

Celebrating International Literacy Day, September 8, 2002 : Teach the Mothers and Reach The Children

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Traditionally, nations have emphasized the education and literacy development of boys and men. The failure to focus resources on girls and women shows itself in the international literacy statistics compiled by [UNESCO](#). From 1980 to 1995, the illiterate population of men fell from 327 to 318 million, while the numbers of illiterate women grew from 551 to 565 million (Aksornkool, 2001).

Typically, providing educational services to adults stimulates a greater interest on the part of parents, especially mothers, to become involved with the education of their children. Research by [Wider Opportunities for Women](#) (WOW) in Washington, DC studied the effects of women's participation in workforce basic skills training on (1) their behavior toward their children, (2) their interactions with teachers and participation in school activities, and (3) their children's behavior in school (Van Fossen & Sticht, 1991).

WOW trains welfare mothers in the work skills needed for higher paying, non-traditional jobs for women, such as carpentry. WOW also teaches women reading and mathematics skills using materials from the jobs for which they are training. In their research on how a mother's education affects behavior with her children, they found that as a result of their participation in the job training and basic skills programs mothers spent more time with their children talking about school, helping with homework, reading with their children, going to and helping with school activities and they talked more with teachers about their children's education. The WOW mothers also reported that their children liked and attended school more, and they showed improvements in their school grades, test scores, and reading.

Research for UNESCO (Sticht & McDonald, 1990) illustrates the effects of girl's and women's education on children and their educational development at various stages from before birth to the school years:

Before Pregnancy

Better educated girls/women show higher economic productivity; better personal health care; lower fertility rates; and hence they produce smaller families. The latter, in turn, is related to the preschool cognitive development of children and their subsequent achievement in school.

During Pregnancy and at Birth

Better educated women provide better pre-natal care; produce more full term babies; provide better post-natal care and this results in babies with fewer learning disabilities. Before Going To School Better educated women produce better children's health care; better cognitive, language, and pre-literacy development; and better preparation for schoolwork. During The School Years Better educated women produce higher participation rates in schooling; better management of homework; better advocacy for children's education and negotiation of school/child conflicts; and they produce children who achieve higher levels of education and literacy.

All this suggests that this year when the world celebrates International Literacy Day, we should pay special attention to the need for resources to provide literacy educational opportunities to the millions of illiterate women who will bring the next generation of children into the world. We should remember that, when we teach the mothers, we reach the children!

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