Social Media for Promoting Excellence in Women Development: Miracle or Myth

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ABSTRACT

With the technology onslaught, contribution of social media in influencing the life choices of the young minds has been immense. With its unusual user-friendly attributes, social media has made an impact on every aspect of life. In the field of education, the teaching-learning ecosystem has gone under a total metamorphosis with use of social media platforms like Youtube, Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Udemy, Slideshare and much talked about Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs). The concept of traditional learning has gone beyond the four-walls. The focus is now on their promise of providing "Anytime, Anyplace Learning" and "the best teachers" to students around the world. In general, this media is useful but it has not gone down without criticism. The cynics of social media have raised questions about its real worth as they claim it is a threat to education because it replaces the face to face contact and widens the knowledge divide due to the existing digital divide, poor representation of women as teachers as well as students on these platforms of online learning. As social media provides greater freedom to the girls/women who face greater inhibitions in terms of familial responsibilities, social and religious restrictions etc., it invites contempt from the conservatives and the status-quoists. With these dilemmas, the developments in the social media need to be seen more objectively and rationally so that the gender gap can be mitigated and engendering this media can be accomplished for gender development. The pronouncements of educational technology enthusiasts that online learning is sweeping aside the barriers that have in the past prevented the equitable access to education seems a premature one. As it turns out, students often carry these barriers right along with them, from the real world into the virtual one which is not a very healthy sign in an inclusive teaching learning environment. Against this backdrop, the present paper is an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena and suggest some plausible ways to counter the shortcomings and harness the maximum fruit of the inclusion of social media and other online learning platforms in education with special consideration of gender aspects.

| **KEYWORDS** | Social Media for women development, MOOCs for women education. |

"Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process" (From International Conference on Population and Development). But the right to education is denied to women due to familial responsibilities, social biases, religious restrictions etc. In such a scenario, what MOOCs might mean for Dalit girls in India or Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan or girls abducted by Boko Haram in Nigeria. There is a view that MOOCs might save them from bullets or assault, by allowing them to study in safety at home and that they can anonymously obtain knowledge and help free themselves. Online courses such as MOOC (Massive open online course), or open educational resources like Academic Earth, ALISON (Advance Learning Interactive Systems Online) EducateMe360, Peer 2 Peer University etc. have the potential to open many new doors that traditional education system cannot. Even for non-formal learning like cultivating a hobby, new media offers a plethora of learning resources in multiple formats to suit different types of learners. Enthusiasts belonging to different fields, share their knowledge along with best practices and tips on YouTube, Slideshare and Twitter. Experts curate learning resources in their area of proficiency and make them available on websites like Pinterest, ScoopIt and Learnist. Many teachers worldwide are sharing free tutorials on Udemy and WizIQ. Most of these savants are even willing to engage in a dialogue on a discussion forum; Facebook or Google group to help solve specific issues their followers raise. Some are even eager to form informal online learning communities. Thus, the use of social media has changed the teaching- learning scenario in a tremendous way. At the same time, the cynics of social media have raised questions about its real worth as they claim it is a threat to education because it replaces the face to face contact and widens the knowledge divide due to the existing digital divide, poor representation of women as teachers as well as students on these platforms of online learning. As social media provides greater freedom to the girls/women who face greater inhibitions in terms of familial responsibilities, social and religious restrictions etc., it invites contempt from the conservatives and the status-quoists. With these dilemmas, the developments in the social media need to be seen more objectively and rationally so that the gender gap can be mitigated and engendering this media can be accomplished for gender development.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA
Social media has been defined as a group of internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Ghose and Thakurta (2013) observed "Social media depends on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. It introduces substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organisations, communities and individuals." Bryer and Zavataro (2001) observed: "Social media are technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders. These technologies include blogs, wikis, media (audio, photo, video, text) sharing tools, networking platforms (including Facebook), and virtual worlds." These contrast with media tools that have social features, but which may not connect individuals or groups through the Internet.

A **massive open online course** (**MOOC**) is an online course aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the web. In addition to traditional course materials such as videos, readings, and problem sets, MOOCs provide interactive user forums that help build a community for students, professors, and teaching assistants (TAs). MOOCs are a recent development in distance education which began to emerge in 2012. (Wikipedia)

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) was first introduced in 2008 by Dave Cormier to describe "Connectivism and Con-

nective Knowledge" course. In 2011, Sebastian Thrun and his colleagues at Stanford University designed an open access course on Artificial Intelligence. It was a tremendous success of MOOC. Since then, MOOCs have become a label for many recent online course initiatives from institutions. (Nath, 2014)

MOOCs may be seen as an extension of existing online learning approaches, in terms of open access i. e. anyone can participate in an online course for free of cost and scalability i. e. these courses are designed to support an infinite number of participants to courses. The opportunity that MOOCs offer for massification of courses and mitigating gender gap in education have generated significant interest from governments, institutions and commercial organizations. MOOCs reduce not only cost of study but they save women from various obstacles at many levels. The impacts of MOOCs on education with focus on women education may be considered as follows:

New Opportunities
Social media offers different benefits to different people. In general, it provides a flexible set-up which is also free of cost. Earlier online learning was essentially insynchronous but MOOCs use synchronous communication technology which has made online learning a less solitary experience. Following are its major benefits.

