

# *Literacy and Women's Empowerment*

Stories of Success and Inspiration



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Institute  
for Lifelong Learning

# LITERACY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

*Stories of Success and Inspiration*

*'The education and empowerment of women throughout the world cannot fail to result in a more caring, tolerant, just and peaceful life for all.'*

Aung San Suu Kyi



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Author: Janine Eldred  
Editorial coordination: Ulrike Hanemann  
with support from Rouven Adomat

Graphic design and layout: Jan Kairies

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores how literacy learning can support women's empowerment and the development of greater equality, benefiting not only individual women, but families, communities and economies too. It describes and reflects upon some of the most promising approaches to developing literacy and learning for women, who form the majority of the world's illiterate adults. Key success factors are identified to inform recommendations for others seeking to support the empowerment of women.

These are stories of hope and possibility. They demonstrate how, with imagination and determination, literacy learning is taking place and making a difference. Some programmes are available because policies and strategies are in place at international, national or regional levels. In other cases, developments are due to local initiatives, inspired belief in learning for everyone, and voluntary determination. They show how change, transformation and empowerment of some of the world's most vulnerable women, and the development of greater equality are possible. The stories are drawn from LIFE (Literacy Initiative for Empowerment), E-9 (nine high-population countries) and SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation) countries.

## 2. Background: data and development

Adult literacy learning is about people developing competences that enable them to live and work in fulfilling ways. It is not simply about teaching, in a mechanistic way, a set of skills, rules and activities about letters and words. It is complex and multi-faceted, and a vital and intrinsic aspect of individual, community and societal development. It includes speaking and listening as well as reading, writing and numeracy. It is not a fixed set of skills but is a vital part of the continuum of lifelong learning. It is also linked to other aspects of learning and development, such as health, maternal care, early childhood education, skills and employment as well as equity and empowerment.

The most recent EFA Global Monitoring Report (2012) indicated that in 81 out of the 146 countries with data for 2005-2010, more

women than men are illiterate. Of these countries, twenty-one display extreme gender disparity, with fewer than seven literate women for every ten literate men. (UNESCO, 2012, p. 5)

The most recent data, for 2011, published by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), reveal that women's literacy continues to lag behind that of men. This is particularly so in Arab States (male rate of 85% vs. female rate of 68%), South and West Asia (male rate of 74% vs. female rate of 52%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (male rate of 68% vs. female rate of 51%). Global figures suggest that 89% of men and 80% of women are able to read and write in 2011. 493 million, or two thirds of the global illiterate population, are women. (UIS, 2013, pp. 8-9)

The UIS data suggest that youth literacy rates are greater than adult rates, meaning that adult literacy rates are likely to increase in future. They indicate that of 148 countries, 100 had reached gender parity in youth literacy by 2011. This bodes well for achievement of the Education for All targets by 2015. However, there is no clear pattern in relation to young women. While globally 61% of illiterate youth are female, in Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and East Asia and the Pacific young women form half or less of the total youth illiterate population.

A recent blog posted by Pauline Rose, Director of the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, urged caution in interpreting such figures. She suggests that many countries are a long way from gender parity in education, with 36 countries not achieving parity in primary education and with girls at a disadvantage in 30 of them. At secondary level, she reports that 61 countries will not meet their targets. Inequalities are more visible when family income or country of residence are taken into account. For example, 88% of the poorest young women in Ethiopia, Yemen and Haiti have not completed primary school, while most wealthy urban males have. (World Education Blog 2013)

The LIFE<sup>1</sup> mid-term review indicated that during the period of 2006–2011, ‘...in ten LIFE countries, the share of reported non-literate women decreased, while 21 LIFE countries faced increases in the share of non-literate women.’ (UIL, 2012)

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1 LIFE targets the 35 countries that have a literacy rate of less than 50 percent or a population of more than 10 million people who cannot read nor write. Eighty-five percent of the world's non-literate population resides in these countries, and two-thirds are women and girls. (UIL, 2013)

This is a shocking revelation, as LIFE countries are attempting to reduce disparities between women and men in relation to adult literacy. Younger women, aged 15–24, present a more positive picture, with 20 LIFE countries having achieved adult literacy gender parity. The report concludes that *‘The empowerment of girls, women and families living below the poverty line, particularly in rural areas, needs to be continued as the key focus of LIFE in future.’* (UIL, 2012a, p. 28)

There are many challenges in interpreting data, not least in comparing understandings and definitions of literacy in different countries. Literacy is a complex, culturally-bound concept and different definitions have been adopted. In 1958, UNESCO adopted an official definition which equated literacy to the ability to read and write a simple statement. Since 2005 a more complex definition of literacy has been used, which includes an ability to identify, understand, create and communicate, as well as compute, using printed and written materials in various contexts. Plural notions of literacies incorporating social, economic, cultural and political practices have also developed. They include family and community contexts, the media, technology and work and life in general. (UIS, 2009)

Regardless of the limitations of global data and international comparisons, the stark reality is that, based on national definitions, over 400 million women in the world have no or low literacy skills. In response to the data, there have been repeated calls for policies and priorities (Archer, 2005); for practices and programmes (UNESCO, 2010) and for action (NIACE, 2012).

### 3. A rationale for women, literacy and empowerment

#### 3.1. Literacy is a human right

Since the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), education has been recognised as a human right. In 1975, the *Persepolis Declaration* identified literacy as a right and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* in 1981 affirmed literacy as a component in addressing equity. More recently, Sanchez Moretti and Frandell (2013) argue that as a vital and intrinsic part of education, literacy is an essential human right.

