

Open Distance Learning (ODL) and Economic Empowerment of Women: A Pathway for Poverty Reduction and National Development

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Abstract: Improving and expanding education is considered as a milestone for women empowerment in any society. Open Distance Learning (ODL) system of education is playing an important role especially in developing countries, to provide education to women. The aim of the paper is to assess the role of Open Distance Learning (ODL) system in economic empowerment of women in Pakistan which could reduce the poverty and ultimately can boost up the process of overall national development. AIOU's role was tried to explore in: a) increasing the chances of employment and b) improved control over family resources by enhanced economic contribution of its female beneficiaries. For the purpose, data has been collected through questionnaires from 3000 randomly selected postgraduate female students of Allama Iqbal Open University from 20 selected regions on the basis of their representative proportion in different faculties. The impact has been measured in terms of what the female students of this university have felt and expressed. In addition to quantitative study, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with students. The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents indicate that the AIOU does provide a chance to majority of women who are in their middle ages, married and belonged to the middle working class. On the basis of findings, it is mentioned that there is a strong realization that education is intrinsic for women to be economically empowered in present challenging era. AIOU's influential role in different areas of economic empowerment of women in Pakistan includes women's access/control over family resources, access to employment opportunities, economic contribution to family support and women's ownership of family assets/land. Results pointed out that more than 80% reported that due to AIOU education they became economically empowered. Most of the respondents mentioned that this is the only accessible and socially feasible opportunity which educated which has enabled them to participate in formal economy. Women constitute almost 51% of Pakistani population and if formally included into labor force the overall size of national economy could increase a lot besides overall reduction in gender biased practices. This will further impact in reduction of poverty and improvement in life standards of common masses.

Key words: Women Empowerment • Economic Empowerment • AIOU • ODL • Education

INTRODUCTION

Open Distance Learning (ODL) as a term that encompasses the “open” and “distance”. In which “Open” means: the removal of constraints of face to face conventional classroom method, Flexibility for students

who need an alternative to the conventional system and Scale with equality. The term “Distance” means: teacher and student have a space and time division/distance, also involves e-learning, open learning, flexible learning, on-line learning, resource-based learning, technology-mediated learning. By this interpretation, ODL should be:

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- Asynchronous (time separation);
- Either correspondence (print) based or self paced learning, but no blend with physical face to face modes;
- At par or better quality than conventional learning;
- Automatically equally accessible [1].

When conventional systems and approaches cannot meet the needs, it is necessary to look for new strategies. Confidence seems to be growing that open and distance learning is such a strategy. Examples of this growing confidence can be found in many countries. For example, it has been recommended that distance education efforts in the nine high-population countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan, referred to as the E-9 countries), focus on expanding work for school equivalence, for teacher education and for non formal education, especially in relation to health [2]. The term empowerment covers a vast landscape of meanings, interpretations, definitions and disciplines ranging from psychology and philosophy to the highly commercialized self-help industry and motivational sciences. Successful efforts to empower poor people often share four elements: Access to information, Inclusion and participation, Accountability and Local organizational capacity [3].

Most current definitions of empowerment in the development literature draw upon Amartya Sen's articulation of "Development as Freedom" (1999) where development is about expanding people's choices [4]. For example, [5] defines empowerment as "the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them. In this regard, [6] is of the opinion that empowerment is a multifaceted approach that make the horizon broaden and bring more control over resources that enhances the decision making capacity of gender. The Commission on the Status of Women in its reports emphasized the need for continued efforts toward gender equality in education and training. In its agreed conclusions on enhanced participation of women in development: an enabling environment for achieving gender equality and the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia the fields of education, health and work, adopted at its fiftieth session (2006) report, the Commission urged governments to ensure women's and girls' full and equal access to all levels of quality education and training [7].

The status of women in Pakistan varies considerably across classes, regions and the rural/urban divide due to uneven socioeconomic development and the impact of tribal, feudal and capitalist social formations on women's lives. According to report of UN Economic, Social Affairs and Population Division (2009), women constitute 48.6% of the total population in Pakistan. Women in Pakistan need to be empowered in a way that they could play a complementary role, to strengthen the economy and the socio-political problems. Most of the women are unpaid workers in the agricultural settings of the country. Women are silent contributors to the country's economy [8]. According to HomeNet Pakistan (HNP-2009), home based workers (more than 8.5 million) are not recognized by the government as workers/ laborers [9]. Therefore, not only they are not given due recognition in the context of building nation's economy but they are not either able to get any facility including social security and right to make collectives [10,11].

