

Women's Issues in Literacy

Sharon Franz

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Abstract

This paper was part of a panel presentation at the International Literacy Year Colloquium in October 1990, in Washington, D.C. Addressing the obstacles to education faced by women in many parts of the world is a primary thrust of the paper. It goes on to point out that there are many definitions of literacy, depending on the context. Several examples of programs in which the academy is involved in different areas of the world are presented. The paper concludes by stating that increasing the level of education for women will not happen by chance; it must be mandated.

1. Introduction

The focus of this colloquium is *Literacy: The Foundation for Development*. It is also important to look at Women in Development (WID) issues. Over the past four years, I have watched the growth in the recognition of and importance placed on women's roles in development. This trend will be around for some time to come. Research supports this emphasis on women's issues in literacy.*

2. Obstacles to Educating Women

At the Academy, we saw a relationship between education and the economy. We began to understand through research that, for women who have more education, the chance for wiser choices about childbearing and fertility is higher. We have begun to broaden the definition of work. What we once considered as women's work, we now think of as part of a whole economic structure. Small enterprises, small crafts, and even housework are factored in as part of the whole economy. Studies on the educational rates and agricultural productivity of women feed into the increased emphasis on women. The Academy aids many programs funded by the Agency for International Development (AID). Women are part of mainstream activity, and we need to emphasize bringing them more into mainstream activity.

Many urban and rural pockets in the U.S. look like the third world because of increasing poverty. We face many challenges to provide universal literacy because of the extreme poverty in so many areas. In this country and overseas, women are often the most severely hit by poverty. Research shows that the feminization of poverty is real. Single mothers are the hardest hit. Overseas, rural populations are the biggest challenge to providing services.

Education is labor-intensive. For years, we tried to make teacher-proof curriculums and develop a technology that bypasses one-on-one teaching. We were somewhat successful, but are far from a teaching and learning situation that does not use people for direct instruction.

There are limited resources for education. We can look at resource allocation all over the world and find that education spending is right behind defense, but it is still not enough. It is going to cost more. A challenge to literacy, particularly literacy for women, is "Do we really have the political will to do it?"

Literacy for women will be particularly difficult because the gap between boys and girls enrolled in formal schooling has changed little since World War II. For all studies, we need to look at the actual numbers of the literate population, literate men and literate women, because in developing countries, literate men always outnumber literate women.

The obstacles to developing literate populations are compounded for women. A serious problem is the traditional view of women's roles. It is serious because this is a problem for both men and women.

*Sharon Franz is Senior Vice President and Director of the Education Exchange and Student Services Academy for Educational Development, Washington, D.C. Her earlier work focused on urban school systems and community-based organizations in the U.S. One of her major interests is in ways to facilitate collaboration among organizations. She is proud to say that she is a teacher and an administrator. She has over eight years of teaching experience and feels that this has been vitally important to her work today.

Both sexes see women in particular roles and men in particular roles. In many of these preconceived views, women do not need high levels of literacy. These are roles in the home, or in subservient or subordinate positions. Women are more often nurses rather than doctors, secretaries rather than executives, paralegals rather than lawyers. There is a preconceived notion of how we see the level of literacy for women and what we see them doing. A big challenge is to promote a level of literacy that we all want to achieve, whether male or female.

Another major factor is formal and informal religious belief systems. We see this in countries that follow the Islamic religion. Islam has strict rules for women's roles in the society. We talk about increasing the roles of women in formal education, but a religious culture is there that must be worked within. It is not our place to make suggestions or to make changes in the system. When necessary, we work within the constraints of the religious belief system.

Another important issue in educating women is that women tend not to have a vision for the future. Why should they bother to go to class? In our work in the U.S., we tend to work with urban school systems and community organizations on issues related to teenage pregnancy. The most important variable for getting young women to delay sexual activity and pregnancy is to help them see that they have future options. There is a reason not to become pregnant because there are opportunities and a future out there. To become pregnant when thirteen or fifteen years old will limit, if not prohibit, those future opportunities. Since young women tend not to dream and see life in the same way that young men are socialized to do, it is very difficult to get them to stay in school or to aggressively pursue their studies. What they do in the middle schools and the early high school years is going to affect what their future life opportunities are.

Another significant factor is child care and family responsibilities. This is a universal obstacle. No matter how we break down the male/female barriers, women will continue to be seen as the primary child care givers. This is a significant factor that we have to consider when talking about increasing literacy rates among women.

There are few role models for young women. There is a need for more women in leadership roles and policy-setting roles. My experience at the Academy is that most of the teams that we send overseas to design projects or to do evaluations are male dominated. A majority of the pool of consultants that we draw upon are men. We are working very hard to change that because we need to get more women out in the field and in roles where they can be role models. Women need to be in evaluation roles, but historically women have not been involved in leadership. This is beginning to change.