In spite of this, much of the discussion and debate in advocating for women's literacy is addressed from what is described as a 'functional' perspective rather than a 'rights' perspective. The functional approach promotes learning for specific outcomes relating to, for example, health and economic development. A rights approach is concerned with the development of individuals to fulfil their potential and be involved in all levels of society as equal human beings. In their review of the *Beijing Platform for Action*, Unterhalter et al (2011) suggest that there has been an increase in global discourse, goals and policies related to equality, the barriers women face, and rights-based advocacy. However, they also indicate a lack of translation of policy to actions at local level:

*Moreover, research in a number of different countries and organizations has pointed to the difficulties of translating broad global ambitions for gender equality in education into action at local level. Schools and local communities often feel distanced from both global and national policy processes. In the words of a South Africa head teacher the goals for EFA and the MDGs are "heard a long way off", while little concerted effort goes into supporting teachers or local district education officials to implement them. (Unterhalter, 2011, p. 8)*



Even where legislative frameworks have been established, they have not brought about the desired changes. The mid-term review of the UN Literacy Decade suggested that

*Literacy has never been more necessary for development; it is key to communication and learning of all kinds and a fundamental condition of access to today's knowledge societies. With socio-economic disparities increasing and global crises over food, water and energy, literacy is a survival tool in a fiercely competitive world. Literacy leads to empowerment, and the right to education, includes the right to literacy - an essential requirement for lifelong learning and a vital means of human development and of achieving the Millennium Development Goals. (UNESCO, 2008, p. 8)*

Translating global aspiration and ambition into policies and practices remains a challenge, in spite of many signs of hope that change is possible and evident in different parts of the world.

### **3.2. Literacy learning and development reap great benefits**

As the above data indicates, millions of women have not been formally educated (including literacy learning), either as children or as adults. However, links between those women who have received education and positive outcomes are reported, indicating wide-ranging benefits to women and society. Specifically, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reports that educated mothers recognise the importance of healthcare and have a greater influence on their children's educational attainment than their fathers. Women who have completed primary education are likely to have fewer children as well as fewer mistimed or unintended births. They add that educated women have more control over household negotiations, and are more likely to be economically active and contribute to the costs of schooling. (UNFPA, 2013)

In recent years there has been an increased focus by international development agencies on women and girls (DFID, 2011). There is a heightened expectation that investing in women's education will result in better-nourished children, healthier pregnancies, a

reduction in HIV/AIDS or more effective economies. The links between learning and such outcomes cannot be claimed to be causal but rather strong associations between literacy learning and wider outcomes have been evidenced.

UNICEF reports that the education of women impacts upon infant and maternal mortality rates, improves nutrition, promotes health, reduces the likelihood of HIV/AIDS, and contributes to improved education for the next generation (UNICEF, 2013). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) - including the eradication of hunger, the reduction of child mortality, improved maternal health, reduction in HIV/AIDS infection, and universal primary education - are all affected by the education and empowerment of women. This is due to the significant roles women play in relation to these developmental issues.

The role of women as peace-builders, especially in post-conflict countries, is increasingly recognized. Reporting on conflict situations tends to portray women as powerless victims, which is often the reality during times of war and genocide. However, in many post-conflict situations women are in the forefront when it comes to negotiating and building peace, at familial and community levels, and also at some of the highest levels of government. For example, women outnumbered men in the newly constituted government of Rwanda, working to create stability for economic and social recovery. (UN, 2013)

Women often undervalue the contributions they make as mediators and peacemakers, especially in domestic contexts. Many women have experienced and know about sexual violence, living marginalized lives due to HIV/AIDS or disabilities. Researchers have demonstrated that peace often starts within families, in the way men and women relate to each other, and in how their children are educated. Women are usually involved in resolving domestic violence as well as wider community aggression and conflict. A study of five countries indicated how educated and empowered women were equipped to participate in formal peace-building activities. (ActionAid, 2012)

Initiatives such as *Feed the Minds*<sup>1</sup> in Sierra Leone demonstrate how offering unemployed young women skills for a trade, building confidence and developing literacy can help them to change the direction of their lives. Skills training in this initiative includes

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1 <http://www.feedtheminds.org/>

tailoring, catering, hotel management, motor mechanics and carpentry, all of which are in demand in the local economy. Literacy learning is closely linked to vocational training. This project illustrates how women can learn a wide range of skills that may lead to different identities and understanding of the capabilities of women and the roles they can play.

The complex discussions and debates about global sustainability continue, particularly in relation to the new global development agenda that will replace the *Millennium Development Goals* and *Education for All* post-2015. These embrace the importance of education in assuring a sustainable world. Disappointingly, not all debates and declarations recognize the importance of women's education. This debate needs to include the important role of women's literacy in sustainable development. The *Worldwatch Institute* highlights concerns about women's reproductive health and family planning, implementation of human rights especially in relation to the gender parity, and the support of girls' education, especially in secondary school (Worldwatch Institute, 2013). Recent web discussion on the *World We Want*, as part of a UN thematic consultation on environmental sustainability, identified education as an imperative for global development (World We Want 2015, 2013). Obviously, no development strategy can succeed unless it engages the talents and potential of women.

### 3.3. Literacy and learning lead to empowerment

Empowerment is a process of supporting people to become more aware of power relationships and systems and understand that just and fair balances of power contribute to more rewarding relationships, mutual understanding and increased solidarity. Empowerment also means being better equipped to take control of your life, including education. At its best, education has empowerment at its heart. A study commissioned by UKAID from the Department for International Development described empowerment as a journey rather than a destination. This study revealed how empowerment for women in different countries and contexts is not always the same. It strongly recommended that empowerment must start from and build upon women's own experiences rather than from pre-set outcomes imposed by external organisations. (DFID, 2012)

*Paulo Freire* spoke of how education can be functional, like an instrument used to facilitate conformity, or can become a process of developing freedom, where men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Freire, 1996). Literacy learning is sometimes an end in itself; individuals wish to read and write simply because they were unable to do so through initial schooling, or because they see others gaining from being literate. But literacy also enhances and develops other skills and knowledge. It is a tool for access to greater awareness, information, knowledge, skills, understanding and power, for multiple purposes. Literacy learning is, as Freire suggests, vital in making sense, not only of the word, but also of the world.