According to World Economic Forum, on Political Empowerment, Economic Participation and Economic Opportunity, Pakistan rank 37, 53 and 54 respectively in the world. It indicates that women should be put into economic activity for their empowerment [12]. With reference to labor force participation, females are surviving in unhealthy conditions in Pakistan. Education enables women to perform productive social roles and enhance their mobility in society. Education enabled women to become familiar with problems of home management [13]. Globally, education is regarded as the key factor in overcoming the barriers that women face in their lives. Women education can enhance their empowerment level and bring a positive social change in a society by raising their status in the family and society. Further, studies assert that the overall condition of women access to and control over economic resources were also unsatisfactory in Pakistan and 59 percent of the women could speak in household spending whereas most (70.4%) of the women could spend money by themselves in their homes. But in case of buying the valuable things women participation was limited. Thus, there is an overall lack of control over resources and decision making process for women in the country [14].

The Study Argument: The development of any nation is dependent on equal participation of both male and female in various spheres of life and no society has ever liberated itself economically, politically and socially without such

participation [15]. What may be the case and argument about women's subordination; the fact is that women's socio-cultural, religious and political empowerment in different fields of life becomes indispensable because they constitute 49% and almost equal to men of the total population [16]. Similarly, [17, 18] are of the opinion that females constitute half of the overall population and any investment in the development of human capital, ignoring female population cannot be fruitful for the progress of the country. This paper is an attempt to examine the role of ODL in economic empowerment of women in terms of perceptions of AIOU female postgraduate students all over Pakistan. Empowerment can take place at a hierarchy of different levels - individual, household, community and societal - and is facilitated by providing encouraging factors (e.g. exposure to new activities, which can build capacities) and removing inhibiting factors (e.g. lack of resources and skills).

Gender development is a key towards overall development of a nation. However, there are impediments existed particularly socio-cultural factors that obstruct the way of gender and development with special reference to female at large. Mostly, in developing countries in general and in Pakistan in particular such factors are playing a leading role in obstructing socio-cultural, political and educational attainment of female population. There are multiple of socio-cultural conditions in the country, the patriarchic nature of the society and feudalistic mode of production and its control by a dominant stratum make a huge gap between gender and development process. Such kind of attitudes marginalized the position of female at large and restricts them to participate in communal activities with men [19]. Similarly, in relations to their educational development, they are treated as inferior and are mostly confined to the work i.e including child caring and household maintenance [20,21]. Studies indicates that a linked exist with marginalized position of women to the cultural and religious norms of the society and to [22,23] Pakistani society is patriarchal in nature where women suffer many kinds of discrimination, which leads in their low social, economic and educational status while [24]Robinson-Pant (2004) reveals the highly attributed prevalence of current poverty.

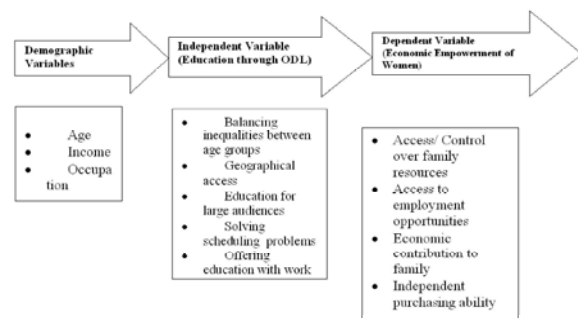
Similarly, in a society like Pakistan, female access to educational institutions is limited and even restricted in many areas. According to report of UN Economic, Social Affairs and Population Division (2009), women constitute 48.6% of the total population in Pakistan [24]. Women in

Pakistan need to be empowered in a way that they could play a complementary role, to strengthen the economy and to solve the socio-political problems. In such a scenario, the importance of ODL increases many folds because it is a convenient method of improving one's education. AIOU, through distance education has, thus, provided educational opportunities to the house bound girls and women.

Major Objectives of the Study: The aim of the paper is to assess the role of Open Distance Learning (ODL) system in economic empowerment of women in Pakistan which could reduce the poverty and ultimately can boost up the process of overall national development. The specific objectives of the current study area as below;

- To assess if there is any role of ODL education in enhancement of women's access/control over family resources
- To find out if there is any role of ODL education in increasing women's access to employment opportunities
- To explore the effect of ODL education on women's economic contribution to family

Conceptual Framework: The major theme of the current paper has been given in the following figure:



MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purpose of the study, both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to have clearer and reliable understanding. Further, the details are given in the following manner:

Research Locale: As the AIOU system of education is working all over Pakistan, thus the study is not limited to a particular area rather all the studentship of AIOU are included in the study.

