



RESEARCH ARTICLE

WOMEN AND POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT: ENHANCING SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OF RURAL WOMEN THROUGH LIFELONG AND LIFE-WIDE LEARNING

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Abstract

Women in general and rural women in particular are deprived of equal access and opportunities to education and skill training programs; and the situation is more deep-rooted in developing countries. However, the level of people's education, skills, information and awareness, quality of their attitudes, values, and intensity of their aspiration and energies affect the extent and pace of socioeconomic development of a country. The world's latest 2015 data reveal that out of 781 million people aged 15 years and over, who cannot read and write, nearly two-thirds are women; a proportion remain unchanged for the past two decades (UN, 2015). Data also reveals that the vast majority of this group live in developing regions, particularly in Sub-Saharan African and Southern Asia. Thus, lack of equal access and opportunity to education in the region impedes socioeconomic participation of rural women and women in general. Therefore, this study aimed to look at the importance of lifelong and life-wide learning to enhance social participation of rural women. Thus, a total of 169 survey respondents from Nalpathimala village of Kottayam district, Kerala State of India were participated in providing necessary data. Descriptive statistics such as percentage, mean point value, and standard deviation were employed for data analysis. Further, Chi-Square test of independence was employed to test either statistically significant relationship between lifelong and life-wide learning, and social participation of rural women exists or not. Accordingly, the major findings of this study reveal that lifelong and life-wide learning can importantly contribute in providing school dropouts of rural women opportunity to improve their skills and knowledge, so that they will attain capability within their society; to enhance their participation in decision-making at family and community level; to enhance awareness of rural women towards family and community health issues; to improve their self-confidence; and to boost their social inclusion, therefore, to feel secure in their society. In sum, this particular study discloses the existence of significant association between lifelong and life-wide learning, and social participation of rural women.

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Introduction:-

Development is not merely about increasing national wealth, but also about improving the well-being of the majority of the people, ensuring people's freedom, and increasing their economic security. Social, economic, psychological, spiritual or medical state of the majority of the people should be improved. People's freedom such as personal and social security, freedom of speech, supporting or not to support ideas and programs of the government and that of legally registered opposition political parties, which includes freedom of making nonviolence protests should be secured. In this context, positive development refers to economic growth plus human/social development. Hence, positive development must encompass human/social development which measured by life expectancy, adult literacy, access to quality education for all at all levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary), gender parity, and people's average income which is a necessary condition of their freedom of choice. This means that the level of people's education, intensity of their aspiration and energies, quality of their attitudes and values, skills and information highly affect the extent and pace of the development. And it significantly influences all levels of development, family, community, national or global level development (Green, 2008). According to social development theory, development is the result of society's capacity to organize human energies and useful resources to meet challenges and opportunities. In this context, development is a human process, in the sense that human beings, not material factors derive positive development (Jacobs & Cleveland, 1999).

It is true that economic growth of a country increases nation's total wealth and enhances the potential to reduce poverty and to solve other social problems. But, due to lack of fair wealth distribution, corruption, and other various reasons, sometimes economic growth is not followed by similar progress of human/social development. Instead, growth can be achieved at the cost of greater inequality, higher unemployment, weakened democracy, loss of cultural identity and over use of natural resources needed by the future generations.

As the links between economic growth and social development are better understood, experts including economists agree that economic growth without human development is inevitably unsustainable; that is, it cannot continue along the same lines for long. In order to be positive, economic growth itself depends on its natural and social conditions; otherwise, if it achieved in the absence of social development, the overall result of people's well-being turn into negative. Hence, it is difficult to sustain such economy politically. Therefore, economic growth must be constantly nourished by the fruits of social development. These include higher qualified workers, capable technological and managerial innovations along with opportunities for their efficient use, more and better jobs, apposite circumstances for new businesses to grow, and greater democracy at all levels of decision-making. In this view, access to quality education, health services, employment opportunities, gender equality, and political freedom are among the major conditions that enabling human/social development (UNESCO, 2005). On the other hand, qualified labor, technological innovation and quality management are among the key circumstances that enabling economic growth; and these are conspicuously the fruits of human development.