Education may not automatically lead to empowerment as each woman's situation, context, country, culture and custom also influence whether she is able to exercise her knowledge and understanding. Women are less likely than men to participate in community decision-making, including parent associations and school management committees. They are less likely to take on roles of leadership and management in the workplace. Such participation is not only linked to education but also to cultural attitudes towards women.

The empowerment of women through literacy learning is only one important part of the total picture. Supporting women in learning, questioning, understanding and challenging the suppression they experience empowers them, but only partially. Creating greater economic and political opportunities to contribute to families, communities and nations also contributes to empowerment. Relationships with brothers, husbands and fathers, as well as community and authority leaders, are at its heart. If empowerment of women is to lead to greater equality, existing systems, authorities, laws and policies must be reviewed and amended.

Nor can education necessarily lead to economic success for individuals or societies (Oxenham, 2008). In some Arab countries, such as Algeria, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, greater gender parity in education has moved forward rapidly over the past decade. However, this has not always translated into greater representation and equality in the work-place (Vishwanath, 2012).

The GMR on Youth and Skills highlighted how women carry a heavy workload and face discrimination, not only in education but also in employment (UNESCO, 2012). This is particularly true

in rural areas, where opportunities and mobility are limited, and traditional customs and attitudes persist longer than in many urban areas. The perception that women are inferiority to their husbands is a feature of many cultures (Vishwanath, 2012).

Laws declare women as minors in Swaziland, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire have legal restrictions on wives' freedom to seek employment, under the 'heads of households regulation'. Female heads of households, with young children, work extremely hard and face great time constraints in gaining access to paid employment. (Cagatay, 1998)

Where women do gain access to work it is often associated with their traditional roles, such as sewing or cooking, which supports the stereotype of what women can do. While such work may increase economic power, it is insecure, entails self-employment, or is carried out in addition to domestic work and caring for children and older people. In many case, the attitudes of men in such scenarios do not change, and their dominant roles persist. Women simply take on more work, rather than use their knowledge and skills to contribute domestically and economically to more egalitarian partnerships.

With increased access to employment come greater financial controls, which are empowering to women. Managing money and making decisions about spending and saving are experiences denied to many women, so literacy learning, including financial literacy, skill development and income generation are needed to develop economic equality. Examples of micro-financing activities such as those organised for women by the *Grameen Bank* in Bangladesh or *Jeevan Bikas Samaj* in Nepal, can provide steps to greater equality, provided women take control and manage the funds.

Learning must be integrated with all development activities, including women's health, employment, education, active citizenship or relationships.

When women are involved in the co-designing, development, implementation and evaluation of their learning programmes and activities, then empowerment is more likely to emerge. Including men in learning, to explore rights and associated issues, helps to support the effectiveness of empowerment and address some of the barriers women face.

Anna Robinson-Pant (2008, pp. 1-12) observes the shift from literacy being a 'technical fix' for some other purpose such as

access to family planning, to one of investigating and responding to what literacy means in the lives of individual women. The process of learning also makes a difference. A didactic, technical, pre-prescribed approach to literacy learning is far less likely to produce long-lasting development than one which sets out to respond to women's situations and engage and involve them in determining a relevant and rewarding learning experience.

It is possible to argue that there is not a complete dichotomy between the functional and empowerment perspectives. Through functional processes, learning literacy linked to, for example, seed propagation or a community bread-making enterprise, may develop an individual's learning identity. This empowers them to develop greater understanding, confidence and participation. Sometimes a functional approach is an acceptable route into learning as the purpose is clear and less threatening to possible dissenting voices. Participation in learning, motivated by a functional purpose, can empower women to become involved in citizenship activities, through heightened awareness and understanding and gains in confidence.

Individuals have multiple purposes and motivations for learning. Programmes and provision must respond to these by carefully exploring which literacy practices are already being used and placing the interests, concerns and realities of women at the heart of the learning experiences (Nabi R., Rogers A., Street B., 2009).

The case for the promotion and provision of literacy learning for women is clear. However, the complex and multi-layered challenges surrounding the provision of opportunities mean that the need for creative, responsive and imaginative approaches to providing adult literacy learning is great.

## 4. Stories of imagination, success and possibility

Around the world, various projects, initiatives and national policies have set out to address the challenges of women's literacy learning. Projects tend to be time-bound and laden with high expectations. Short-term pilot projects have the potential to discover and demonstrate what works in particular settings, but will not lead to sustainable provision. Experience indicates that there are no quick fixes and the greatest impact comes from national policies and priorities on lifelong learning, which are financially supported over many years.

The on-going work of the *Skills for Life* policy in England and the *Kha ri Gude* campaign in South Africa are examples of long-term investment in women's literacy. The monitoring of *Kha ri Gude* already indicates that over 80% of participants are women (Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2012; Kha ri Gude, 2013).

The following stories, drawn from research, reports and evaluations, offer a snapshot of the diverse countries, contexts, motivations and approaches to learning. They are not necessarily exemplary but they do demonstrate the importance of women's literacy and learning, some of the creative and interesting responses being developed, and the changes which have been witnessed by both women and men. They also indicate how issues of empowerment and inequity are being addressed as women learn.

### 4.1. Raising voices; speaking up for participation in Nepal

*'We were largely invisible because we could not speak our mind. We were never encouraged to speak by our family and society. We have realised that it is not as difficult as we thought to break this barrier. Now we don't hide our faces and shake with fear when we have to speak with people who come from Kathmandu.'* Woman from Baraha Village Development Committee, Dailekh (Oxfam, 2012, p. 6)

The *Raising her Voice* Programme in Nepal set out to raise women's voices in order to build their confidence, knowledge and skills so that they could bring about changes in their lives and in their communities (Oxfam, 2012). Too often literacy is seen only as

reading and writing; and the other vital components of speaking and listening can be neglected.

In spite of many political changes in Nepal over the past decade, not a great deal has changed for many poor Nepalese. The *Baraha Village Development Committee*, as part of the *Raising her Voice* programme, set out to address the broadening of representation and participation of women. In partnership with three national and three local NGOs, the programme was implemented in three districts in the west of the country, where women are particularly marginalised. The main activity was to set up and run community discussion classes.