- Online learning platforms can prove helpful to women as they provide "Anytime, Anyplace Learning" and the anonymity which can ensure minimum resistance from the family and outside.
- The geographical distance, is no longer a hindrance for women, which was earlier a major obstacle in their getting education.
- Online learning platforms help move a learner from being extrinsically motivated to intrinsically motivated by offering all the three pillars of self-motivation –autonomy (learners can independently take initiative, mastery (through multiple representations and multiple presentations of understanding) and purpose (learners can apply their knowledge and skills to a cause that appeal them) and also, depending upon the performance, their reputation is always on stake in social media. (Gupta, 2013)
- MOOCs provide access to institutions that previously were only open to those people who could physically walk through the door. MOOCs also provided academics with new web tools to spread their teaching.
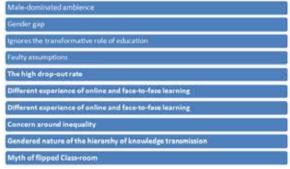

- MOOCs would help to make online learning a less solitary experience.
- One turning point was in understanding the power of the visual. There had been online education for decades, but it had not really taken off. What changed was the ability to teach huge numbers of learners with a single lecturer at

marginal cost.
- A second turning point was the increasing ability and willingness of people to have social interactions via the internet. This opened up the possibility of peer-to-peer teaching and learning, as opposed to the hub-and-spoke model with a single infrastructure and a few dozen lecturers teaching. "If you have peer-to-peer you can scale it up and this is pivotal."
- On a larger scale, MOOCs could help build capacity for local higher education. India aims to grow participation in post-secondary education to 30%. This requires 1,500 new academic institutions needed to be built and millions more lecturers trained.

This is an overwhelming positive. But let's not assume it is a panacea for problems in the developing world. Just as in the physical world, in the virtual sphere the barriers to girls' and women's advancement remain very much in place. With informed intervention and clever design, however, the digital walls may prove easier to scale.
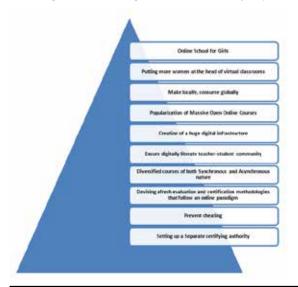
SOME SCEPTICISM

- **Male-dominated ambience**- Researches show that women learn better when they are surrounded by other females. But online learning media is overwhelmingly dominated by men, both as teachers as well as students.
- **Gender gap-** Gender gap in science, technology, engineering, and math courses offered online is serious. Demographic analyses of the students enrolled in much-hyped "massive open online courses" show the depth of the gender gap. Circuits and Electronics, the first MOOC developed by the online consortium of universities known as edX, had a student body that was 12 percent female, according to a study published in 2013. These dismally low numbers provide a reminder that "access" to education is more complicated than simply throwing open the digital doors to whoever wants to sign up.
- **Ignores the transformative role of education**- The fact that girls/women can anonymously obtain knowledge and help free themselves ignores the transformative role of education itself. For the vast majority of the world, knowledge and education is about making a claim for a share of cultural capital. Education had to be a physical reality. Education was an individual affair but was not about being in isolation.
- **Faulty assumptions**- Education is not just about saving costs but also about creating international sensibilities. Maintaining the status-quo regarding women issues concerning their education is definitely not a healthy sign.
- **The high drop-out rate-** The high drop-out rate from MOOCs is also a problem. One of the major challenges in the developing world is not only access to education but also its quality. Without quality, students are set up to fail.
- **Different experience of online and face-to-face learning**- Also, online learning experience is not the same as face-to-face learning and there are concerns about providing education to millions that did not offer the full educational experience.
- **Concern around inequality**- By its very design, online learning platforms widen the knowledge divide because of the existing digital divide. And the concern is more critical

for underdeveloped and developing countries. If one thinks of democratising education by giving people MOOCs instead of face-to-face education, it means the poor in the developing world get MOOCs and the elite continue to get face-to-face education. This will further consolidate inequalities.