Population of the Study: AIOU female students of postgraduate level from 20 selected regions have been included in the population. Regions selected for the study include Abbotabad, Bhawalpur, Dera Gazi Khan, Dera Ismail Khan, Dera Murad Jamali, Faisalabad, Gilgit-Baltistan, Gujranwala, Hyderabad, Islamabad, Lahore, Larkana, Multan, Muzffarabad, Peshawar, Quetta, Sahiwal, Sialkot, Sukker and Rawalpindi.

Sampling and Sample Procedure: For the purpose of obtaining representative information, 3000 female students were selected through proportionate random sampling technique as sample of the study. The proportions in the sample were fixed according to number of students enrolled under different faculties at the AIOU record.

Tools of Data Collection: Due to the diverse nature of the various regions and educational level of the respondents along-with the availability of all the information to contact, Questionnaire and in-depth interview guide were utilized as tools of data collection. After development of tool and finalization of samples, the copies of questionnaire were sent to the selected 20 regions where it was handed over to the study participants during their workshops. The questionnaires were printed both in English and Urdu languages and a detailed note related to instructions was also part of the tool. These questionnaires were duly filled by the students and returned to the regional staff who forwarded the same to the researcher. In addition to quantitative study, 30 in-depth interviews were also conducted from students. Ethical guidelines were properly followed and an informed consent with details of study and its objectives was also given with each questionnaire. The informed consent was signed by all the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the collected information, the data has been analyzed and results have been given in the form of tables with discussions.

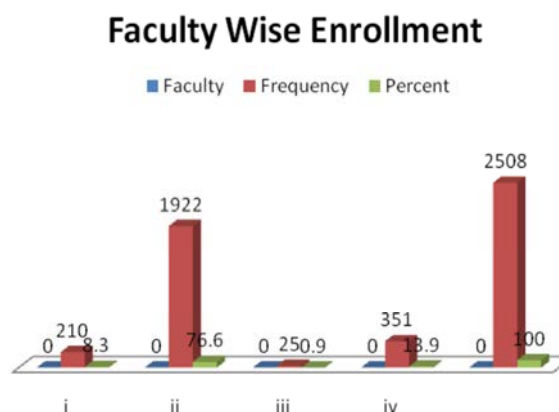
Backgrounds of the Respondents: Age composition of the sample shows that a vast majority of the respondents were between the age group of 20 to 40 years and more than half were either doing some job or self employed at the time of data collection. Respondents were selected

Table 1: Faculty Wise Enrolment of Respondents

Faculty	Frequency	Percent
i Faculty of Arabic and Islamic Studies	210	8.3
ii Faculty of Education	1922	76.6
iii Faculty of Sciences	25	0.9
iv Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities	351	13.9
Total	2508	100.0

Source: Field Data

The data has also been statistically analyzed and given in the following chart:



from all parts of the country on the basis of their representation in overall population under study. Data shows that 89.5 % of the sample population belonged to province of Punjab and remaining 10.5% from all other provinces including AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan. It shows that the highest access of female students to AIOU educational programmes at Masters Level is in the Punjab province.

The information related to respondent's monthly income reveals that among working people about 41% were earning less than Rs.20,000 per month and the income of only 5% of the respondents has been more than Rs.30,000 per month. On the basis of total family monthly incomes, it is concluded that a vast majority of the respondents belonged to middle working class, whose successful survival in the society is only possible if they equipped themselves with the educational skills to come out from the vicious circle of poverty. Faculty wise break-up of the respondents shows following details:

Role of AIOU in Economic Empowerment of Women: In present study the emphasis was given to explore and measure the role of ODL by AIOU in economic empowerment of women so different questions were asked to meet this objective. A comprehensive analysis is being made to discuss and develop a reliable synthesis.

Initially, the respondents were asked to share whether they think that AIOU empowers women beneficiaries economically or not. In response, almost all (98%) of the respondents were agreed with the role of AIOU in bringing change in women’s status. Furthermore, the opinion of respondents has been asked on certain aspects of economic empowerment and 91% agreed that education through AIOU enhances women's access/control over family resources. e.g. income, gold ornaments, domesticated animals and valuable goods.

