

Women's Lifelong Education: A New Dawn in Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

The landscape of women's education in Jammu and Kashmir is undergoing a significant transformation, heralded by the emergence of lifelong learning initiatives. This paper explores the pivotal role of continuous education in empowering women within this region. By examining various lifelong learning programmes and their impacts, the study highlights how these educational opportunities contribute to personal growth, economic independence, and social development. Through case studies and qualitative analysis, the paper underscores the challenges and successes faced by women engaging in lifelong learning. It also makes a comparative analysis of lifelong learning initiatives between the pre-abrogation and post-abrogation period of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. This research aims to shed light on the transformative power of lifelong education and advocate for its broader implementation, as a means to uplift and empower women in Jammu and Kashmir.

Keywords: *Lifelong learning, women, Jammu and Kashmir, empowerment, programmes, development.*

I. Introduction

Education fosters a sense of self-efficacy and personal growth, enabling women to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The acquisition of new skills and knowledge broadens their horizons and expands their potential, allowing them to achieve more significant goals and this in a way leads to their empowerment (Merriam and Bierema, 2013). Women empowerment is a critical aspect of human development, and education is a fundamental right that enables individuals to achieve their full potential. In India, women constitute approximately 48% of the population (Census, 2011), yet they face numerous challenges that hinder their empowerment. Limited access to education and skill development opportunities perpetuates gender disparities, confining women to low-paying jobs, and reinforcing their dependence on others

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(Kabeer, 2005). Lifelong learning has emerged as a vital strategy for human capital development, economic growth, and social empowerment (OECD, 2019). By enabling individuals to acquire new skills and knowledge throughout their lives, it can help women overcome the constraints of traditional education systems and societal norms (UNESCO, 2017).

In India, where gender inequality is deeply ingrained, lifelong learning can be a powerful tool for women empowerment, enabling them to challenge existing power structures and demand their rights (Nayak, 2017). Lifelong learning extends beyond formal education to include non-formal and informal modes of learning. For women in India, lifelong learning is crucial as it provides opportunities for continuous personal and professional growth, adapting to changing socio-economic environments (UNESCO, 2015). In a country where gender disparities have historically limited women's opportunities, lifelong learning serves as a catalyst for societal transformation, enabling women to break barriers and achieve their full potential. Lifelong learning initiatives address the gaps by offering adult education programmes, vocational training and skill development courses tailored to the needs of women.

One of the most significant impacts of lifelong learning on women's empowerment is economic independence. Education and skill development enhance women's employability, enabling them to secure better-paying jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities. According to the World Bank, educated women are more likely to participate in the labor force and earn higher incomes, which can lead to improved living standards for their families (World Bank, 2018). Lifelong learning programmes empower women by enhancing their employability through vocational training in fields such as technology, healthcare, hospitality, and agriculture. By acquiring relevant skills and certifications, women can access better job opportunities, negotiate for fair wages, and contribute more effectively to their households' income. Beyond economic empowerment, lifelong learning challenges societal norms and stereotypes that restrict women's roles and aspirations. Education empowers women to challenge discriminatory practices such as child marriage, gender-based violence, and unequal access to resources. It encourages critical thinking and advocacy skills, enabling women to become leaders and change agents within their communities.

Lifelong learning also promotes awareness of women's rights and legal protection, equipping women with knowledge to assert their rights and seek justice in cases of abuse or discrimination. Access to health education and information is another critical aspect of lifelong learning for women's empowerment in India. Many women in rural and underserved areas lack basic knowledge about reproductive health, hygiene

practices, and disease prevention (WHO, 2019). Several initiatives across the world, demonstrate the impact of lifelong learning on women's lives. For instance, the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh has been instrumental in providing microcredit to women, enabling them to start their businesses and invest in their education. This initiative has transformed the lives of many women, lifting them out of poverty and empowering them to become active economic contributors (Yunus, 2007). Similarly, the Open University in the United Kingdom offers flexible learning opportunities, allowing women to pursue higher education while managing their personal and professional responsibilities. This has enabled many women to attain degrees and advance their careers, contributing to gender equality in the workforce (Open University, 2020).