Nepal ©UIL

The groups were run based on *Reflect* methodology, an innovative approach to adult learning that fuses the theories of *Paulo Freire* with the methodologies of participatory rural appraisal, meeting daily for up to two hours (ActionAid, 2013). Facilitators were recruited from within the community and the topics of discussion were about what affects women's lives. The participants aired concerns and views and created action plans to tackle particular problems. They also learned how community organisations work



and how to develop leadership skills. The facilitators supported women in organising meetings and events to meet influential community members and leaders. They publicised success stories through the local media.

The programme enabled women to start making real changes in their communities. They gained the confidence and skills to speak out, voice their opinions, form arguments and negotiate solutions. They have used their literacy skills for practical purposes, such as ensuring that water pumps operate at the right times. They have lobbied for longer opening hours for health posts and more medicines and greater access to antenatal and midwife services. At school, they have negotiated for more information about school management and their children's education.

Significantly, the women have arranged ward meetings, which bring together men and women from across the community, including teachers, representatives of political parties and local government officials. This has helped those in positions of power and influence to understand and appreciate the challenges women face and develop greater respect for women as leaders. An indication of their influence was cited where, in a heavily male-dominated community, of the 450 agenda items discussed in the three districts between 2009 and 2011, 163 were recommended by women. 111 of these suggestions were implemented. The voices of the women were beginning to be heard in local governance.

While it cannot be claimed that the balance of power and the attitudes of men in the communities had changed dramatically, some men became strong supporters and advocates for the programme. Others have been convinced by instrumental arguments and tolerate their wives' participation. Some men are still resistant, but in no society has women's status changed overnight. Sustained activity is likely to bring about more changes. Women have identified areas where they feel that more support is needed. These include public speaking, deeper knowledge of what is expected of them when they get elected to roles of responsibility, and greater understanding of policies and procedures.

*Before, women did not know that they had a right to be part of the committee. The discussion classes taught us that we could do this. We realised that we shouldn't simply wait for men to offer us posts. Sometimes we need to fight for*

*our rights.* Devi Sunar, chair of the School Management Committee at Deuti Primary School, Surket (Oxfam, 2012)

### Key success factors

- *Speaking and listening skills were seen as vital aspects of literacy learning and vehicles towards empowerment;*
- *The Reflect circles offered open but secure environments for women to raise issues and share concerns, and begin to articulate new and different possibilities;*
- *The involvement of key community influencers helped to make sure that empowerment strategies worked to support women in positions of influence;*
- *Including men at different stages and at different levels of influence helped to raise awareness and understanding of the difficulties women faced, contributing to changing attitudes;*
- *The project progressed with the women and offered new skills and support as they developed;*
- *Partnerships brought together organisations that could contribute as well as gain from involvement.*

## 4.2. Literacy and Life skills in Indonesia<sup>1</sup>

*'I go to school from 7.30 a.m. to 1.00 p.m., six days a week, come home and work with my mother until the evening. Then I do my homework and go to sleep. I'm very tired!'* A student from West Java

In a national survey conducted in 2010, the Indonesian government revealed that almost 10% of females from rural areas had never attended school. These women are further marginalised, as most access to continuing education is in urban areas, resulting in long travel times. Expectations that women will fulfil traditional roles in Indonesian society, caring for the home and engaging in domestic work, along with early marriage, mean that access to

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<sup>1</sup> Clement (2012)

learning is unlikely for many of them. The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) led an initiative to establish non-formal educational equivalency programmes relating to primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels. It aimed to teach functional, including literacy, and vocational skills, and incorporating life skills education.

Three packages were developed at the three levels and were targeted particularly, but not exclusively, at young women over the age of 13 who had dropped out of formal education. These programmes were offered at flexible times, to enable the young women to fulfil domestic and childcare responsibilities while receiving education. The tutoring was sometimes offered 'door to door' via motorbike, caravan, boat or bus, with each mobile service equipped with learning materials, including multi-media equipment. In other places, local community centres, including *madrasahs* (Muslim religious schools), offered learning opportunities. In some instances, members of the family registered with the local education authority to help the young women learn at home, supported by weekly visits from a tutor. This was seen as particularly beneficial to those young women who were married or had children.

The learning packages with literacy learning at their heart offered different learning routes. These included academic, vocational and combined pathways. Training was also provided for community-centre tutors, alongside mechanisms for the assessment, standardisation and accreditation of the non-formal learning centres. These mechanism helped to develop the equivalency aspects of the programmes. Successful partnerships were created with community learning centres, *madrasahs*; the *Centre for Developing Non-Formal Education and Youth*, and the *Centre for Learning Activities Development*.

The initiative reports that most of the young women came from low socio-economic backgrounds, many of them balancing studies with domestic and work responsibilities. Families supported the girls' education as it was local; boys are more likely to be allowed to attend formal education which involves travelling long distances or residential provision. While this did not address long-standing cultural attitudes to girls, it did enable the young women to develop literacy and life skills and progress to higher levels of learning. The long-term outcomes mean that those young women who had dropped out of learning are better placed to enhance their future

employment opportunities as well as support their own children's education.

Some centres adopted a community empowerment model based on UNESCO's LIFE recommendations, using activities such as family literacy education, individual literacy studies, literacy through art and culture, literacy through folklore, literacy through newspapers, and entrepreneurship. In one farm centre, these activities were integrated with life skills such as organic farming, livestock raising, art and culture, sewing and beauty, as well as vocational training, relevant to the local job market. It offered entrepreneurial skills to develop and manage businesses, including rabbit and goat farming, orchid and cactus cultivation, trades and services. Some of these programmes have begun to address expectations about the roles and responsibilities women can fulfil, as many young women study organic farming and livestock raising, which are traditionally male areas of study. This initiative is self-financing as 60% of the farm's profits go to the students and 40% are used to run the programme.

