The impact of literacy on women and development

Case studies from South Asia

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In recent years there has been much research on the impact of literacy on women’s lives and how literate women can contribute to development. Though there has been a concerted effort by the United Nations and other international nongovernment organizations to improve the economic and social position of women in general and women in developing countries specifically; the situation is still open for improvement. This article will give a general world overview of how nations have responded to the unequal treatment of women, especially in the area of education, and how women’s literacy has an impact on development, with a specific focus on South Asia.

1. Global situation: Facts and figures

[Topics: literacy statistics, world literacy]

1.1. The literacy gap

In 1990, there were 948 million illiterates (15 years old and over) in the world: 699 million are in the continent of Asia, 177 million in Africa, 50 million in the Americas, 19 million in Europe and the former USSR, and 1 million in Oceania. Of those people, 917 million live in developing countries (97 percent of (1995). Notes on Literacy, 21(4).
the world’s illiterate population), and a relatively insignificant number, 32 million (3 percent) in
developed or industrialized countries (Ballara 1991:4).

1.2. Gender disparities

Statistics for developing countries for 1990 show that 45 percent of the female population of developing
countries is illiterate; in the least developed countries this figure rises to 79 percent of adult women. In
Africa, 64 percent of women cannot read and write. In absolute numbers, the vast majority of women who
cannot read and write is concentrated in Asia; illiterate women in this region alone account for over 77
percent of the world total (Ballara 1991:6). Sixty-seven percent of the world’s illiterate adults are women.
In Nepal, the illiteracy rate for men is 62.4 percent and for women is 86.8 percent, with an overall rate of
74.4 percent. In 16 developing countries, primary school enrollment for girls is two-thirds lower than for
boys. In 17 countries, the secondary school enrollment for girls is half that of boys enrollment (World

1.3. Urban and rural disparities

The UNESCO statistics comparing urban and rural areas (percent) shows that the rate of illiterate women
in urban areas is higher than that of urban women. For example, in Nepal female illiteracy in urban
areas is 46.5 percent while for rural regions it is 85.2 percent; male illiteracy rates for urban and rural
areas are 27 percent and 53.8 percent respectively (Ballara 1991:7).

2. The global response

Between 1975 and 1985, the United Nations adopted an action plan for the newly designated Decade of
Women. Equality, development, and peace were declared the basic principles for the implementation of
women’s programs with special reference to equality of opportunities in education. However, the Decade
of Women only partially achieved its aims.

In 1985, a world conference was held in Nairobi, Kenya to review and appraise the achievements of the
United Nations Decade for Women. From this conference, three subthemes were highlighted:
employment, health, and education, with education being seen as the basis for the promotion and
improvement of women’s status and a tool to support their role as equal partners in society.

In the 1980s, UNESCO, in cooperation with its member states and other international nongovernment
organizations (NGOs), implemented a special program titled Equal Opportunities in Education for
Women and Girls. Its main objectives are the promotion of the equality of women and the increase of
women’s participation in development in the interests of justice and peace. Proposals within the equal
opportunities program suggested that literacy projects (which include knowledge in areas such as health
and agriculture) and employment can play an important role in promoting development and in improving
women’s quality of life (Ballara 1991 ix–x).

For any of the above programs and objectives to be successful in bringing about lasting change in raising
the status of women and girls, one must consider the links between the condition and the position of
women. One writer considers the CONDITION OF WOMEN encompasses the material state in which women find themselves: their poverty, their lack of education and training, their excessive work burdens, and their lack of access to modern technology, improved tools, and work-related skills. The POSITION OF WOMEN refers to their social and economic standing in comparison to men. When these aspects are taken into account, short-term and long-term needs and goals can be defined. This in turn leads to the defining of policies and strategies that can contribute to improving women’s situations and their contribution on development (Ballara 1991:x).

3. Women’s literacy: A development priority

There are many social, economic, and cultural reasons which justify special action to make literacy for women and girls a high priority. Acquisition of knowledge is one of the prerequisites for human development. Literacy and postliteracy activities specifically for women in a single educational process provide for women’s participation in sustainable development under equal conditions and with equal benefits; they must be available to all women in order to enhance their individual, economic, political, social, and cultural development (Ballara 1991:x).

In order to achieve this, the United Nations (UN) initiated a world movement to promote literacy and proclaimed 1990 as International Literacy Year, its aim being to mobilize and inform the public. UNESCO proposed a plan of action for the eradication of illiteracy by the year 2000 and organized with other UN agencies a world conference on “Education for All.”