- **Unviable Business Model**- Everybody says MOOCs are free, but everything starts off free and then five or six years later the economic exigencies start having an impact. Almost certainly down the line there will be a charge structure, and when you have a charge structure in a foreign currency it can have a dramatic impact.

- **Gendered nature of the hierarchy of knowledge transmission-** One aspect of MOOCs is that the stars are almost all men. At one website only 9 of 56 History MOOCS were presented by women. The MOOC model, of the authoritative talking head, is one that privileges cultural perceptions of male dominance over certain types of knowledge. The gendered nature of the hierarchy of knowledge transmission that takes place is clear in the MOOC model of education. Although students are invited to respond at different points, to a large extent, the presenter controls the topic, the vocabulary, and the trajectory of whatever dialogue might take place. This is more so in case of xMOOCs rather than cMOOCs.

- **Myth of flipped Class-room**- MOOCs have also created new excitement among the mostly male presenters about the possibilities of the flipped classroom. Of course, there is no pedagogical innovation happening here; feminist scholars have flipped the classroom for years. What is flipped is usually the use of class time, not authority. After all, a MOOC is centred on lectures, which are now given in front of a camera with no students present, thus denying any opportunity for response or interaction from the listener. The instructor remains the sole purveyor of information and the students remain the passive consumers; with pre-recorded lectures, the instructor controls the content even more than is usually case, and it is more difficult to adapt to individual student needs.

The Way Out
With Social media tools of learning, especially MOOCs, we have a mechanism to reach high quality education and a globally collaborative learning experience, to any section of society. For the first time, technology and digital content have been combined together to serve massive groups of students across diverse educational, economic, social and ethnic backgrounds. MOOCs have raised the bar on what learners and educators can do to gain and impart education. MOOCs have also provided ways for anyone to learn using open resources and networks, and to earn and innovate. (Ficci Vision Paper, 2014). If we adapt and transform learning through Social Media as per our local needs in the backdrop of global scenario, we have much to gain. The following measures can be really helpful:

- One potential solution to this information-age problem comes from an old-fashioned source: single-sex education. The Online School for Girls, founded in 2009, provides an all-female e-learning experience.
- Another way to promote female students' sense of belonging in online math and science courses would be putting more women at the head of virtual classrooms.
- Teaching-learning milieu should try to incorporate the experience of the local teacher in the developing world. In other words, Make locally, consume globally should be the norm.
- Popularization of Massive Open Online Courses is a pre-requisite and it involves creation of a huge digital infrastructure.
- Ensure digitally literate teacher-student community and requisite infrastructure including cheap digital technologies, digital devices, and seamless high-speed cheap internet connection.
- In order to suit varied needs of learners, course structure of online courses should be of two types, one being the regular fulltime courses which are designed both synchronously and asynchronously. Synchronous courses imply that all the learners access a particular course at the same time on a common online platform via a Virtual Classroom where the learners pursue their education from different remote locations yet stay connected together with the instructor. Asynchronous courses are different with their pre-recorded digital tutorials, which could be accessed by the learners at any time asynchronously.
- Online courses completely differ from the traditional mode of formal education, therefore, evaluation and certification methodologies need to be devised afresh that follow an online paradigm. The perception that certification status of open education should be at par with the formal education system needs to be wiped out. Since the course is of diversified nature, regular periodic assessments are required along with separate final examinations for summed up evaluation.
- Prevent cheating in examinations is one of the most difficult task. As for the online evaluation, the pattern of questions needs to be mostly of non-descriptive, short-answer type, MCQ, and selection-based types. Online course providers should form partnerships with some institutes providing basic infrastructure for conducting online examination.
- Separate certifying authority needs to set up in India for the certification of online courses. However, the process may be decentralized by giving affiliation of certification to different private MOOCs providers but the overall system needs to be under Government vigil to ensure quality and sanctity.

These steps, if taken effectively, will improve the face-value of online courses and hence the improved job market for online learners. These may bring about massive change in the educational scenario for all in general and women in particular.

CONCLUSION
Some see MOOCs and other online learning platforms as the biggest thing to solve world poverty; others dismiss them as a fad that will have disappeared in two years. Neither is true. Online learning platforms are not miracles and they are certainly not myths. Just as the internet has made aces to knowledge and wisdom as easily accessible as pornography, social media will also influence the educational scenario, in India and the world, in a mixed way. There is a need to address the problems which may mar the utility of deployment of social media in education. But the conversation, collaboration, coherence, global reach, scalability and low-cost dimensions that social media offer can be a blessing for a meaningful, effective and engaging education for all, provided they are used prudently. It is crucial that collectively we approach this challenge without cynicism, on the one hand, or romanticism on the other. Cynicism could prevent innovation, and romanticism could raise unrealistic expectations. "We need nuance."

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