The organisers of the equivalency programme reported greater demand than the funding permits. It is due to expand through the government's development plan. However, many of the factors that perpetuate women's traditional roles remain unchallenged. This problem exists both in formal and non-formal education. While this programme is only beginning to address issues of gender equality, it is challenging some of the inequities in the education of young men and women and shifts in attitude towards women's education have been observed and reported.

*'Since girls have started attending our programme, they are getting married at an older age. Many families are telling their daughters to wait until they finish school to get married. More girls are enrolling, their families are comprehending the importance and value of education.'*

Director of one of the centres

### Key success factors

- *A government policy recognizes and addresses inequalities in education;*

- *The initiative demonstrated responsiveness to the challenges of rurality for women, which had been identified through data-gathering;*
- *The familial and cultural realities of the young women who have dropped out of school were carefully considered when designing and planning learning opportunities. While some of this could be seen as perpetuating traditional attitudes and customs, it is possible that fewer young women would have participated without such considerations;*
- *Learning is brought to the learners, using a range of imaginative methods;*
- *An attempt to provide equivalency of accreditation with formal learning, using non-formal approaches, helped to bridge the gender divide.*

### 4.3. Sahajani Shiksha Kendra: Claiming employment rights with literacy for poor women in India<sup>2</sup>

*Nirantar* is a long-established provider of literacy learning opportunities for women in India; one recent initiative has focused on reaching some of the most marginalised women in a rural area where social and economic inequities are great. Caste-based discrimination is common, as is violence against women. A lack of employment, drought and migration are features of the area. The *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act* (MGNREGA) is of great significance to people in such circumstances. This Act guarantees 100 days of employment, offering equal wages for women and men. However, the implementation of the act is in the control of politically and socially powerful people. The interests of women belonging to scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST) are largely ignored.

A programme was designed under the auspices of MGNREGA with a focus on the ‘right to work’, with the key aims of building women’s literacy alongside awareness of and information about women’s rights and entitlements under MGNREGA. It began in 2007, reaching 112 villages of Lalitpur District and working with around 2,000 women. Features of the initiative included aware-

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<sup>2</sup> UIL (2012b)

ness campaigns, literacy camps, the functional use of literacy and numeracy for accessing MGNREGA entitlements, and collective engagement with local administrations on issues related to the right to work. In addition, a monthly broadsheet in the local language was produced and a solidarity event – a *mela* – held, along with dialogue with the district administration to support women in becoming leaders or ‘mates’ under MGNREGA, in order to improve access for women to the scheme.

The literacy camps, organised to offer women residential, intensive and sustained learning opportunities, focused on MGNREGA. These provided information about the MGNREGA scheme and allowed the participants to build upon their existing literacy skills. Activities involved wall writing, and practice in filling out forms and reading and filling in work records. Throughout this process women realised that many of them had worked 100 qualifying days but had not received any wages. They became annoyed and motivated, demanding their rights from the local administration. Literacy learning was leading to real empowerment.

The *mela* was organised on International Literacy Day, attracting over 600 local women, with the theme of the right to work at its heart. Following this event, a common memorandum was drafted and submitted to the district magistrate. The memorandum asserted the rights of the women under MGNREGA.

The MGNREGA campaign was designed to raise awareness using songs, posters and banners; gather information through participatory research appraisal approaches; make village plans; create forums for women to share concerns and agree collective action. This multi-pronged approach resulted in hundreds of women for the first time demanding work forms and receiving the minimum daily wage.

Fifteen women were accepted into the mates supervisory role, and special training modules and programmes were developed for them. They played an important role in promoting and involving women in literacy learning linked to a right to work. They also supervised at worksites, completing attendance records and assessing work completed by the workers. By engaging women who had been trained in literacy, numeracy and gender issues, *Nirantar* helped to demonstrate and develop greater equity, democracy and transparency in the mate system.

Not only were individuals, groups of women and *Nirantar* organisers challenged, but so too was the MGNREGA process. Some of

the difficulties experienced by the learners were addressed through the monitoring process. Other, more systemic issues remain more difficult to resolve, such as those relating to the caste system and to long-established work practices that, for example, exclude women on the grounds of strength from performing particular jobs. A lack of childcare support and water on work sites were also identified as systemic barriers to be addressed. All in all, the overwhelming progress made through the initiative demonstrates how women's literacy learning can be harnessed to promote important issues such as work rights, to empower women and to demonstrate their legal rights to greater equity.

*'I have developed literacy and numeracy skills after being associated with ... the literacy centres and camps. I have gained confidence in using the mobile phone, fill in the attendance roll as a MGNREGA mate and been trained in measurement.'* Learner in Nirantar programme



India © Sahajani Shiksha Kendra

### Key success factors

- *The focus of the initiative, on work rights, was of great relevance to the women;*

- *A multi-pronged approach addressed several needs simultaneously;*
- *Literacy learning was seen as relevant and essential from the outset, and the women saw the direct links between this and accessing their rights under MGNREGA;*
- *Campaigning and a high profile event raised not only awareness among the women but also among the wider community;*
- *Authorities and powerful agencies were involved so that women were not trying to address barriers to learning alone;*
- *Women were encouraged to become ‘mates’ (leaders), demonstrating their ability to accept and carry out supervisory roles.*

#### 4.4. Women and Literacy in post-conflict Sierra Leone<sup>3</sup>

*‘Literacy helps you become self-reliant by using your reading and writing skills to empower yourself.’ Learner*

The *Finnish Refugee Council* has worked in Sierra Leone since 2003, using the *Reflect* approach in this post-conflict country (Finnish Refugee Council, 2013). Community development and adult literacy initiatives took place in six districts in the southern, eastern and northern provinces.

They aimed to:

- Strengthen literacy activities in the communities;
- Support small-scale group businesses;
- Improve community access to information on relevant development issues.