Historically, women in India have faced significant barriers to education. Social norms and cultural practices often relegated women to domestic roles, limiting their access to formal education. However, the post-independence era saw a gradual shift with the implementation of policies aimed at promoting gender equality in education. The National Policy on Education, 1986, and subsequent amendments emphasized the need for increasing female literacy rates and ensuring access to education for girls and women (NCERT, 2005). So, this paper explores the significance of lifelong learning for women's empowerment in Jammu and Kashmir, examining its impact on various aspects of their lives, including economic independence, social status, health and peace of mind.

II. Research Methodology

Research Design:

- The study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative data.
- The study has used a survey research method to collect quantitative data, and semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data.

Sample Size and Population:

- The study targeted women aged between 18-60 years in urban and rural areas of India.
- A sample size of 500 women was selected using stratified random sampling.
- The sample was divided into two groups: women who have participated in lifelong learning programmes and women who have not.

Data Collection Methods:

- Survey questionnaire: A structured questionnaire was developed to collect data on demographics, education, employment, and lifelong learning experiences. Survey questionnaires were administered through online platforms and in-person interviews.
- Semi-structured interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 women from each group to gather data on their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to lifelong learning. These were conducted in-person or via online medium.

Data Analysis Methods:

- Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics (t-test, ANOVA).
- Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured.
- Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board.

III. Public Programmes and Results

Jammu and Kashmir, a region with a complex socio-political landscape, has witnessed significant challenges in its developmental trajectory. The region's unique cultural heritage, coupled with prolonged periods of conflict and instability, has influenced various aspects of life, including education and women's rights. Traditional norms and patriarchal values have often restricted women's access to education and economic opportunities. However, recent efforts by government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and community groups have started to address these disparities by promoting lifelong learning as a means of empowerment.

UMEED SCHEME under JKSRLM

Background: The UMEED scheme, part of the Jammu and Kashmir State Rural Livelihoods Mission (JKSRLM), aims to improve the socio-economic status of rural women by providing them with vocational training, skill development, and financial

inclusion opportunities (Department of Rural Development JK, 2021). One of the respondents named Zarina Khan informed that group of women from the Anantnag district formed a Self-Help Group (SHG) under the UMEED scheme. These women received training in traditional crafts like pashmina weaving and embroidery. With the skills acquired, they began producing high-quality handmade products. The scheme also facilitated access to micro-credit, allowing them to purchase raw materials and expand their business. The women leveraged digital platforms to market their products, reaching a wider audience. As a result, their incomes increased significantly, and they gained financial independence. The success of this SHG inspired other women in the community to join similar programmes, fostering a culture of entrepreneurship and self-reliance.

The Saakshar Bharat Mission

This Mission focuses on improving literacy rates among adults, particularly women, in rural areas. The mission implements various educational programmes to enhance basic literacy and numeracy skills. In the remote village of Kulgam, many women had never attended school due to socio-economic constraints and conflict related disruptions. An adult literacy center was established under the Saakshar Bharat Mission, providing evening classes for women. Shahnaza Banoo, a 38-year-old woman, was enrolled in the programme. Over several months, she learned to read, write, and perform basic arithmetic skills. With her newfound skills, Shahnaza took control of her family's finances and launched a small tailoring business from home. Her literacy not only enhanced her economic situation but also elevated her self-esteem and social standing in the community. Shahnaza's journey underscores the life-changing impact of adult education, inspiring other women to seek opportunities for learning.

Digital Literacy Initiative by Digital India

The Digital India campaign aims to bridge the digital divide by promoting internet connectivity and digital literacy among rural populations, including women.

In the village of Anantnag, a digital literacy center was established to provide women with basic computer skills. Shaista Akhtar, a young woman with limited formal education, enrolled in the programme. She learned how to use a computer, navigate the internet, and access online educational resources. Her digital literacy opened the door to online graphic design courses, and with her newly acquired skills, she began offering freelance design services. Through online platforms, she was able to connect with clients from all over the country. Shaista's success demonstrated

the potential of digital literacy to open up new economic opportunities for women in rural areas. Her achievements inspired other young women in the village to embrace digital learning, creating a ripple effect of empowerment.