Sustainable Development:-

According to the definition given by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, development is sustainable "if it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Jarive, 2016). Thus, sustainable development refers to development that promotes prosperity and economic opportunity, greater social well-being, and environmental protection. In other words, economic growth is said to be positive and sustainable if and only if it encompasses human development and environmental issues. Of course, education in all its forms (formal, informal, non-formal) is the key factor for attaining sustainable development. Here, it is vital to note that identifying education system that can fit with specific group of learners is very essential, as all the systems cannot be equally or efficiently fit for all type of learners. For instance, the type of education for school children is quite different from the type of training for farmers to equip them with skills and knowledge about how to use fertilizers to increase their produces. Clearly, the former one hits its target better through formal education; while the pre-defined need of the specified target learners (farmers) can be attained best through lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education system.

Lifelong and Life-Wide Learning:-

Lifelong learning is learning that admits any time in one's life as a right time to learn. It may be broadly defined as learning that perused throughout life. Further, it refers to learning that is flexible, diverse, and available at different times and in different places with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences in a personal, civic, and

social and employment related perspective. In other words, learning should not be limited to time and school setting as ongoing learning throughout life enables people to take advantage of new opportunities that arise as society changes (UNESCO-IE, 2002). Rapid growth of technologies which needs self-update of individuals with the newly emerged technology, and the various socioeconomic and political problems around the world that needs systematic and effective approaches to overcome are the two major reasons for the necessity of lifelong learning.

Life-wide learning is an approach in which needs of the learners and the appropriateness or relevancy of the content to the real life problems of the learners are the center of learning. In this context, skills and knowledge that attained from life-wide learning programs are for immediate use; to solve the real life problems of the learners and that of their society at large. Furthermore, life-wide and lifelong learners can develop valuable skills, such as interpersonal communication, teamwork, leadership, discipline, responsibility, planning and organizing, and practical problem solving (UNESCO, 2006). Life-wide learning is different from academic education in which it is learner oriented and need-based, problem solving approach, and acquiring knowledge and skills for immediate use. It helps to enhance skills and knowledge of all who wants to learn irrespective of their formal education background. Hence, it provides the disadvantaged group of the formal education an opportunity to enhance their knowledge and skills, so that they considerably contribute in the process to attain socioeconomic development of their society; while women in general and rural women in particular constitute large number of this disadvantaged group in any society. They deprived of equal access to education and skills training programs, however, the two are key contributing factors to sound economic growth and social, political and cultural advancement (UIL, 2015).

Therefore, considerable participation of all the productive age group of the society is needed in order to achieve positive socioeconomic development. Hence, the role that women in general and rural women in particular can play in the course of socioeconomic development should be recognized and enhanced as well. In other words, as women are half of the world's total population, their significant contributions in socioeconomic development programs are needed in order to achieve positive development (economic growth plus social development). Therefore, to enhance active and direct participation of this disadvantaged group of the society in socioeconomic development activities, it is a must that to provide an access and opportunity that helps to skill-up their indigenous knowledge and rich life experiences.

Hence, it is crucial that to boost the roles that rural women can play in any concerned social development activities; of course at different levels. These include involvement in:

- Need Assessment - identifying their needs
- Goal Setting – a clear identification of what they want to be or what they want to achieve
- Planning implementation procedures – how to go through to achieve their goals
- Monitoring and Evaluation – checking either or not the planned program is going as it planned, and either or not the program has achieved what it supposed to achieve
- Taking action - based on the monitoring and evaluation result of the program, taking necessary corrections such as, re-plan or sustaining the program if successful progress has been obtained.

Therefore, this particular study may contribute in pointing out the importance of lifelong and life-wide learning via non-formal education to enhance social participation of rural women.

Objective of the Study:-

This particular study aimed to look at the significant role that lifelong and life-wide learning can play to enhance social participation of rural women, which is a must walk to attain inclusive and sustainable development (economic growth plus human/social development).

Material and Methods:-

This research is descriptive in nature. Quantitative research approach was employed to come across conclusions through analysis of primary data. Rural women of Nalpathimala Village of Kottayam District, Kerala, India, who are organized in Kudumbashree (women self-help groups) in particular and rural women in general are the study and the target population respectively.

Simple random sampling method was used to select 169 survey respondents from the study population having a total of 299 members. Personal scheduled interview was used to collect survey data from the source. Descriptive statistics

such as percentage, mean value, and standard deviation were used for data analysis. Chi-Square test of independence was employed to test either statistically significant relationship between lifelong and life-wide learning, and social participation of rural women exists or not.