4. The effects of literacy on women and development

In Nepal, boys are sent to school; girls are kept at home to help with chores and field work. The adult literacy rate is low: 39 percent for men and only 12 percent for women. Village literacy classes are filled with women seeking intellectual relief from their hard labor. Most simply say, "I have come to have my eyes opened." Life in the hill villages is a neverending round of hard labor in the fields, childrearing, and serving in the home. The incentives for these women to start learning are resentment and curiosity.

Introducing literacy to a community should be accomplished through assessing and meeting the felt needs of the people. In Nepal, the government responded to this proposal by first recognizing the immense illiteracy problem, and then they assigned each nongovernment organization in the country a set location in which to work in order to make the people in that area literate by the year 2000. The United Mission to Nepal, was designated the area of Jajarkot in Western Nepal. This section of the article will look at areas of basic need for women and the communities they serve. Case studies which follow are from an interview with Jessie Glover, a literacy consultant in South Asia from 1990 to 1993.

4.1. Health

Studies in several developing countries have shown that women’s education plays an important role in reducing infant mortality, increasing the life expectancy of future generations, and improving child rearing and development. “The State of the World Population” (UNESCO 1990b) reported in the results (1995). Notes on Literacy, 21(4).
of a study carried out in 46 countries that a one percent increase in women’s literacy rate is three times more effective in reducing infant mortality than a one percent increase in the number of doctors. More knowledge and understanding of hygiene, child and mother nutrition (especially during pregnancy), control and prevention of diseases (whether these are chronic or transmittable), general health practices, and childcare will enable mothers to improve their own health, as well as that of their babies, their families, and their communities (Ballara 1991:33).

Case study 1

One night while I was visiting a class, they actually put on a drama for me that they had written themselves. It was a drama about two women who had sick children—both the children had diarrhea. The first woman took her child along to the traditional medicine man. He blew on it and puffed, and advised the mother not to give the baby any fluids. And of course that baby died. The other mother with the sick child was told by the women to take him along to the witch doctor. Then along came the health worker who said, “What’s wrong?” The health worker said, “There is something else you can do as well,” and she told them about the oral rehydration solution which she then made for them and fed to the baby, and the baby got better. These were the women themselves showing the old ways and now the new way. That was an amazing illustration to me, showing that they had really seen the difference.

4.2. Education of children

Women’s literacy has a positive effect on school enrollment and attendance of children. A study carried out in Mexico established that adults who completed literacy courses had more daughters with some formal education than those who had not finished their studies (Ballara 1991:14). The World Health Organization has found that a woman who has gone through an adult education class, even though she may not gain a high level of proficiency herself, has a tremendous sympathy and support for her own daughters to have that opportunity. She is also sympathetic to them taking time in doing their homework, whereas a woman who has not been educated just says, "You are wasting your time!"

Case study 2

One night we went to visit our neighbor up the road. When we got there the place was in darkness except for this tiny light from a hurricane lamp in the top story (the loft) where they sleep. I called out to Chinee Maya, “Have you gone to sleep?” She called out, "No! No! No! I am helping my daughter with her lessons.” Chinee Maya was a new literate, but being literate herself, she was highly motivated that her daughter would also do her lessons well. Their literacy makes women very conscientious and committed to the education of the next generation; it helps them to encourage their own children in their studies. The woman who has gone through the struggle of becoming literate knows that to acquire it requires extra time.

4.3. Agriculture

Increased productivity in the agricultural sector of the work force is also linked to the educational level of rural women. Studies on the effects of education on productivity in agriculture in a number of developing (1995). Notes on Literacy, 21(4).
countries have concluded that four years of primary education (usually considered the minimum level for retaining literacy) increased productivity by 7.4 percent with additional benefits due to the modernization of agriculture. Literacy helps people acquire necessary knowledge that enables them to make better use of natural resources and protect the environment; it also facilitates a change in attitudes such as a greater receptivity to "new" approaches or techniques that can encourage increased productivity (Ballara 1991:14–15).

Case study 3

In our program, we actually take the facilitators to a farm where they can see things happening, and we give them a 10-day integrated agriculture course. The facilitator then goes back and takes with him a variety of seeds for different kinds of green vegetables. They are very keen to learn those things. The women who come to the course are meeting women from other villages and are sharing ideas about their crops and animals. They share ideas of how they coped with these new things that they were learning. It is such a wonderful broadening experience for them to meet ladies from other villages and share one another’s experiences.

4.4. Personal development

Literacy is a right to which everyone, women as well as men, should have access. Acquiring the ability to read and write enables women to increase their self-confidence, improve their self-esteem, become aware of their civil rights, improve their income-earning capabilities, and play an active role in family and community decision making. Literacy is a means for women to participate on equal terms in the process of social development and change, therefore, literacy is a tool for women’s empowerment.