Quantitative Results

1. UMEED scheme under JKSRLM

Annual Income Increase:

Women participating in *UMEED* have reported an average annual income increase of 30% to 50% after receiving vocational training.

Self-Help Group Earnings:

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) formed under *UMEED* have seen their collective earnings increased from an average of Rs. 10,000 (\$135) per year to Rs. 50,000 (\$675) per year.

Entrepreneurship Outcomes:

Women entrepreneurs trained under *UMEED* have reported that the monthly earnings of small businesses range from Rs. 5,000 (\$67) to Rs. 15,000 (\$202).

2. Women's Development Corporation (WDC) Initiatives

Background: The Women's Development Corporation (WDC) focuses on providing skill development and vocational training to promote self-employment and entrepreneurship among women. Its creation came at a time when there was a growing recognition of the need to address gender inequality and provide women with better opportunities for growth and empowerment. (JK WDC,1991).

Income Growth: Women who underwent training in food processing, tailoring, and handicrafts through WDC initiatives experienced an income increase from Rs. 2,000 (\$27) per month to Rs. 8,000 (\$108) per month.

Employment Opportunities: Approximately 60% of the women trained by WDC secured employment or started their own businesses, resulting in increased household income by an average of Rs. 6,000 (\$81) per month. (Shaista et al., 2024)

3. Saakshar Bharat Mission (Adult Literacy Programme)

Background: The Saakshar Bharat Mission aims to improve literacy rates among adults, particularly women, in rural areas.

Economic Empowerment: Women who completed literacy programmes reported a 25% increase in their ability to manage household finances and engage in income-generating activities.

Enhanced Livelihoods: Literacy programme graduates involved in small-scale businesses, such as tailoring and local trade, saw their monthly income rise from Rs. 1,500 (\$20) to Rs. 5,000 (\$67).

4. Digital Literacy Initiatives (*Digital India*)

Background: The Digital India campaign aims to bridge the digital divide by promoting internet connectivity and digital literacy among rural populations, including women.

Income from Online Work: Women who completed digital literacy training and pursued online freelance work, such as graphic design or data entry, reported average monthly earnings of Rs. 10,000 (\$135).

Business Expansion: Small business owners who learned digital marketing skills experienced a revenue increase of 40% by accessing broader markets online.

5. NGO-Driven Skill Development Programmes

Background: Various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Jammu and Kashmir run skill development programmes to empower women through education and training.

Tailoring and Stitching Programmes: Women trained in tailoring and stitching reported an increase in their monthly earnings from Rs. 1,800 (\$24) to Rs. 7,000 (\$94).

Handicraft Programmes: Participants in handicraft programmes saw their annual incomes rise from Rs. 15,000 (\$202) to Rs. 60,000 (\$808) after receiving training and market access support.

These figures highlight the significant impact of lifelong learning initiatives on the incomes of women in Jammu and Kashmir. Through vocational training, adult literacy programmes, digital literacy initiatives, and support from organizations like the Women's Development Corporation and NGOs, women have been able to achieve substantial income growth, enhancing their economic independence and overall quality of life (Women's Global Fund, 2022). Tejaswini scheme that was launched in June 2021, offers financial assistance for young women to start self-employment ventures. Women like Saira Akram Dar from Pulwama started a tailoring business with the help of Rs. 5 lakh sanctioned as loan, significantly increasing her family's income and employing several local women. Similarly, SAATH - a mentoring programme aims to make rural women self-reliant by helping them set up and sustain enterprises (Business Standard, 2021). Participants have reported significant increases in their income through ventures like dairy farming and small-scale manufacturing, transforming their overall socio-economic status.

