussion. BOU uses the conventional school buildings as tutorial centers and teaching staffs as tutors.

Media uses: BOU uses print, audio, video, post, tutoring, radio and television to help its students learn effectively. However, in SSC programme, only print, tutorial sessions, radio and TV programmes are used. As the students don't have access to the modern media, they have to depend heavily on the print and tutorial sessions.

Evaluation: Students of the SSC programme is evaluated by the end-of-course written examination. The questions are set and exam-scripts are evaluated mostly by the tutors and the teachers of BOU.

CONCLUSION

The first step for the women empowerment is to enhance their literacy level and uplift their entrepreneurial skill. SSC programme of BOU certainly serves the purpose of enhancing literacy as well as the general level of education for the rural women. The main constraint in the SSC programme is the heavy dependence on the text materials. Since the students don't have much access to other educational media, printed textbooks have become the main vehicle of knowledge transmission in the programme. As a result, if the students face any difficult in understanding the contents, they always depend on tutors and fellow students. That's why, the demand for more and more tutorial sessions are always high in the programme, which is a diverging tendency from ODL system. Therefore, adopting more and more distance education media is very crucial in this case. Only BOU alone will not be able to do that. Government intervention can be very fruitful in this case. For example, government can allow more chunk in TV and Radio for BOU programmes or can allow BOU to use a separate channels for broadcasting its programmes. At the same time, government can provide TV and Radio sets to the rural female groups. This kind of initiative will help the rural women learn from the programme most effectively.

In the case of skill training programme, COL-BOU projects shows that the entrepreneurial skill can be enhanced by using ODL materials. Of course, ODL system is relatively appropriate to train the huge number of rural poor women in Bangladesh. However, designing, developing and delivering the ODL materials in this case needs careful attention. The materials must be more simple. Since the rural women are not literate in general, the materials should be either practice oriented (for example, learning games) or illustrated materials. Cases based on success stories of the rural women, threats and remedies in the businesses, etc. may be more attractive to the rural women. So, locally produced radio and TV programmes based on the cases may be useful in this case. Of course, the social norms and gender sensitivity should be captured while the materials are developed. The collaboration with the NGOs and GOs are very important to maximize the impacts of the training programme.

Through literacy and business skill training by ODL the rural poor women can have a good base for running and undertaking a business confidently. After having the training, they can reduce the uncertainty in their businesses due to the inappropriate planning and maximize the net revenue from the business.

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