Results obtained from statistical data also show that 93% respondents were of the view that education is the bedrock for women to empower themselves through engagement in economic activities. According to them, education from AIOU has increases females’ access to employment opportunities and such increase has enhanced the chances of economic gains and they feel more confident in applying for employment opportunities. An almost equal number agreed that education through AIOU enhances women's economic contribution to family support i.e. share on expenditure, earnings, family expenses etc. Similarly, if women are economically empowered, their children get more emphasis on acquisition of education with lesser chance of discrimination among male and female children. Also, due

to education they become able to give tuition to their siblings and children, do jobs in different fields, as well as run business etc. and through all these efforts ultimately economically contribute to their families.

The field information and its analysis indicates that 73% of the respondents were having the view that AIOU’s education increases women’s awareness and understanding of their rights related to family’s resources and its utilization. They were of the view that education through AIOU can enhance women's ownership of family assets/land and other such issues as well. However, 28% of the respondents were not agreeing that education has any role in accumulating women’s possession of family assets in Pakistani society because the resources are male oriented and mostly the nature of the society is patriarchic and feudalistic. In Pakistan, usually women do not have direct access or authority towards their family’s property which reinforce a sense of inferiority in terms of their ownership and decision making process. The statistical information is given in Table 2 below:

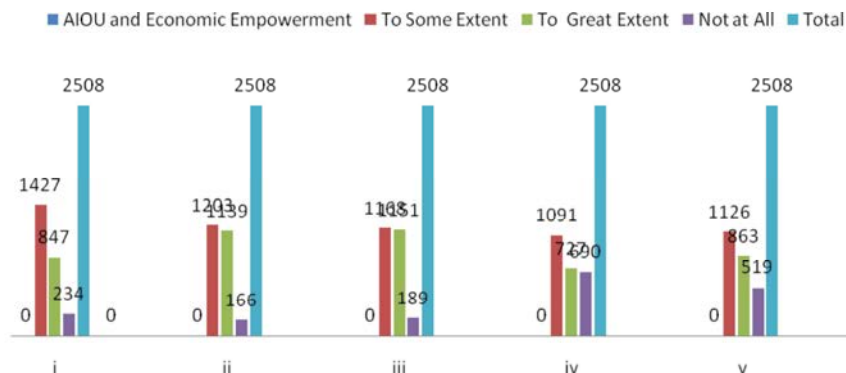
The information mentioned in the above table has also been given in the following diagram which further validates the statistics with regard to the role of AIOU in economic contribution.

Table 2: Role of AIOU in Economic Empowerment of Women in Pakistan

AIOU and Economic Empowerment	To Some Extent	To Great Extent	Not at All	Total
i Education through AIOU enhances women's access/control over family resources	1427 (56.9)	847 (33.8)	234 (9.3)	2508 (100.0)
ii Education through AIOU enhances women's access to employment opportunities	1203 (48.0)	1139 (45.4)	166 (6.6)	2508 (100.0)
iii Education through AIOU enhances women's economic contribution to family support	1168 (46.6)	1151 (45.9)	189 (7.5)	2508 (100.0)
iv Education through AIOU enhances women's ownership of family assets/land	1091 (43.5)	727 (29.0)	690 (27.5)	2508 (100.0)
v AIOU education enhances women's ability to make small or large purchases independently	1126 (44.9)	863 (34.4)	519 (20.7)	2508 (100.0)

Source; Field Data

Role of AIOU in Economic Empowerment of Women in Pakistan



Personal Experience of Economic Empowerment Through AIOU:

Observations and researches have asserted that due to existence of a strong patriarchal structure and conservative culture, there is still a long way for women to achieve their due share in family's possessions. Furthermore, 79% respondents were having the opinion that education enables women to take financial decisions of purchasing different household accessories more confidently, especially, if they are earning. In Pakistani society, it has been observed that women do not have free access to family income to buy something for themselves or household items they look forward to male members of the family. The respondents were requested to share those views about their attainment of education from AIOU and its role in support for women's lives to attain or enhance their economic empowerment status or not. In this regard, Table-2 reflects their responses with respect to areas identified for responses. Among important areas of economic empowerment, one was "Education through AIOU enhances women's ownership of family assets/land," whereas, the findings indicates that 24% of the respondents were having personal experience that being educated they have more access towards their family assets. A case of a respondents reported during study is worth mentioning that she graduated from AIOU and after marriage started living in a small city of KPK with her husband. After death of her father, she was disowned from her share in father's property by her brothers and nephews. She decided to go to court for her right and thus she won her rights through court after continuous struggle of nine years and got her share in her father's property. She commented that it's only my education which provides me vigilance and insight about my rightful obligation. She mentioned that she never realized before this incident that the education and awareness received because of her engagement with AIOU can be as helpful in her life.