Results:-

A total of 169 respondents participated in providing necessary data for this research. Accordingly, respondent's demographic data show that 92.2 percent of the respondents were active in Kudumbashree project (Women self-help groups) for more than 5 years. Age-wise, 50.3 percent of the respondents were in the range of 15-44 years old, whereas the remaining 49.7 percent were above 44 years old. Data also reveal that 98.8 percent of the respondents can read and write. Regarding educational level of the study respondents, data display 21.3 percent completed primary school, 52.7 percent completed secondary school, 20.7 percent completed pre-degree, and 4.1 percent of the respondents completed first degree.

Data show that 97.7 percent and 89.9 percent of the respondents responded that lifelong and life-wide learning helps them to participate in family and community level decision-making process respectively. It is observed that 95.9 percent of the respondents agreed with importance of lifelong and life-wide learning in relation to provide dropouts of rural women opportunity to upgrade their education level, so that to gain functional skills and knowledge. Also, 92.9 percent of the respondents agreed that lifelong and life-wide learning significantly benefits to improve planning and managing skills, and knowledge of rural women. Data also reveal that 95.3 percent of the respondents agreed that lifelong and life-wide learning can notably help to re-skills rural women, so as to be proficient in their society, and therefore to enhance social inclusion. Further, 90.5 percent of the respondents agreed that lifelong and life-wide learning can help rural women to develop a feeling of secure within their family and their respective society at large.

In addition to data about respondents' experience in various social issues as a benefit of skills and knowledge they had gained from lifelong and life-wide learning, some descriptive data related to their attitude about importance of lifelong and life-wide learning in relation to enhancing rural women's role in the course of achieving positive social development is given in Table 1 below shortly.

Table 1:- Descriptive Data Regarding Respondents' Attitude about Importance of Lifelong and Life-Wide Learning in Enhancing the Role of Rural Women in the Process of Social Development.

Items	DA	AG	M	SD
1. Lifelong and life-wide learning helps to enhance functional skills of school dropouts of rural women.	18 (10.7)	151 (89.3)	2.787	.618
2. Lifelong and life-wide learning helps to enhance proficiency and social inclusion of rural women	8 (4.7)	161 (95.3)	2.90	.425
3. Lifelong and life-wide learning improves planning and managing skills and knowledge of rural women	12 (97.1)	157 (92.2)	2.85	.515
4. Lifelong and life-wide learning helps to enhance rural women's role in the process of social development.	8 (4.7)	161 (95.3)	2.90	.425
5. Lifelong and life-wide learning provides rural women opportunity to discuss on ways of transmission of HIV/AIDS and other transmitted diseases, and how to protect themselves and their families from it.	4 (2.4)	165 (92.6)	2.95	.304
6. Lifelong and life-wide learning helps rural women to feel secure in the family	16 (9.5)	153 (90.5)	2.81	.587
7. Lifelong and life-wide learning helps rural women to feel secure in the society	6 (3.6)	163 (96.4)	2.92	.371

Source: Data from filed work

Note: Figures in the brace denotes percentages.

1 = Minimum = Disagree (DA)

2 = Undecided (UD)

3 = Maximum = Agree (AG)

Table 2:- Chi-Square Test Analysis of Data Concerning Respondents' Attitude.

	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6	Item 7
Chi-Square	104.660 ^a	138.515 ^a	124.408 ^a	138.515 ^a	153.379 ^a	111.059 ^a	145.852 ^a
df	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 84.5.

Observed Chi-Square value (X^2) = 916.388, $P < .001$, Critical value of Chi-Square at $df = 7$, and .05 confidence level is equal to 14.067.

Discussions:-

Respondents' demographic data reveal that more than 50 percent of the respondents belong to the age group of 15-44 years old, while the remaining are above 44 years old. On the other hand, 92.2 percent of the respondents have an experience of involvement in various need based and life-wide learning and skill training programs that offered under Kudumbashree project (women self-help group) for more than five years. This shows that the unique feature of non-formal education to provide lifelong and life-wide learning to the disadvantaged clients of any age group in a given society, while women in any society constitute large number of this group.

Furthermore, the above result indicates that as they participate in various life-wide learning for more than five years, the respondents are experienced and skilled enough to evaluate the importance of lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education to improve the role of rural women in achieving inclusive social development. Hence, necessary data were collected from appropriate source.