300 *Reflect* learning circles were established, each comprising 25–30 adults in over 200 communities. In total, more than 6,000 people were involved, over half of whom were women. Literacy and numeracy were combined with discussion, analysis and action in the communities involved. Circles received small sustainability

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<sup>3</sup> Upton and Gandhi (2012)



funds and some received additional business training and a start-up fund to assist with business development. Two radio stations developed programmes to support community activities and the development of materials to enable people to write about their lives and influence the content and direction of their learning. An annual learning assessment, a voluntary ‘levelling’ or testing exercise, determined when learners were ready to progress to more demanding learning activities.



©Finnish Refugee Council

Partnerships were established with eight non-governmental organisations (NGOs), two radio stations and with PAMOJA (an African Reflect network organisation) in Sierra Leone. As the initiative developed, the Non-Formal Education (NFE) Division of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology of Sierra Leone became increasingly interested in the work. The *Refugee Council* evaluated the work in a formative way over the life of the initiative and produced a long and detailed report of their findings.

The evaluation was conducted in a participatory manner, exploring challenges and changes resulting from involvement. The three most important areas of change were identified as literacy,

conflict resolution and health. Significant changes in literacy practices were recorded by circle participants, in relation to daily living and working, including such things as using a mobile phone, helping children with school work, recording loans given to people, reading children's report cards, reading road signs; understanding how to take medication, speaking up in public, writing the names of customers and their measurements and knowing about basic human rights and responsibilities. The evaluation revealed that the use of funding for the circle, the provision of teaching materials, co-operation by the radio stations and facilitator training and support were contributory success factors.

Health and sanitation issues were addressed involving simple everyday techniques such as hand-washing, cleaning latrines and hanging washed clothes outside to kill germs. The radio stations also broadcast awareness of health-related matters. Participants were able to identify changes in their behaviours including using literacy to help healthier living. Many of these reports came from women, suggesting that responsibility for hygiene and sanitation often fell to them. Whilst this was a positive outcome, it remains a challenge to ensure that men also take on such responsibilities.

Other changes recorded, which were empowering to women, included speaking out in public, joining in discussions in the community, relationships with husbands, and responsibilities within the circle. The *Reflect* circle offered an open and fair process that supported and contributed to the women's empowerment. It was felt that new awareness and skills helped women and men to see themselves differently, and to learn about the opportunities available to them. Evaluators reported that both women and men spoke about changes in their understanding of gender roles and relationships.

Discussion revealed the high value placed on unity, identifying conflict resolution, co-operation and reduction in gender violence as the most significant changes. In this work in Sierra Leone, women were able to explore and express concerns about these important aspects of their lives and help in addressing change, alongside the men. The circle contributed to building a sense of community and a viable future. Women could see opportunities for openly sharing aspirations about creating firm foundations for future development. They addressed the values, attitudes and understandings that need to be in place before more practical issues can be developed. Some debate arose about whether the

desires for conformity and harmony could result in women not raising their voices in case their challenges led to further unrest. It is possible that in such settings, women were less empowered than in a more settled situation. However, the fact that women and men were working together on respect and values, and were able to address such sensitive issues as gender-based violence, must be a positive outcome on which to build a more stable future. This highlights the understanding that empowerment differs according to contexts and situations.

Five months after the end of the initiative, over 500 people were willing to devote a day to an evaluation meeting. This is testimony to the value and sustainability of the circles. Recommendations for future work included ensuring that facilitators receive on-going training and payments on time and that two facilitators should work with each circle. The annual assessment/levelling process should be aligned with national standards, so that the work is more formally valued and recognised by learners and government officials. Future funding may not be available at local level but support at country level, in order for the core support to continue beyond the initial developments, is being considered. Finally, the evaluation process was felt to be a replicable model which drew out rich data and insights, particularly into literacy and women's empowerment through the *Reflect* circles. The partnerships were felt to be very successful and will help to sustain the work long term; many of them felt the work had only just begun.

*'We now know our basic human rights and responsibilities.  
... [learning] empowered me to speak up boldly in public'*  
Learner

### Key success factors

- *Reflect is a tried and tested participatory approach with proven replicability; it provided an open place and democratic process for women to experience a sense of equality with men and to feel more empowered (Duff, Fransman, and Pearce, 2008);*
- *Women were encouraged to take on roles and responsibilities within the circles;*

- *Men and women were involved in facing challenges together, including issues of gender, gender violence and equality;*
- *Partnerships helped to facilitate and also sustain the work;*
- *Literacy gains were identified in functional ways, such as health or enterprise, but seemed to contribute to greater individual autonomy and confidence, particularly amongst the women;*
- *Identifying both personal and group changes, in a formative way, through a thorough evaluation, empowered individual women and influenced agencies of authority such as the government, in shaping future programmes and policies.*

#### 4.5. Children's nutrition and literacy learning in Senegal<sup>4</sup>

*'Through the NESAs project, attendance of women to prenatal and postnatal visits increased in our health post'* Nurse

The Senegalese government has developed a national policy to improve the nutritional status of children under five years and of pregnant and nursing mothers. A study in 2008 revealed acute malnutrition in young children in 10 of the 13 districts surveyed, so a partnership of five key agencies, including the World Health Organisation (WHO), the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), and UNESCO, was established to develop and implement a response. The strategy was to improve food security, open up access to health services and develop the capacity of local and community institutions to better respond to crises. It was quickly acknowledged that high rates of illiteracy were a major handicap to success.

The Directorate of Literacy and National Languages (DALN) produced a training manual and modules, to be made available in seven languages. The manual covered topics such as child nutrition, food security, health in pregnancy, hygiene and mother and child health. These were presented in simple formats indicating themes, topics and issues to be considered. Examples of questions

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<sup>4</sup> NESAs (2013)

and answers were included, along with pictures and texts to help understanding. This approach helped to support the literacy development of the trainers.

Following the training, women passed on their new knowledge to other women in their communities by talking with other mothers and using information sheets, which had been translated into local languages. This ‘cascade’ approach was complemented by a local media campaign on the theme of nutrition, which was organised following a stakeholder workshop involving journalists, 26 community radio stations, 14 regional radio stations and 14 traditional communicators.