Secondly, 18% of the respondents assert that education from AIOU has enhanced their access to employment opportunities. Again a case of a respondent as evidence is shared for support where she is teaching in an institution. She left her education after middle (Eighth grade) due to domestic reasons and then joined AIOU for further studies. She has been AIOU's student from matriculation to masters and on the basis of this education she got this appropriate job. Another effect of AIOU on personal lives of the respondents' is prominent and that education through AIOU has enhanced women's access/control over family resources. In this regard, 16% of the respondents stated that they have experienced the

same in their life. A case of similar respondent is submitted that she did graduation from AIOU and after marriage to her cousin started living in a rural area of Punjab. Just because of her education, she has given the charge to look after family chores. She is successfully running her family responsibilities including management of family dairy farm.

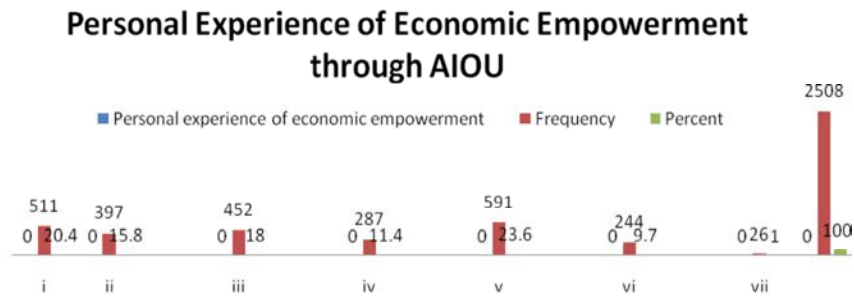
The information also indicates that there were 11% respondents who supported that education through AIOU enhances women's economic contribution to family support on the basis of their personal experience. They mentioned that it is a logical chain reaction of education as by improved education they either get good jobs or received promotions in their existing offices. As a result, their resources in term of income had increased and as a response these females are able to contribute more towards their families. As shared by a female respondent, after the death of her parents in a car accident, she took the responsibility of her family. Because of no one to support, she decided to look after the family business-firm. Soon she realized that without proper business education she can't be in a position to take her family's business upwards. She joined AIOU along with her work and completed her higher level business management degree and now more progressively running the firm and the family.

There are also some other examples and 10% respondents experienced that their education from AIOU has enhanced their ability to make small or large purchases independently. They explained that due to education, they have now more exposure about the outer world they have learnt how to interact in different situations. Most of them have developed self esteem and confidence that they also do have abilities like others to perform activities. They feel more comfortable in interacting and bargaining in the markets while such opportunities were missing before education. In support of the argument, a case of a respondent is presented as an example where a female mentioned during interview that she is single and living with her parents in Lahore and doing Master's degree. On the basis of her B.Ed degree from AIOU, she got a government teaching job which fulfills her dream of constructing her own small house under her supervision in Lahore after ten-to-twelve years of job. Her parents are of the view that if we give a chance to our daughters to be educated then there is no task that a female cannot perform even all those which usually are attached to males in Pakistani culture. Education plays a significant role in enhancing women's wellbeing and act as a starting point towards their empowerment.

Table 3: Personal Experience of Economic Empowerment through AIOU

Personal experience of economic empowerment	Frequency	Percent
I None	511	20.4
ii Education through AIOU enhances women's access/control over family resources	397	15.8
iii Education through AIOU enhances women's access to employment opportunities	452	18.0
iv Education through AIOU enhances women's economic contribution to family support	287	11.4
v Education through AIOU enhances women's ownership of family assets/land	591	23.6
vi AIOU education enhances women's ability to make small or large purchases independently	244	9.7
vii Any other	26	1.0
Total	2508	100.0

Source; field data



The analysis of the data shows that high majority (80%) of the respondents for all five statements were in one way or the other agrees that their education is a major source of empowerment and the same is also true for all women in society (Table 3 below)

The above information has been provided in the form of diagram given below which also asset that there is a strong association with AIOU programs and growth in personal experience in terms of economic growth of the respondents.

