Gender in primers

by Fiona Varley

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The pressing need for women’s literacy in today’s world is beyond question and is a huge challenge for SIL. As most fieldworkers are all too aware, literacy work is a complex phenomenon; it is about the representation and reproduction of symbols, either for subjugation or for empowerment. In view of these serious potential effects and implications, we must ask ourselves how sensitive we are in SIL to issues of gender in the design of our literacy programs. This article briefly considers one particular aspect: the design of primers.

A recent analysis by Ila Patel (1996) of primers used in the government-sponsored Total Literacy Campaigns in Gujarat, India, highlights some ways in which gender issues may be neglected in the design and content of primers.

The study found that concern for women’s equality was not adequately addressed or reflected in the text. Whilst some attempt was made to show positive images of women as protagonists (principle characters through whom the main message is conveyed in each lesson), their role was generally confined to caring and nurturing tasks in the family. Men were exclusively the protagonists for themes related to production-oriented development areas such as agriculture, income-generation, cooperation, environment, and self-employment. When women were portrayed in development roles, they were restricted to “women-centered” topics, for example, health, hygiene, and girls’ education (that is, the traditional role of caring for the family).

Page 1.
Even on social issues, women protagonists only discussed topics related to marital and family life, such as dowry and alcoholism. Men, however, were not restricted to the production-oriented development sector; they informed and advised family members such items as marriage and dowry.

Analysis of interaction patterns of male and female protagonists revealed subtle gender differences. Men advised and informed mixed groups in the community, but women mostly addressed groups only of women in public.

Occasionally women were shown as engaged in economic activities, but their participation was presented as supplementary or secondary, for example, picking vegetables and assisting in unloading manure from the cart, while men plowed and drove tractors.

Patel concludes that, in general, the primers reinforced existing gender stereotypes while superficially advocating equality. In fact, women’s marginal productive role was further justified by the idealization of their domestic and reproductive role as wives and mothers. Women’s roles and responsibilities were shown to revolve primarily around their role as caretakers in the family, while men held authority as decision makers within the family but seldom actively participated in domestic work or child care.

There is clearly a danger of paying lip service to the idea of integrating women into the development process, whilst in practice ignoring their role as productive workers and active citizens and, instead, focusing exclusively on the domestic and reproductive spheres.

Although primers will differ from one cultural context to another, Patel’s analysis warns us against perpetuating stereotypes which disadvantage women. We must ensure that the content of our literacy programs matches and responds to the concerns of women and the need for an improvement in their status in the community without going too far and representing women in a way that bears not relation to the reality of their context.

Reference


Citations

Page 2.