

3. Gender Equality and Adult Basic Education



Women's basic education in Pakistan, Khoj

This paper highlights the fact that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) do not directly address the issue of adult basic education and literacy, in spite of these being essential for achieving the Millennium targets. It explores the potential of adult basic education with gender equality to be transformative for individuals, and for groups working to address key issues, such as gender-based violence, and HIV/AIDS. The role of governments and other key agencies in relation to gender equality and adult basic education is also explored. The paper concludes with a discussion of how to develop longer-term approaches to gender equality, adult basic education, and literacy.

Adult basic education and the Millennium Development Goals

There are almost 800 million illiterate adults worldwide, of whom 64 per cent are women.¹ There is widespread agreement that adult basic education and literacy enhance human and social development and underpin the achievement of all Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yet the MDGs do not emphasise or address the eradication of adult illiteracy or the provision of basic education for adults and out of school youth. The education Goal (MDG2) focuses on universal primary education. The gender Goal (MDG3) has targets for gender parity in the formal primary, secondary, and tertiary education system, but leaves out adult basic education. There is an urgent need to expand the vision of both these MDGs to take on board basic education for adults.

Literacy and women's empowerment

Societies have become increasingly dependent on the printed word, and non-literate people are among the poorest and least powerful in the world. Marginalised groups and individuals receive little or no education. This particularly affects poor women and girls who experience forms of discrimination and injustice.

There is a close relationship between literacy, power, and empowerment. The objectives of adult basic education and literacy have been expressed by a wide-ranging global consensus 'to enable people and communities to take control of their destiny and society...'.²

National Literacy Programme, Uganda

An evaluation of the National Literacy Programme in Uganda showed that, among positive outcomes, the empowerment or increased self-confidence of learners were perhaps the most salient. One woman expressed this by saying that, before becoming a literacy learner, *'I talked with my hands in front of my mouth without looking up, but now I feel strong and free to speak up.'*³

There are many providers of literacy teaching, with funding from numerous sources. They use a wide range of approaches, from teaching specific skills and knowledge for limited purposes (e.g. literacy linked to income-generation schemes), through to facilitating learning to achieve more far-reaching empowerment and social change. In other words, adult basic education and literacy teaching does not have to be restricted to teaching people to read and write. While not all literacy learning is empowering in this way, and women sometimes report literacy classes that fall far short of this, it does have the potential to *transform* poor people's lives. This transformation can powerfully challenge gender inequality:

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- Through the teaching process itself, which can promote dialogue, supporting and encouraging learners to discuss and reflect on their condition and its causes.
- By equipping learners with the skills to gain information and to advocate for their own rights.

Although adult basic education and literacy programmes have the potential to be empowering for women and girls, a wide-ranging assessment of literacy programmes show that few have explicitly 'gendered' aims or gender policies. Of those that do, the aims related to gender range from the achievement of equal access to programmes, to the transformation of the lives of women outside the classroom.

Research in a number of settings indicates that, for poor women's lives to be transformed through gender-equitable adult basic education and literacy teaching, the content and processes used must be guided by the experiences and aspirations of the learners, so that they feel relevant to them. Pertinent and continuing training of teachers to this end is necessary.

Total Literacy Campaign, India

From the late 1980s, the NGO Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS), worked in partnership with the Government of India on the Total Literacy Campaign, the aim of which was to mobilise women for literacy. The campaign, which used messages that linked literacy to basic livelihood problems, and questions of exploitation and discrimination against women, provided new hope and optimism for millions of women from all classes. It gave women a social sanction to come out of their houses and participate in activities organised in their villages. Today the BGVS is in the process of building institutional support at the village level for women working with self-help groups. The objectives of these groups include providing a focus for activities for women's empowerment, helping women to upgrade their literacy skills and, through micro-credit enterprises, enhancing their status in the family and in the community.⁴

The realities of women's lives

Illiterate women are a very diverse constituency. What individuals wish to achieve and change through becoming educated and literate will vary according to their circumstances and the environments in which they live. Case studies show that participatory methods for programme design can ensure that these wishes are a central part of literacy programmes.

Changes in the wider external environment – for example, macroeconomic policy that involves a reduction in government spending on the social sector because of external debt, or a reduction in the prices paid for crops that women produce – can directly affect women's lives. Rapid change, e.g. due to a government adopting policies on gender equality or due to widespread unemployment, can

result in confused perceptions of the divisions of work between women and men. This can lead to backlashes against women's independence if, for example, it creates new or different demands for literacy and organised learning.