If one of our goals is to increase rates of literacy among women around the world, we need to look at those obstacles that prevent progress. It will be difficult to start an education program or a teacher training program without paying attention to child care, family responsibilities, and tying education to future options for women.

3. Definitions of Literacy

The definition of literacy changes rapidly. A simple definition that I use is: "A literate person is one who can take advantage of society's opportunities and contribute to its improvement." Many societies, like a small tribal village in the Amazon rain forest, will have different meanings of literacy for each member of that group. The ability to contribute to the group's improvement and to take advantage of the local society's opportunities will vary between individuals and between societies. When considering a society like Nairobi, Kenya, or Brooklyn, New York, literacy has very different meanings. The definition of literacy clearly is contextual and constantly changes. It needs to reflect what one needs to function in that setting and to make a positive contribution.

Other factors go into the definition of literacy. As the world changes and becomes smaller, there will no longer be the tribe in the rain forest that is untouched by the rest of society. Some groups may not be touched yet, but they are rare. More people are running into the need for mainstream literacy, or *world literacy*.

Literacy is also defined by the needs and demands of the larger society in which the individual must function. About ten years ago, a colleague had a brother taking the New York State Bar Examination. She worried about the possibility of a pass or fail for her brother. My friend had a lot of anxiety. I asked what the passing score was. The answer was that the passing score changes. The Bar Association sets it based on the number of lawyers needed. It may not be capricious, but action is taken at the highest level of policy and institutional change to adjust and shift the scale. Such actions affect the pipeline with which teachers come into the system, the number of nurses being trained, and the number of lawyers accepted.

That a society is influenced by its economic structure, religion, and traditions is not the complete picture. It is also influenced by the role in which a person is assigned or takes to fit within the society. In most of our formal education systems, there is a tendency to identify early on what a person's capabilities or capacities are. Then that person is tracked through the education system.

A project in the U.S., funded by the Ford Motor Company, tries to increase and improve the quality and quantity of the math and science courses taken by minority and female students in the middle grades and high school. This was motivated by need. The Ford Motor Company could not find enough females and minorities coming out of college with engineering degrees because they came out of high school without the prerequisite math and science courses.

A recent study by the College Boards shows that taking algebra in high school is the most important variable predicting whether a minority student will go on to post-secondary education. It sounds simplistic, but much is written about the female math phobia in our society.

4. Academy Programs

With this background, I present some of what we are trying to do at the Academy with donor agencies. One of our largest projects is the Advancing Basic Education Literacy (ABEL) project, funded by Agency for International Development. It aims to provide field support to agencies around the world to expand basic education in developing countries.

Another Academy project is a worldwide literature review on women and literacy. The purpose of the review is to find out what is out there, what is happening, and what needs to be done in the future. We expect to finish this report by early next year. The Academy senses that the future holds many research questions about women and literacy. There is not yet a large body of literature on women and development. Most of the literature is anecdotal. After finishing the review, we will be able to better determine what the appropriate research questions are. We hope this will increase access to literacy for women in the future.

As a part of an applied research study in Malawi under ABEL, we are examining Women In Development (WID) factors before designing a basic education program. Past practice was to move forward and design a basic education program that was sure to include an emphasis on women without looking at the current factors. By seriously examining these WID factors before the design, we may help structure a program that is more sensitive to the needs of women.

We are part of a multi-donor project in Malawi. In the implementation phase, we are looking into the factors that impede girls' access to education. At first I thought, "Can it be that difficult to figure out what the factors are?" So much of it is culture-bond and situation-bond. If we are working to identify interventions, we must be certain of the setting in which we work. We must be cautious not to go straight up against the culture. The way in which we challenge cultures needs to be thoughtful and sensitive to history and tradition. We will be working with the ministries of education and culture in Malawi to institutionalize several of the findings. Our responsibility to the ABEL project will be to monitor and evaluate the probable interventions that we have proposed.

A project in Pakistan is a good example of some religious issues that overlay improving education access for women in developing countries. The project is the Primary Education Project in Baluchistan and Northwest Frontier, two of the major provinces in Pakistan. It is an effort to work with local education systems and local school systems. A key goal of the project is to increase access

to education for girls. Islamic law requires that girls at puberty be taught by females. There are no female teachers, so how can growth be nurtured? The female literacy rate is four percent in Baluchistan and is seven percent in Northwest Frontier.

A few months ago, the Academy started a project with UNICEF and the government of Japan. UNICEF provides the cash for this project, and the government of Japan provides a van. The Academy designs the curriculum and does the training. We are jointly developing a mobile training van to go around through all the districts, village to village. It will enroll young girls who have an eighth grade education or higher.