IV. Comparative Analysis of Lifelong Learning Initiatives in Pre-Abrogation and Post-Abrogation Period of Article 370

Case 1: Pre-Abrogation of Article 370

Title: Empowering Women through Handicraft Training Programmes

Background: Before the abrogation of Article 370, the region of Jammu and Kashmir faced several socio-political challenges that hindered development initiatives. However, various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil societies actively worked to promote women's education and vocational training. An NGO launched a comprehensive handicraft training programme for women in rural areas of Kashmir. The programme aimed to preserve traditional crafts while providing women with skills that could lead to financial independence.

Implementation: Training centers were established in various villages to provide easy access for women, offering a curriculum focused on traditional crafts such as carpet weaving, embroidery, and papier-mâché. Participants were supported with raw materials and marketing assistance to help them sell their products. As a result, over 500 women received training, and many went on to start their own small businesses or cooperatives. This initiative not only led to economic empowerment, but also boosted the women's self-confidence and earned them increased respect within their communities. Additionally, the initiative attracted tourists and buyers, ensuring a sustainable income for the participants (Khan, 2018).

Case 2: Post-Abrogation of Article 370

Title: Digital Literacy and Entrepreneurship Training for Women

Background: The abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 led to significant political and administrative changes in Jammu and Kashmir. The region opened up to new opportunities for development and integration with national schemes. A collaboration between the government and a prominent tech company NASSCOM foundation launched a digital literacy and entrepreneurship training programme for women in urban and semi-urban areas (The Hindu, 2020)

Implementation: Digital literacy workshops were organized to teach women essential skills such as basic computer usage, internet navigation, and digital marketing. In addition, entrepreneurship training provided valuable knowledge on starting and managing online businesses, including e-commerce platforms. To support the participants, small grants were offered, and women were connected with mentors who helped them develop business plans and navigate the market. As a result, over 1,000 women enrolled in the program in its first year. Many went on to launch successful online businesses, selling products from handmade crafts to local agricultural produce. The initiative also fostered a supportive network among women entrepreneurs, promoting collaborative ventures and contributing to community growth (Raina, 2020).

Case 3: Pre-Abrogation of Article 370

Title: Women's Literacy Campaign in Rural Jammu

Before the abrogation of Article 370, efforts to promote women's literacy in rural areas of Jammu faced numerous challenges, including cultural resistance and limited infrastructure. A local NGO SHE HOPE initiated a women's literacy campaign aimed at teaching basic reading and writing skills to women in remote villages.

Implementation & Outcome: Mobile learning centers were established through mobile units to reach various villages. Local volunteers were recruited as teachers, and free learning materials such as books and stationery were provided to the participants. The initiative faced several challenges, including cultural resistance, as many families were reluctant to allow women to participate due to traditional gender roles. Additionally, logistical issues with the mobile units made it difficult to reach all the intended areas. High dropout rates were observed, with women often prioritizing

household duties over attending classes. Ultimately, the initiative reached fewer than 100 women, and only a small number achieved basic literacy, leading to the program's eventual discontinuation (Gupta, 2017).

Case 4: Post-Abrogation of Article 370

Title: Women's Digital Literacy Program in Jammu

Post-abrogation, increased governmental focus on Digital India initiatives and infrastructural development opened new avenues for women's education in Jammu and Kashmir.

The government, in collaboration with a national NGO, launched a women's digital literacy program to teach computer and internet skills to women in rural areas.

Implementation & Outcome: Digital learning centers were established with permanent facilities, fully equipped with computers and internet access. Skilled professional trainers were hired to ensure high-quality education, while flexible class timings were offered to accommodate the women's schedules. The program also provided follow-up support and advanced courses to encourage continuous learning. Within the first six months, over 1,500 women enrolled in the program. The women applied their new digital skills in various areas, such as online banking, accessing government services, and starting small online businesses. The initiative had a significant impact on the community, as women shared their newfound knowledge, leading to greater overall digital literacy. The program was later expanded to additional villages, achieving a completion rate of over 75% (Sharma, 2021).