Increasingly, for many women, living with HIV/AIDS is a reality. Levels of education have been found to be a strong predictor of levels of knowledge about safe behaviour and ways of reducing infection. Education programmes for young people worldwide are addressing HIV/AIDS prevention with increasing coherence. However, in adult basic education the learning and knowledge is fragmented and dispersed. Adult basic education needs to provide support to learners to help them consider HIV/AIDS from both personal and local perspectives, and women need to be supported to negotiate safe sex.

The vulnerability of women and girls to gender-based violence also makes them more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Women and girls report violence through enforced sex in the domestic sphere, and as a result of conflict and war. These experiences can have profound effects on their confidence and outlook and therefore on their ability to learn. Adult basic education and literacy programmes need to consider how to support their learning, by enabling them to reflect on their experiences.

HIV/AIDS, gender, and adult basic education in Thailand

The AIDS Education Programme of Chiangmai University has been collaborating with the Asian-South Pacific Bureau of Adult Basic Education (ASPBAE) in developing a set of participatory tools to promote HIV/AIDS and gender awareness in the community. The tools are designed to help women and men analyse the linkages between gender (gender inequalities), development (issues of poverty and migration), and HIV/AIDS. They include techniques for analysing gender values and selecting marriage partners; women's work and men's work; risk behaviours and connections among groups in the community; gender roles and values in HIV/AIDS prevention and care; and gender differences in the control of, and access to, resources in HIV/AIDS prevention and care.

The research and application of the tools emphasises the need for adult basic education and awareness-raising about HIV/AIDS to be closely linked to other spheres of education, social action, and structural change. It also suggests the need for gender-sensitivity training for young men and women as well as for service providers, community leaders, and faith-based leaders — all gatekeepers to women's equality.⁵

What is needed?

For adult basic education programmes to be gender-equitable and to recognise the local impacts of poverty, discrimination against women, and HIV/AIDS, they need to be closely linked to social action and structural change focusing on poverty alleviation measures, side by side with their engagement with the whole range of education provision.

Support and training for literacy workers in exploring these issues, and links with other support services, need to be established. Training and awareness-raising among trainers, youth leaders, and students of how prevailing gender biases and relationships increase the vulnerability of women, especially to HIV/AIDS, is necessary. In addition, literacy workers need to be able to help both women and men to discuss forms of gender inequality.

If adult basic education is to play a role in transforming the lives of learners, staff need to be trained in participatory practices that include women and men, so that they can support learners by developing locally appropriate materials, available in languages appropriate for a range of learners.

The short-termism that is often in evidence in adult basic education and literacy programmes also needs to be addressed. In many cases, short-term instruction is given (e.g. for six months), without the follow-up needed to consolidate learning and promote reading. This can have a negative impact on women who may be constrained in their mobility to find another class or who have little spare income to buy follow-up materials.

The current lack of training for teachers and facilitators, and the shortage of institutions providing training in empowering methods for the delivery of adult basic education, both need to be addressed. There are few staff development opportunities or incentives. Volunteers, often women, are poorly remunerated, despite their potential and their commitment.

The Bolsa Escola Programme in Brazil: empowering mothers and women

The Bolsa Escola programme is best known for its objective of providing families with income subsidies, conditional on maintaining their children in school. However, a second objective of the programme, currently being implemented by Oxfam GB and the NGO Missao Crianca with EU funding, is to empower women within the family. A mother's level of education, her race, and her level of income, are all factors that correlate strongly with the educational achievement of children in Brazil.

The programme, entitled 'Education to Confront Poverty', provides adult education for mothers and other members of their families, and creates incentives for mothers to participate directly in school meetings and local education councils. The potential for women's participation already exists in some contexts, but there are no real incentives for them to get involved. So, by putting women in charge of receiving and allocating the benefits of the programme, their self-esteem is boosted and their decision-making influence within the family is promoted. Merely putting them in charge of Bolsa Escola funds is not enough: instead, the programme is helping them to become agents of change in their families and communities and to develop skills that can transform their lives.⁶

Neglect of the sector by governments

Governments state that they are committed to adult basic education and literacy – but in reality they are a low priority for most. Adult basic education has remained under-funded and marginalised within ministries, resulting in poor cohesion and co-ordination in adult basic education programmes. Current government neglect of the sector needs to be reversed.

Where they exist, large-scale government-funded adult basic education and literacy programmes are usually weakened by short-termism – they are one-offs with no budget or plan for follow-up. Adult education has been addressed through patchy and unco-ordinated programmes and work by NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs). These often rely on short-term funding.

This is not a promising backdrop for the development of more sophisticated gender-equitable policies and practices. In order to deliver gender-equitable adult basic education and literacy programmes, governments need to ensure that, rather than being rigid and prescriptive, programmes are sensitive to variations in context, respectful of differences, innovative, and responsive to a range of challenges for building gender equality. Literacy programmes must operate at a local level. Decentralised support services appear to be the most successful means of enabling this, but these need adequate resourcing. Where it exists, good practice should be documented and shared.