Senegal, Children’s nutrition and literacy learning  
©UNESCO Dakar 2012

In addition, a literate environment was developed as a way to support learning. Slogans were translated into the seven national languages; banners were created on breast-feeding, weaning and mother and child nutrition. These were displayed in all the main towns and centres involved. Posters were developed, in local languages, giving information on mother and child health, supported by pictures. T-shirts were made, printed with slogans which were given to all learners as a reward for good attendance and to complement the literate environment. Training of trainers and facilitators was organised and learning was offered to women

for over 300 hours. Literacy classes were provided in 150 sites, in seven regions to 4,500 learners.

The work demonstrated effective approaches to inter-agency co-operation with the local community; it was seen as a collective commitment to managing malnutrition. Local networks and institutions were involved including religious, political and administrative communities. This partnership approach meant that any organisations or authorities, which might have resisted women's participation, were committed. It also meant that all the relevant organisations could contribute to development. Further topics for learning were identified including nursing mothers, infant feeding and sanitation.

The process of developing and delivering the programme using the training manual has helped to contribute towards sustainability beyond the initial phases. The programme has continued as the training manual has given the government an opportunity to integrate health modules into the national literacy curriculum. The initiative also helped to strengthen capacity amongst community radio journalists and broadcasts have included items on nutrition and health, based upon the initial work.

*'With the project, we can now read and write and have acquired knowledge nutrition for ourselves and for the healthy growth of our children.'* Learner

### Key success factors

- *The multilingual approach offered respect for diversity and recognition of the importance of mother-tongue literacy development, especially as women are likely to be speakers of community languages;*
- *Women were involved and empowered as advocates and peer supporters in passing on their new knowledge and skills to other mothers, giving them a status and recognition they may not have previously received;*
- *The involvement of key organisations and institutions demonstrated public support and meant that their approval was given to women's involvement in the initiative;*

- *A multi-media approach of teaching, broadcasting and developing a multilingual, literate environment was developed. This helped to open up access for women;*
- *Government health and education departments worked together;*
- *Sustainability was built in through the development of a training manual which was mainstreamed into the national literacy curriculum.*

#### 4.6. Learning reading, writing and health in Brazil<sup>5</sup>

*'I came to consult the doctor and needed to sign a document. The nurse noticed my difficulty and she suggested that I participate in the programme. I began to study the same day.'* Learner

An integrated programme of literacy learning and health was initiated in 2002 by the *Curitiba City Council* in Brazil as a joint initiative between the health and education departments. Several studies were conducted, revealing, for example, that over 40,000 people in the area struggled with reading and writing. Other data concluded that infants born to mothers with few or no literacy skills were at greater risk of hospitalization than those of mothers who were literate. Another study evidenced an association between high infant mortality rates and higher rates of illiteracy among mothers. Whilst not drawing causal links between the two areas, the evidence was used to launch a programme.

The programme set out to:

- Implement the council's adult literacy and health policies through community involvement;
- Help to prevent the outbreak and spread of acute and chronic diseases and reduce infant mortality;
- Promote adult literacy as a vehicle for empowerment and a means of improving people's quality of life.

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5 UIL (2010)



Brazil © Alfabetizando com Saúde

The target groups included young people who had dropped out of school and the majority of learners were women from the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups in the city region. These disadvantages arose predominantly from traditional cultural attitudes to the roles of young girls and women.

The programme was designed to address local people's immediate health concerns, including hygiene. Specific issues related to cancer, worm infections, dengue fever, cholera, HIV/AIDS,



diabetes and sexually transmitted diseases. Healthy eating and nutrition, family planning and childcare, environmental health issues and the administration of medication were also part of the curriculum. This provided diversity and flexibility as well as responsiveness.

Trainers were brought together to form a community volunteer educators' network. They were trained as community educators/facilitators with monthly updating activities to keep abreast of developments. Over 300 facilitators have been trained. Not all of these became workers for the programme due to an absence of financial remuneration and limited resources for travel.

*Community Health Agents* recruited participants to groups of up to 20 learners who met at least twice each week. All materials, including audio-visual resources, were custom-designed and produced by the *Curitiba Departments of Education and Health*. Learners developed their literacy skills using health themes and topics. Participatory approaches, including drama, were used to engage and involve learners, encouraging them to use existing knowledge and bring personal experience into the new programme. Freirean approaches, which avoid didactics and authoritarian teaching, rather drawing upon the experiences of the learners, were adopted. Monitoring and evaluation was conducted in a formative way involving an oversight committee. There were also visits by representatives of the city departments, monthly progress reports produced by volunteer educators and feedback via e-mail and telephone communications. At the end of the year, quantitative research was carried out.

The number of participants rose over 6 years from 167 in 2002 to 10,000 in 2012. Learners reported improvements in literacy as well as wider benefits such as increased mobility and reductions in drug-taking amongst those women who had experienced mental health problems. The widely experienced increases in confidence associated with literacy and learning were demonstrated in changes in daily living and directly impacted on the health of the women - and men - involved.

Changes in eating and lifestyle habits as well as increased access to medical services due to higher levels of understanding of health problems, especially related to such conditions as diabetes, were reported. Individual stories highlight the impact the programme had on their lives:

*J, 52 years, was so eager to learn that in 2007, after 25 years living in Curitiba, she learned to read and write fluently in less than six months. The Alfabetizando com Saúde (Learning to Read and Write in Good Health) was the passport to a new life... to which she had had no access because of the barrier of illiteracy. At first, she read the Bible daily and tales to her grandson and youngest daughter.*

*[...]*

*That was the beginning of a long-term investment in her own education. Interested in learning more, she enrolled and completed the supplementary elementary school and took courses in technical electrician, makeup and crafts. Her goal now is to graduate from high school. "I also want to have a sewing workshop", she says proudly. The turning point in the life of J happened in the back room of the Health Unit of Leonice village in the Boa Vista Region. (Metropole Journal, 2012)*

The programme has been adopted and adapted by Mozambique, demonstrating the value of its approach to another Lusophone country. It faces challenges associated with training volunteer educators rather than developing a professional cadre of staff, payment for volunteers, assessment of learners and formal certification. Nevertheless, the city continues to fund the work, using community venues, which are used at little additional cost, making the programme sustainable.