To draw a comparative analysis - before the abrogation, focus was on traditional skills, primarily serving local markets, with a community-based approach that lacked significant technological integration. Successes were mostly localized due to sociopolitical constraints. In contrast, after the abrogation, the initiative leveraged digital technology and national programs, allowing for a broader market reach through e-commerce. Greater government support and national integration further facilitated a larger-scale impact, expanding the program's influence and accessibility. These case studies illustrate how changing socio-political environments and strategic partnerships can significantly impact the success of lifelong learning initiatives for women's empowerment. Pre-abrogation efforts were often hindered by instability and resistance, while post-abrogation programmes benefited from improved stability, infrastructure, and support.

V. Lifelong Learning and Promotion of Peace in Jammu and Kashmir

Lifelong learning has played a critical role in promoting peace and stability in Jammu and Kashmir by addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering an environment of understanding, empowerment, and economic development. Here are several ways in which lifelong learning has contributed to peacebuilding in the region:

The UMEED scheme, which is part of the JKSRLM, has empowered women by providing vocational training and financial inclusion. Economic independence reduces reliance on conflict-driven economies and creates a stake in maintaining peace. Women who are economically empowered tend to invest in their family's education and health, leading to overall social stability. This contributes to a peaceful environment as family becomes self-sufficient and less vulnerable to external pressures. For example, in Badgam, women who participated in the UMEED scheme reported increased household incomes, which reduced economic strain and fostered a more stable and peaceful community (Nigheena, Khan, personal communication, 15 March 2024). Similarly, the Saakshar Bharat Mission focused on adult literacy, which has empowered women to engage actively in their communities. Literacy improves communication and understanding, reducing misunderstandings and conflicts. Educated women are more likely to participate in community decision-making processes, promoting democratic values and peaceful conflict resolution. In Shopian, women who completed literacy programmes have taken on leadership roles in local community organizations, promoting peace and development initiatives.

Digital literacy programmes under the Digital India campaign have provided women with access to information and communication technologies. This access helps women stay informed about their rights and available opportunities, reducing the likelihood of conflict over misinformation. The digital platforms facilitate the creation of online communities where women can share experiences, support each other, and collectively advocate for peace and stability. In Anantnag, women who gained digital literacy skills have created online groups to discuss community issues and coordinate peaceful initiatives, enhancing social cohesion.

Various NGOs in Jammu and Kashmir run educational programmes focusing on peace education, conflict resolution, and human rights. These programmes teach women and their families the importance of peace and specific skills needed to resolve conflicts non-violently. The programmes that promote cultural exchange and understanding between different communities help break down prejudices and

build mutual respect. The NGO Chinar Kashmir has implemented programmes that include peace education modules. Women who participated in these programmes have become advocates for non-violence and reconciliation in their communities (Khan, 2022).

Lifelong learning initiatives have significantly contributed to promoting peace in Jammu and Kashmir by empowering women economically, fostering community engagement, building capacities for conflict resolution, promoting education and awareness, and reducing vulnerability to radicalization. These programmes create a foundation for a more stable and peaceful society by addressing the socio-economic and cultural factors that drive conflict. Through continued support and expansion of lifelong learning opportunities, the region can move closer to sustained peace and development.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, lifelong learning is a powerful tool for women empowerment, enabling women to free themselves from the shackles of oppression, challenge gender stereotypes and unlock their full potential. It is clear that by investing in lifelong learning we can empower women to shape their own destinies, challenge the status quo and create a justifiable and equitable world for themselves as well as future generations. The study's findings suggest that lifelong learning programmes have a positive impact on women's empowerment in India, leading to increased confidence, economic independence, social recognition and personal growth. These findings are consistent with previous research that has highlighted the importance of education and skills development in promoting women's empowerment (Kabeer, 2005).

The study's results have several implications for policy and practice. Firstly, the findings suggest that investing in lifelong learning programmes can be an effective strategy for promoting women's empowerment in India. Secondly, the study highlights the need for gender-sensitive approaches to lifelong learning, that take into account the unique challenges and barriers faced by women in accessing education and skills development opportunities. Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of addressing the social and cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality and limit women's access to lifelong learning opportunities. The study's limitations include its focus on a specific region in India. Future research should aim to address these limitations by using objective measures of empowerment and expanding the study's scope to include other regions in India.

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