Lack of active and direct social involvement of women in general and rural women in particular is among the major gender disparity issues across the globe; but, much more deep-rooted in developing nations. Hence, rural women everywhere are deprived of the opportunity and access to partake in social activities and to develop decision-making power at different levels. Hence, their potential participation in various development activities is undermined and disvalued. This under potential participation of this massive group hinders both the achievement and sustainability of country's positive development; both economic growth and social/human development. Thus, this study intended to look at the importance of lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education in relation to improve potential contributions of rural women in attaining social development; which is the key component of inclusive and sustainable development. Therefore, it is essential to examine the decision-making experiences of the respondents. Accordingly, data concerning respondents' experience in decision-making both at family and community levels show that 97.7 percent of the respondents participate in family level decision-making activities as a result of skills and knowledge they had attained from lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education. On the other hand, lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education helped 89.9 percent of the respondents to take part in community level decision-making activities. This result is also in line with the idea that states, empowerment must involve not only individual awareness, but also collective awareness and action, which is fundamental to the aim of attaining social transformation" (UIE, 1995, pp. 8-9). This implies that lifelong and life-wide learning can significantly help to empower rural women, so that they can meaningfully take part in decision-making activities both at family and community level. This plays a paramount role in building inclusive social development, and as it provides opportunity for all to take part in planning various socioeconomic programs, it has a vital contribution in minimizing gender disparity. Minimizing gender gap implies that maximizing equal access and opportunities for all. Therefore, in its broadest sense, lifelong and life-wide learning play significant role in enhancing active participation of rural women in particular and the disadvantaged group of rural community in general in achieving inclusive and sustainable development.

Moreover, survey data reveal that 20.7 percent of the respondents completed their pre-degree education through equivalence program of non-formal education that functions as alternative approach to upgrade educational level of the deprived group of the formal schooling, who are mostly dropouts of primary and secondary education, and those who completed only their primary or secondary education. In this view, it is also observed that 95.9 percent of the respondents agreed with the significance of lifelong and life-wide learning in advancing the skills and knowledge of the disadvantaged group of rural women. This implies that as more educated and aware people can significantly take part in any development programs, lifelong and life-wide learning can significantly contribute to enhance the role that the disadvantaged rural women can play in achieving inclusive socioeconomic development.

Survey data reveals that 92.9 percent of the respondents agreed that lifelong and life-wide learning helps them to enhance their planning and managing skills; therefore, they can meaningfully participate in the process of achieving socioeconomic development. Advancing the planning and managing skills and knowledge of the productive age group of a given society is a vital step in building inclusive active workforce, which is significantly important in achieving fast and positive socioeconomic development. Thus, as the majority of the rural women are deprived of the formal schooling, it is a must that to provide them need based and life-wide learning and training programs. And this helps them to advance their life experience and indigenous knowledge so that they can actively take part in various socioeconomic development activities. It also helps to assure their social inclusiveness.

Further, data reveal that 97.6 percent of the survey respondents believe that lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education helps them to discuss about means of transmissions of HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases, and therefore, how to prevent themselves and their families from these diseases. This result indicates that the significance of lifelong and life-wide learning to advance awareness of the disadvantaged group of rural women and rural community in general towards family and community health issues, which is directly linked with any elements of socioeconomic achievement. This result also in line with the recent study of the determinants of health literacy among older adults that found “participation in lifelong learning in any of its forms (formal, non-formal and informal) is one of the strongest predictors of health literacy of old adults”(WHO, 2013, p. 36). It is clear that in any society, women in general and rural women in particular take the lion’s share in advancing and maintaining health conditions of their families and that of the community. And, improving the health conditions of the family and that of the society at large plays a great role in achieving positive socioeconomic development. Hence, healthier, conscious, and skilled society can react positively and actively in socioeconomic development activities of their country. Thus, it is vital that to advance health related skills and knowledge of rural women in particular and that of the rural community in general; and as such, this results implies that lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education is importantly used in advancing awareness and knowledge of the disadvantaged rural women in numerous family and society issues, including sanitation and health cases. Therefore, lifelong and life-wide learning contribute in advancing the significance of rural women in maintaining clean environment and family health.

