UPSKILLING WOMEN THROUGH E-LEARNING: A NEW DIMENSION IN SOFT POWER OF INDIAN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Since the inception of the Information Age, India's digital framework has expanded significantly, becoming an integral element of the nation's Soft Power strategy. The McKinsey Global Survey's results indicated that crises such as COVID-19 have actually accelerated digitalization, evidenced by the increased demand for E-learning. Consequently, this has prompted the initiation of the New Education Policy 2020, which focuses on digitizing the Indian education sector to enhance its quality, reach, and affordability. This document aims to highlight the transformative potential of e-learning for women's education and their participation in the evolving employment landscape. Furthermore, it explores how this advancement could further amplify India's Soft Power, thereby generating greater opportunities for women, leading to noteworthy shifts in domestic policies and the broader societal perception regarding women's empowerment.

Keywords: Age of Information, E-Learning, India's Soft Power, Job Market, Covid- 19, NEP 2020, and Women Empowerment

Introduction

The inaugural bold endeavor in creating E-learning resources was undertaken by the University of Toronto in 1986, which successfully experimented with online conferencing as an instrument for cooperative learning. Simultaneously, India embarked on substantial, enduring reforms aimed at establishing a robust foundation for future growth. The concept of leveraging distance learning to democratize access to technical and managerial education was initially proposed in the National Education Policy of 1986 (NEP). The subsequent draft of NEP 2016 underscored the importance of integrating Information and Communication Technology in higher education and skill enhancement, highlighting the significance of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for delivering top-tier education and meeting the need for ongoing knowledge updates. NEP 2020 marked a significant milestone by sanctioning top 100 universities in the NIRF rankings to provide online degrees, further aligning this initiative with the Digital India campaign to facilitate student authentication and integration into a national academic repository. Institutions such as Amity University and IIT Madras now offer scalable online degrees and IGNOU has a broad selection of online certificate programs.

The profound cultural and historical wealth of India holds the promise of elevating its position as a leading soft power but it remains incomplete without a strategic plan to

enhance its digital diplomacy amidst a burgeoning digital revolution. Digital public infrastructures can be a significant part of India's soft power and in turn bolster India''s global influence through its blossoming digital economy. Presently, India is the world's second-largest internet user base, with 692 million people accessing the internet (Data Reportal's 2023), showcasing its evolution towards becoming a prominent global power.

In the modern era, digital diplomacy has revolutionized traditional diplomatic practices, utilizing the Internet and ICTs. The advent of information technologies has transformed international diplomacy and underscored the importance of ICT in contemporary conflicts, making digital diplomacy more pivotal than ever. For instance, Kosovo's recognition by Facebook in 2013 exemplifies the new dynamics of state and non-state soft power diplomacy in the digital age.

The emergence of the internet has catalyzed the evolution of e-learning, a progression that accelerated dramatically during the 2020 global pandemic, leading to a surge in educational technology adoption worldwide. India has become a frontrunner in online education, with the market expanding significantly and numerous EdTech startups emerging, positioning India to become a leading exporter of digital education. Government initiatives, including the National Knowledge Network (2010), Diksha (2017), NEP 2020 and eVidya (2020) have propelled this growth, with the NEP 2020 facilitating online degrees and blended learning as crucial for enhancing education access and quality.

Online learning platforms have made education accessible to diverse demographics, including women who, due to societal and logistical constraints, might find traditional educational avenues challenging. The transition to online learning and remote work is bridging gender disparities, enabling women to achieve educational and professional advancements, thus contributing significantly to societal progress in the 21st century. It is essential to continue fostering inclusivity and leveraging digital advancements to maximize women's potential in the workforce.

Objectives

- The objective of this study is to evaluate the increase in internet accessibility resulting from initiatives led by the government and subsequently propose strategies for leveraging this access to enhance women's skills through e-learning.
- The research will explore the significance of soft power diplomacy for nations and the role of e-education in strengthening soft power.
- Furthermore, it will elucidate the connection between a high soft power ranking and the empowerment of women.

Hypothesis

- E-learning will contribute to women's progress in the workforce, fostering gender equality and ultimately facilitating the sustainable development of India.
- E-learning plays a crucial role in the creation of soft power.
- A favorable perception of soft power will enable India to present itself as an attractive destination for investment, enhance the reputation of its goods and services and bolster India's ambitions to become a global leader.

Methodology

The research paper has adopted a descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing comparative analysis to concurrently examine the status of women in India in relation to other nations.

To elucidate the theoretical underpinnings of Soft Power Diplomacy, it employs the Theory of Complex Interdependence proposed by political theorists Joseph Nye & Keohane. Additionally, it leverages the democratic peace theory to interpret power from a socio-cultural perspective, illustrating how democracies are inclined towards exercising soft power rather than adopting aggressive strategies.