Attainment of Economic Empowerment Status (AES):

This portion of analysis and discussion is about the attainment of economic empowerment by female through education provided by AIOU where as the responses regarding the issue has been obtained regarding ODL education in AIOU. To measure whether empowerment attained through AIOU remained at what level, a numeric scale was developed for AES. The response categories were assigned with different numeric values on the basis of their response strength as given below.

The Values Assigned to the Opinions Were:

- To great extent = 5
- To some extent = 3
- Not at all = 0

Another score of 5 was added to those who mentioned that they have experienced economic empowerment in any way because of education through AIOU in their life. The categories/ levels of empowerment are as:

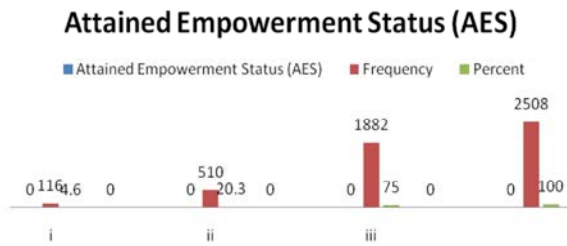
- Score 0 - 10 = Low empowerment attained
- Score 11 - 20 = Medium empowerment attained
- Score 21 - 30 = High empowerment attained

Results of the mentioned scale reveal that the Attained Status of Economic Empowerment shows an increase because most of the respondents in one way or the other are empowered economically by education from AIOU. Data shows that 75% of the respondents' AES score was between the ratios of 21-30 which declare that majority of the respondents have attained high level of economic empowerment. Besides, another 20% respondents' score remained between 11-20 which also indicate that their attained status can be considered at medium level. Such findings prove that the role of education from AIOU is quite instrumental in developing the skills of female beneficiaries and they could get economically active and contribute not only in their own lives and the lives of their families but in overall socio-economic development of the country. These results confirm that that most of the AIOU courses

Table 4: Overall Attained Empowerment Status (AES) Score

Attained Empowerment Status (AES)	Frequency	Percent
I (0-10)		
(Low economic empowerment attained)	116	4.6
ii (11-20)		
(Medium economic empowerment attained)	510	20.3
iii (21-30)		
(High economic empowerment attained)	1882	75.0
Total	2508	100.0

Source; field data



are job oriented and related to different professional fields. The statistical information are given in Table 4 below:

The statistical information has also been given in the form of graphic presentation which further shows that the education provided by AIOU has significant contribution in status attainment of the female folk in the country (Figure below).

CONCLUSION

Improving and expanding education for involving half of the population i.e. women is the need of the day and with reference to Pakistan, it is one of the major focus of MDGs. Education is also compulsory for women's empowerment in any society. There are various institutions which promote education but the role of Open Distance Learning (ODL) system of education is playing an important role especially in developing countries, to provide education to women and men irrespective of the race, color and religion. The current study was about to find out the role of Open Distance Learning (ODL) system in economic empowerment of women in Pakistan and how such empowerment reduces the poverty level of women and contribute towards overall national development. In this regard, the information has been received for how AIOU increases the chances of employment and further, how it contributes to improve women conditions to control over family resources by enhancing female capacity as beneficiaries. The information has been analyzed and thus the findings concluded that there is a strong realization that education is intrinsic for women to

be economically empowered in present challenging era. Generally, the students of AIOU perceive that their education is one of the causes in supporting to improve their economic situation. AIOU's influential role is acknowledged in different areas of economic empowerment of women in Pakistan including women's access/control over family resources, their access to employment opportunities, economic contribution to family support, women's ownership of family assets/land and to make small or large purchases independently. It is a highly important fact that more than 80% of the study subjects themselves experienced that their empowerment status has been enhanced in at least one of the mentioned areas of economic empowerment. Results show the opinion of most of the respondents that their economic status may not have been the same if they did not join AIOU for improvement in education. A very large number of graduate and postgraduate female students have been enrolled in professional courses like B.Ed and M.Ed and other Masters Programmes of AIOU which is definitely resulting in active involvement of these graduates in to formal economy. Finally, the study concludes that AIOU education system not only increases women empowerment in multiple areas of the economy, however, it has a significant contribution towards national economy, overall development and prosperity of women as well.

On the basis of respondents view, it is suggested that the quality of education shall be maintain as per international standards so that it provide quality education to all the citizens and fulfill the national as well as needs of local market.

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