Chi-Square test of independence was employed to test if statistically significant relationships existed between respondents’ replies to the variables and their perception about lifelong and life-wide learning, and participation of rural women in social activities. This is a logical technique of judging the significance of association or relationship between two attributes. Hence, “as a test of independence, Chi-Square enables us to explain whether or not two attributes are associated” (Kothari, 2004, p. 237). Therefore, in this part, Chi-Square test of independence is used to analyze the existence of significant association between lifelong and life-wide learning, and enrichment of roles of rural women in social development.

In this case, I proceed with the null hypothesis that the two attributes (Lifelong learning and enrichment of social participation of rural women) are independent, which means that lifelong learning has no significant importance to enhance social participation of rural women.

Therefore, the results of Chi-Square test of independence for (items 1-7), which aimed to test the null hypothesis of this research (H_0) reveal that the computed value of Chi-Square for each item is greater than the critical/table value of Chi-Square at specified degree of freedom and margin of error. As it can be observed from Table 2, the value of the calculated Chi-Square for each item is much greater than the critical value of each item at degree of freedom (df) = 1, and .05 margin of error,) which is equal to 3.841; hence, the results obtained in (items 1-7) are taken as quite significant.

The Chi-Square values of the (items 1-7) are together added using additive property of Chi-Square test, which is adding various values of Chi-Squares under the same objective to obtain a single value of Chi-Square which helps in forming a better idea about the problem under consideration if the degrees of freedom are also added(Kothari, 2004). Therefore, the new computed value of Chi-Square ($X^2 = 916.388$) is also much greater than the critical/table value of Chi-Square ($X^2 = 14.067$) at degree of freedom (df) = 7, and .05 margin of error, $p < .001$). Hence, it is again taken as quite significant. This implies that the opinion expressed by the respondents concerning the importance of lifelong and life-wide learning to advance social participation of rural women is significantly different from the opinion expected by chance, i.e. in case the respondents evaluate importance of lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education to enhance social participation of rural women without understanding what they have asked about. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0) which states “There is no significant relationship between lifelong

and life-wide learning, and social participation of rural women” can be rejected with greater confidence; and I conclude that the obtained result diverges significantly from the result expected merely by chance. Therefore, the result obtained in this section entails that the existence of significant association between lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education and social participation of rural women.

Conclusion:-

This study aimed to look at the significance of lifelong and life-wide learning to enhance the role of rural women in the process of attaining inclusive and positive social development, which is a fundamental component of inclusive and sustainable development. It also aimed to contribute in enriching understanding of planners and policy makers, particularly in developing nations towards the importance of lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education to improve awareness, skills and knowledge of the deprived group of the rural women and the rural community in general. Therefore, this study looked at analysis of importance of lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education to enhance active participation of rural women in decision-making process at family and community level; to improve planning and managing skills and knowledge of rural women; to raise awareness of rural women towards family and community health; to advance self-confidence of rural women; and to achieve social inclusion of rural women. Therefore, the findings display that there is a significant positive association between lifelong and life-wide learning and social participation of rural women.

Accordingly, based on the findings and the discussion made, the following conclusions were reached:

- Lifelong and life-wide learning through non-formal education helps school dropouts of rural women to upgrade their education, re-skills in their real life activities; therefore, it boosts their proficiency within their society.
- Lifelong and life-wide learning helps to enhance awareness of rural women in particular and rural community in general towards family and community health, so that they can efficiently prevent themselves, family and the society at large from any communicable and non-communicable diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and Malaria.
- Lifelong and life-wide learning helps to enhance decision-making involvement of rural women both at family and community level, so that it assures their social inclusion.
- Lifelong and life-wide learning helps rural women to develop self-confidence as it improves their participation in social issues; therefore they feel secure in their society.

In sum, lifelong and life-wide learning potentially contributes in enhancing the role of rural women in the process of attaining inclusive social development, which is one of the main components in achieving positive development.

Recommendation:-

Providing equal access and opportunity to all is not merely about equality and respecting human rights, but also about achieving inclusive and sustainable development. Advancing direct and active involvement of all productive age group of a citizen in socioeconomic activities is a key point to improve the well-being of the majority of the citizen. And, as such, education is a key means to enhance the skills and knowledge of the people. Therefore, it is recommended that policy-makers, planners and governments of developing nations should give necessary attention and offer lifelong and life-wide learning and skill training programs to the disadvantaged group of rural women in particular and rural community in general.

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