The research is grounded in both primary and secondary data sources. Primary sources encompass various governmental and official documents, including bilateral and multilateral treaties, draft laws, and leaders speeches. Secondary sources consist of books pertinent to the research theme and scholarly articles from academic journals. Articles published in widely read newspapers and journals are also referenced.

Rethinking Women's Education

The World Bank's 2022 gender statistics for India underscore a pronounced gender inequality in labor force engagement. Within the demographic aged 15 and above, a mere 24% of women are engaged in economic activities, in stark contrast to 73.6% of their male counterparts. Notably, female participation in the labor market has remained below 30% since 1990, exacerbating the gender divide in labor force involvement, especially when contrasted with the lower-middle-income category.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023) points out that despite a noticeable improvement in female educational participation, the gender gap in education remains substantial. In higher education, gender disparities have expanded in favor of women over the last decade, particularly in developed nations and transitioning countries, with 130 women enrolled for every 100 men. However, women continue to face significant challenges in sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, East Asia, and certain Arab States. Addressing this disparity necessitates dedicated efforts, including setting time-specific quantitative goals and establishing clear mechanisms for accountability.

India's eLearning sector was valued at $247 million in 2016 and expanded to approximately US$ 6.4 billion in 2022, marking a compound annual growth rate of 52%. Projections estimate its growth to reach US$ 14.1 billion by 2028. The escalation in traditional classroom education costs by 175%, positions online education as a more economical alternative. The demographic segment within India, aged 15–40, comprising nearly 48% of the population, characterized by high aspirations but limited financial resources, presents a prime target for online education initiatives. Moreover, the younger demographic exhibits a high acceptance rate for online learning platforms. A 7.2 fold increase in women's enrollment in online training programs has been documented, with a report by Internshala indicating that women constituted 40% of e-learners in 2021, engaging in courses for skill development and enhancement. Over six years, there has been a notable surge in female participation in e-learning, with 41% of these learners originating from tier-III cities in India, finding online courses both affordable and beneficial. According to the report, 49% of female learners cited employment opportunities as their primary motivation for enrolling in online training, while 32% sought to acquire new skills. Women's growing interest in STEM and management courses has been evident, with preferences for web development (29%), digital marketing (19%) and Python (16%) among others.

E-Learning has been identified by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) as a key area for deploying education through educational technologies and communication media. It aims to foster learning facilitated by Information Communication Technologies (ICT), with objectives including the development of tools and technologies to promote e-learning nationwide. This approach offers enhanced learning experiences, cost-effective delivery, learning flexibility, uniform content quality, and content reusability. MeitY has historically provided financial support for R&D projects in e- learning across academic institutions and R&D labs, encompassing content development, technology projects, human resource development and faculty training to enhance literacy via distance education employing ICT tools.

The shift towards virtual education significantly impacts societal sectors, necessitating the Indian educational ecosystem's alignment with the rapidly evolving global educational technology market. This evolution is closely tied to the nation's economic and social development, highlighting e-learning as a critical social investment. Government policies on e-learning are pivotal in shaping the future of this educational modality, underscoring its universal relevance and its role in augmenting a nation's soft power. By leveraging e- learning, India can enhance its political legitimacy and future potential by engaging upcoming generations.

Digital technologies are transforming economies and the requisite skills for future job markets. However, the persistent underrepresentation of women and girls in ICT education and careers indicates a need for India to dismantle obstacles impeding their progress.

From 2010 to 2020, women's participation in India's workforce declined from 26% to 19%, plummeting further to 9% by 2022 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the World Bank (2023). The pandemic-induced limitations on women's employment opportunities, coupled with increased domestic responsibilities and wage disparities, have detrimentally affected the country's GDP, underscoring the correlation between female employment rates and per capita GDP. Addressing this issue is imperative for economic stability and gender equity in the workforce.

Consequently, e-learning enterprises have the potential to significantly aid women in resuming their professional journeys post-pandemic. Similar to their male counterparts, women require the acquisition of skills and upskilling to re-enter the workforce. Currently, individuals possessing college degrees are receiving higher salaries in comparison to those without such qualifications. The absence of degrees among women is a contributing factor to their exclusion from middle management roles. Hence, through diligent pursuit of college degrees via e-learning, women can position themselves competitively for such roles. The disparity in female education has notably contributed to their underrepresentation in management roles, with women occupying only 36% of middle management positions (Women in Business 2023 report by Grant Thornton). The advent of eLearning methodologies has transformed the educational landscape, enabling easier access for women to quality education and training, regardless of their geographical location, socio-economic status or age, thereby fostering their professional development and skill acquisition.