Governments must be held accountable for the commitments they have articulated. A policy framework for adult basic education and literacy, based on democratic rights, is needed in most countries to clarify the commitment and role of the state. Where this exists on paper, there needs to be a push to ensure delivery and support stronger forums and networks among the range of education providers, for gender equality.

The role of civil society

The key challenge for civil society is to lobby governments through advocacy, campaigning, and provision for an overall gender equity approach to *all* education, by linking the focus on girls' formal education contained in the Millennium Development Goals to adult basic education and literacy for women.

NGOs need to highlight for governments the potential of participatory approaches in adult basic education and literacy to achieve gender equality and social change. While willing to promote literacy through partnerships with NGOs, governments may become unsupportive or even hostile when mobilisation for literacy leads to a wider social mobilisation of women advocating for their rights.

Movements need to advocate for governments to establish a rights-based policy framework, and governments need to ensure that a process exists to achieve this. This means building dialogue with governments.

There is a huge role for civil society to play in raising the profile of adult basic education and literacy and ensuring that it is gender equitable. NGOs have developed collaborations, such as the Global Campaign for Education, to advocate for governments to honour commitments they have made. More resources are needed to strengthen advocacy for change to public policies, so that these confront gender exclusion in the lack of education for adults and promote education with gender justice.

Adult basic education and literacy are important in themselves, and also for key areas such as health, leadership, and the broad issues of women's empowerment. Through greater advocacy, adult basic education needs to be moved higher up the agenda of the women's movement and higher among the concerns of civil society.

Advocacy for gender justice in education

In 1990 REPEM (Women's Popular Education Network) launched a campaign in Latin America to change the image of women in education programmes and in the media. With little financial support or political will and in a context of sexism at all levels of education, the campaign worked to influence:

- the availability of adult basic education;
- UN summits and conferences, particularly the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V);
- social movements (e.g. the World Social Forum) and women's movements where education was not a priority.

Since then, REPEM has developed into a strong network able to participate in the preparatory process of each UN conference at local, regional, and global levels. It prepares documents, reviews ongoing activities, and monitors the implementation of agreements made by governments and by previous conferences. The campaign fights not only for the physical inclusion of women in adult basic education, but also to overcome the exclusion of women based on other areas of difference: age, social class, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.⁷

Recommendations

Governments need to prioritise adult basic education and gender equality by:

- Developing a policy framework for adult basic education and literacy that is part of an integrated education policy;
- Working closely with civil society organisations to design and develop this framework and subsequent policies;

- Prioritising financial and human resources to support the implementation of good quality adult basic education and literacy that transforms gender relations;
- Forming relationships and programmes with donors who prioritise adult basic education (e.g. SIDA, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency); and
- Developing human resources and capacity, together with adequate funding, at local levels of government (i.e. training, curriculum development, research, and documentation).

Civil society actors need to raise the profile of adult basic education and literacy and increase government commitment by:

- Lobbying for investment in adult basic education as a necessity for achieving all the MDGs;
- Lobbying governments and funding agencies to develop strategies to achieve commitments related to adult basic education in the Dakar Framework of Action for Education for All;
- Lobbying to achieve the Beijing Framework for Action;
- Developing strong links with women's movements and organisations campaigning on HIV/AIDS and aspects of poverty.

Adult educators and civil society organisations together need to develop gender transformatory practices by broadening the concept of literacy, from simply learning to read and write, to learning and developing skills for social action and women's empowerment. They need to campaign for more creative and participatory training of trainers, with action research linked to local gender needs and the diversity of learners, and to document good practice to improve understanding of how literacy is developed in different social contexts and actions.

Notes

(For all Beyond Access seminar papers and *Equals* newsletter see www.ioe.ac.uk/efps/beyondaccess)

¹ UNESCO (2005) 'Education for All – Literacy for Life' EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006'. Paris: UNESCO.

² Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), Declaration 5, www.unesco.org/education/ue/confintea/documents.

³ A. Lind (2004) 'Reflections on Gender Equality and National Adult Basic Education', Beyond Access Seminar 4.

⁴ K. Srivastava (2004) 'Community Mobilisation, Gender Equality, and Resource Mobilisation in Adult Basic Education', Beyond Access Seminar 4.

⁵ U. Duongsaa (2004) 'Development, Gender, HIV/AIDS, and Adult Education', Beyond Access Seminar 4.

⁶ L. Palazzo (2005) 'Bolsa Escola, Brazil: Enabling Enrolment and Empowerment'. *Equals* newsletter 11.

⁷ C. Eccher (2004) 'Gender and Education: History of Some Struggles', Beyond Access Seminar 4.

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