Those who work in developing countries understand that while we would wish for more sophisticated pedagogy, in a developing country, to find young women with an eighth grade education is a real plus. They are quite trainable to work and teach in the primary grades. We are working to develop a curriculum and training modules. After looking at the program objectives, it looks like a viable route.

In rural districts, we must go to where the young women are. This is a way to calm parents' fears. Parents in Japan fear sending young girls off to distant places and will refuse to send the young girls too far from home.

Agency for International Development has undertaken a massive school construction project with the Substantive Education Program to build over 200 schools in two provinces in the next ten years. Much of that involves upgrading current schools to create separate facilities for girls. This again reflects the religious sanctions against coeducation.

A project in Latin America that the Academy started recently is the Guatemala Basic Education Schools Training Program (BEST). This is a largely rural project. A primary focus for this project is bilingual education to make Mayans fluent in Spanish. This returns us to the definition of what counts as literacy. When isolated, knowing only the Mayan language was adequate. Now, they need to know Spanish to integrate into the larger Guatemalan society. Not to know Spanish effectively makes one illiterate. The monolingual Mayan is unable to contribute to the larger society or to take advantage of its opportunities.

Something we are coming up against in Guatemala is the traditional role of women. The data show that in first grade the male and female school populations are equal. By sixth grade, when many are fourteen or fifteen years old, there is an enormous drop in the female school population. The cause is that young girls leave school to assume household responsibilities and to get married, traditional roles for women.

The BEST project will not challenge traditional roles, but will try to have the fourteen or fifteen year olds who would ordinarily complete only sixth grade, complete eighth grade or more. The BEST project will try to increase the number of grades completed by young girls aged fourteen and fifteen. It tries to make the school system more efficient and to improve the retention rate. We could find young girls leaving school having completed eighth, ninth, or even tenth grade.

An interesting assumption is that the young girls with more education will continue to return home for household duties and continue to marry young. I am not so sure that assumption is correct. It goes back to having a vision and seeing a future goal. Education can be dangerous. If we are successful in providing higher levels of information, knowledge, and skills to young women, they may decide to delay marriage and look at other opportunities.

In Guatemala, we try to meet this challenge with a social marketing campaign. We spend time interviewing and surveying parents throughout Guatemala on what they believe they need to get their young children, particularly girls, through school. In this interactive process, the project learns from parents while it teaches them. Persuading parents of the importance of education is another Academy effort.

We also have a Radio Learning Program. The Academy has a long history of supporting radio learning, largely focused on math and the teaching of English. We will continue to do this and add a component that emphasizes girls' education. The advantage of radio, if done properly, is that it can correct or offset teachers' natural tendencies to favor boys. Worldwide, research shows that teachers

tend to call on boys more, and to reinforce boys more positively than they do girls. In the radio project, a Women In Development coordinator monitors activities to see what effect programs will have in the home.

In our Malawi Project, a long-term advisor, Dr. Jean Davidson, designed a Master's Degree Program on Women In Development. It is offered on all eight of the Malawi University campuses. She also developed modules that are being integrated into the sociology curricula at the undergraduate level. Our project funds a Dean of Women's Studies at the university. Her responsibilities are to promote training for women, recruit women, and give guidance and counseling throughout their stay at the university.

The Academy, in conjunction with AID, funds one hundred full scholarships for women enrolled in nontraditional studies. This is important because we need to continue to break down the barriers to who studies what. There was no trouble finding a hundred women. Dr. Davidson is doing the ethnographic study for ABEL, identifying the barriers that will feed into these education studies.

The project also funds the National Commission on Women In Development, which funds several workshops, Master's Degree study programs, and career upgrades. Eight of twenty-one long-term trainees are women. This is significant because ten years ago, less than one-third of those participants would have been women.

Our Botswana Project has 115 trainees in the United States. One-third of them are women. In our teacher training program in Watsutsu, we opened up the teacher training courses so women are enrolled in carpentry, and men are enrolled in textiles. All our projects have efforts to involve women. We need to do more in our projects in the Caribbean and Honduras. Over forty percent of the students enrolled in these projects are women because it was mandated.

5. Conclusion

Increasing the education levels of women will not happen by chance. It must be mandated. This goal must be explicit and specific in all of our work and efforts. I see encouraging progress. It is important for us to start by putting more women on study and evaluation teams.

I close with a quote from John Kennedy. Its words of inspiration relate to history and to our efforts today. It is simply:

“To state the facts frankly is not to despair the future or to indict the past.”

It is our charge as developers to go forward.