In India, digital mediums are being harnessed to transform the lives of women and girls across various levels. For instance, "Shakti," an eLearning initiative, is dedicated to empowering adolescents with knowledge on safe sexual and reproductive health. Similarly, "Stree" with LEAD at KREA University aims to elevate rural women entrepreneurs to greater heights of success in business leadership through MOOC courses focused on systemic and professional bookkeeping.

The democratization of education through online platforms ensures universal access to high-quality learning resources for individuals from diverse backgrounds. This is particularly crucial for women who may encounter barriers to traditional education due to cultural, societal, or logistical challenges. Despite a lower global enrollment rate for women compared to men, as per Coursera research included in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023, women are surpassing men in acquiring key skills across all proficiency levels. The flexibility of remote work has also played a pivotal role in attracting and retaining members of underrepresented groups, including women. A McKinsey report 2022, acknowledged that 71% of firms recognize the advantage of remote work options in enhancing diversity in the workforce.

The rise of digitalization in the business sector has eradicated geographical barriers and dismantled traditional obstacles, paving the way for women to achieve full economic

participation through a plethora of digital job opportunities. Online learning facilitates women's access to reputable education and skill-building opportunities, enabling them to overcome any physical or circumstantial limitations. This flexibility is particularly valuable for women caregivers, 60% of whom stated that without the option of online learning, they would have had to abandon their studies. Consequently, this opens avenues for women to pursue diverse fields of interest, evidenced by the consistent increase in the proportion of female learners on online platforms like Coursera, where women constituted 42% of learners in 2022, an increase from 38% in 2019.

Moreover, the evolution of industry micro-credentials serves as a crucial empowerment tool for women, allowing them to quickly acquire digital skills and transition into higher-paying roles or re-enter the workforce after a break. Recent initiatives by leading corporations and experts, including Meta, PwC India, Salesforce and SAP, have introduced micro-credentials across more than 25 digital job roles, attracting nearly 7 million enrollments globally on Coursera. These micro-credentials focus on digital professions like data analysis, programming, digital marketing, and user experience design, which can often be pursued remotely, thus providing women with access to sought-after roles while also being cost-effective compared to traditional degrees.

The global landscape of work is undergoing transformations due to globalization, automation, and digital evolution, with an impending necessity for large-scale reskilling amidst the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI not only accelerates the reskilling imperative but also plays a central role in delivering quality, affordable training content, overcoming language barriers, and personalizing the learning experience. This expands the learning opportunities for women worldwide, enabling them to acquire in-demand skills. As AI gains widespread adoption and distributed workforces become standard, the importance of human skills and leadership intensifies. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2023 emphasizes the value of socio-emotional skills in the workplace, noting that companies are increasingly recognizing the importance of human skills which are less prone to automation. The report indicates that women are showing significant parity in human skills, including self-efficacy skills like curiosity and lifelong learning, resilience, flexibility, agility & motivation and self-awareness, alongside a lesser disparity in enrollment in skills related to talent management, leadership, and social influence.

The Final Reckoning

India's transformation through digital means stands as a unique phenomenon in global history. Over the last twenty years, the combination of affordable mobile technology, low- cost internet data and an innovative digital identification system has sparked an unparalleled digital revolution in public services. This remarkable change has been primarily driven by the government and public sector organizations. Consequently, for a nation such

as India, it is essential to undertake decisive steps to empower women and quickly tackle gender disparities by implementing strategies to expand women's income opportunities beyond conventional roles, foster economic independence and ensure equal participation in online education and the job market. The rapid advancement in e-learning technologies necessitates the establishment of regulations to maintain compliance with the laws and to provide a secure & universally accessible environment. Few Recommendations in this area are as follows:-

- Creating a framework to enhance quality in online assessments, promoting adaptive and personalized e-learning.
- Formulating standards for evaluating the quality of e-learning content and incorporating new micro learning and Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications.
- Developing e-learning content compatible with mobile devices, including simulations, interactive experiments and 3D laboratories.
- Implementing Big Data reporting and learning analytics to monitor and analyze data concerning learners and their educational environments.

The theme for this year's International Women's Day, 'Investing in Women: Accelerate Progress', underscores the importance of focusing on the economic disenfranchisement of women. It also emphasizes the value of diversity and empowerment across all societal sectors. Despite gender equality being a core principle enshrined in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles, and Fundamental Duties of India's Constitution, societal norms have largely maintained a patriarchal structure, relegating women to a secondary status in many areas. Yet, the movement towards Women Empowerment has seen significant momentum in recent years. This paper has outlined India's substantial progress in this field and delved into the impact of gender issues on the nation's domestic interests and international ambitions. It critically assessed India's emerging status as a soft power on the global stage and argues that championing Women Empowerment through e-learning is a vital strategy in reinforcing this position and substantiating India's ambition to emerge as a global leader, or Vishwaguru.

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