Case study 4

One night as some of the girls were walking to class, they were hassled by one of the young men of the village. So when they got to the class that evening they told the teacher, and they discussed the situation and how they would deal with it. They decided that together the next day they would publicly, in broad daylight, go to the courtyard of the man’s house and confront him as to what he did and that he was to never do it again. This confrontation, in front of his own relatives, would be a rather embarrassing situation for the man. This story illustrates that they were learning to do things themselves. This is not measurable in terms of money. But the long term effects of that kind of self awareness, the awareness of what they can do as a group, I am sure will have a ripple effect in the years to come. It is a definite empowering of the people.

4.5. Income generation

When people talk of development they automatically think of economic or income-generating activities that will help increase income and in turn help alleviate poverty. Most developing world societies restrict women’s education and training, forcing them to live in narrow worlds with very few economic options and discouraging them from accumulating any resources of their own. In fact, women perform 67 percent of the world’s working hours; earn only 10 percent of the world’s income, and control or own less than (1995). Notes on Literacy, 21(4).
one percent of the world’s property (Mackenzie 1993:34). Income-generating schemes usually benefit the women quickly and directly.

**Case study 5**

During the first year of the class’s functioning, every student has to pay 5 Rupees (R5/-) for each book. There are four books in the series, requiring Rupees 20 for the whole 10-month program. All of that money is put into their own class fund so that it stays in the community. In the second year, they have to pay R10/- per book. They work as a class to try and get R1,000/-, and once they reach R1,000/- our office gives them a matching R1,000/- . They then can do something with this money as an income-generating activity. Most of them wanted to buy goats. They were encouraged, however, to set up a tree plantation instead, because goats are very destructive on the environment. They did this, but it was not very successful. The trees died; they were not protected very well. They used the goats and pigs (some villages purchased pigs instead of goats) for animal husbandry. They would sell the offspring. Each class had to decide how much they would give back to the fund so that the fund kept on revolving. They had to pay back to the fund everything they had borrowed initially. After that, the money was their own. That was the type of income generating they preferred. Some of them had chickens; this was so that they could sell the eggs or the chickens for meat. It is the traditional to have livestock and sell them for income generation. They also use the dung and manure for their fields.

One group, instead of buying animals with their class funds, bought a field. The produce from the field they sold to one another at a cheap rate, but the profits went back into their fund. Each class could do what they wanted with that investment. It was a very important learning experience for them as they had to do bookkeeping and manage money.

**4.6. Religion**

Many indigenous groups associate learning to read and write with Christianity, that is, reading the Bible and singing the hymns in church. Some studies have found that religious reasons can play an important role in motivating adults to acquire literacy skills.

**Case study 6**

Because we were working in a community composed primarily of adherents of the national religion, it was a little bit disconcerting for me to realize that some of these women were using their new found literacy skills to read their scriptures. And that was one of the reasons that they were coming to class, but I had to realize that this is one of the inevitable consequences of empowering women to read, you cannot then dictate what they will read or choose to read. One way that we added a balance to that was that in the third year, along with their craft skill development program, they from their own funds and with matching funds from our office opened a village library (which is actually a little tin trunk with about 50 books in it). Most of the books are about women’s issues and, as far as possible, at a simple level of reading. The local church in Amp Pipal donated a selection of simple reading scripture books for every class library. As I went around to visit different classes, I would go around the class and ask each woman, "Which is your favorite book?" In every class there was always someone who named these scripture materials or
some of the Christian biographies that were there. These were not Christian women, they were Hindu women. I found that very encouraging.

5. Conclusion

The enormous needs of women in developing countries impress upon us the importance of and urgency in educating women so that human dignity can be restored and basic human needs can be met. The case studies exemplify the very dramatic effect and immeasurable impact that literacy has on women and their consequent contribution to development in the following areas.

1. Health. An increase in women’s literacy rate reduces infant mortality, improves child and mother nutrition, and provides control and prevention of diseases.

2. Education of children. Women’s literacy has a positive effect on school enrollment and attendance of children. Women who have gone through adult education class have a greater sympathy and support for their own daughters to have that opportunity.

3. Agriculture. Women’s literacy increases the productivity in agriculture and enables the better use of natural resources.

4. Personal development. Women’s literacy increases their self-confidence, improves their self-esteem, and enables them to become aware of their civil rights. Literacy is a tool for women’s empowerment.

5. Income generation. Women’s literacy provides income-generating activities that help increase income and in turn help alleviate poverty.

6. Religion. Women’s literacy enables the reading of Scripture in their own language which has resulted in permanent life changing experiences and transformation.

In every area of society, women’s literacy has vital importance and immense impact on individual’s lives and the lives of their communities.

References


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Citations


Citations