### Key success factors

- *Low levels of literacy were seen as barriers to good health, which prompted joint policies and practices by two city council departments;*
- *Freirian approaches meant that women's experiences and knowledge were valued and used in the learning activities;*
- *The focus on key health issues meant that women could relate;*
- *Health workers, as trusted intermediaries, were able to refer learners, especially women, to learning opportunities;*

- *Literacy materials were specially created to reflect the health themes;*
- *Incremental benefits, as reported by the women, led to further learning. Building-in such opportunities helped to support empowerment in relation to learning identities and progression;*
- *Wider benefits of learning were identified which women could report as making a difference to their identities;*
- *Monitoring and evaluation were recognised as important aspects of development;*
- *Investment was for an extended period and sustainability was built into the programme design.*

#### 4.7. Literacy and learning for young women in rural Pakistan<sup>6</sup>

*'Now I am an able person rather than disabled.'* Learner from Sialkot

A long-established NGO called BUNYAD works in a multi-sectoral way, with a wide range of organisations, to address the difficulties faced by people with no or low levels of literacy. It focuses on those people who are most marginalised. One particular initiative has been designed to empower young, rural women (15–25 years). It is known as the *Adult Female Functional Literacy Programme* (AFFLP).

Available data indicate that there are particularly low levels of literacy among young women in Pakistan aged 15–24 years, at 53% compared with 77% among young men. Female literacy rates are recorded as low as 35% for adults aged 24 years and above, with reports of even lower rates among rural women. Access to learning for them is challenging, influenced by social and cultural attitudes, conservative religious beliefs, early marriages, and few female teachers in a society that shuns interaction between females and unrelated males.

A non-formal programme was launched in an area including 12 Union Councils (nine rural and three urban) and approximately

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6 UIL (2012e)

thirty-six thousand households, where literacy rates amongst young women are particularly low. AFFLP adopts integrated approaches to literacy learning, offering vocational, business and life skills as well as civic (human rights and peace building), health and agricultural education. The programme aims to improve literacy skills and empower women to make contributions to their communities.

Prior to designing the programme, over five thousand young women were interviewed in order to identify levels of interest and need. This process also raised awareness about the initiative and what it aimed to do. Community support was mobilized through the extensive existing networks of organisations and community leaders, with whom over one hundred meetings were held. Information and discussion helped to establish the importance of their involvement in the initiative. Following this phase, *Village Education Communities* and *Family Education Communities* were established, which were designed to identify and encourage young women to participate in the learning, support their continuing involvement, and to contribute to the on-going development of the work.

Two hundred and forty-two teachers were recruited and trained in adult learning methods and approaches and offered monthly follow-up training. A formative monitoring and evaluation process was established involving all the key players.

The young women were taught literacy and numeracy skills in Arabic, Urdu and English, along with a range of vocational skills. The learning centres were set up in village communities, so that they were close to the homes of the young women. Otherwise, many would not have been allowed to attend the classes without being accompanied by a male relative. Some provision was set up in the homes of respected teachers, who were seen to be moral guardians of the learners. BUNYAD developed materials, which were distributed to families before being used, in order to reassure them that traditional religious values were not being undermined through participation. In fact, as greater literacy amongst the young women resulted in them reading the Qu'ran in Urdu or Arabic, families became excited and more learners participated.

Over 5,600 learners participated in the programme. Assessment suggested that the majority had developed their literacy skills so that they are able to read the Qu'ran or the Bible. Some young women gained skills which enabled them to contribute to their

family's economic activities, including such things as sewing and tailoring. Others reported how intergenerational learning had begun with mothers passing on their new literacy skills to their children. However, some women were frustrated that their new vocational and employability skills did not result in increased access to employment. This is being addressed in the on-going work of BUNYAD, by encouraging the development of skills that will support self-employment or add to family-based economic activities.

While many of these young women considered that they had benefited from learning, there was little evidence that issues such as traditional expectations of the roles of women and girls, lack of participation in decision-making in homes and communities, and exclusion from many forms of employment, were addressed. It might be argued that little empowerment had taken place. On the other hand, young women were mobilised to participate in literacy learning, with the support of community leaders and families. While the new-found skills and knowledge were applied by many to religious texts, their identities as learners and their confidence in engaging with learning was demonstrated.

The work is on-going due to links with micro-financing opportunities which help to sustain the work.

*'Female literacy is more important than male because female has to nourish children'. Learner from Sialkot*

### Key Success Factors

- *Target groups and challenging geographical areas were deliberately chosen in order to address issues of marginalisation of young rural women and learn from the experience;*
- *Barriers to participation, especially in relation to language, customs, culture and attitudes to young women, were addressed in the planning process, even though the young women remained, largely, in traditional roles. Empowerment was supported through small steps;*
- *Families and community leaders were 'brought on board' through outreach activities in the planning stages and during the learning process. This 'won hearts and minds';*

- *Literacy learning for purposes such as reading the Qu’ran or Bible, which were desirable to families and communities, led to learning for wider purposes too, including self-employment.*

#### 4.8. Women, family literacy and learning in Turkey<sup>7</sup>

*“Learning to read was always on my mind”, she said. “I sat down with my husband and told him what I wanted to do. This was necessary, you see, because some people think that if a wife starts to learn and becomes more cultivated, well, she won’t obey her husband anymore. Fortunately, my husband, who is also illiterate, is still a far-sighted man. He said, “Why not?”* Dudu Akpınar, a learner who started literacy learning at 41 years of age and wrote a book called, ‘All I Wanted Was to Write a Book’. (Collins, 2001)

Recent data relating to literacy rates in Turkey indicate that over 3.8 million people, 70% of them women, have received no elementary school education. Literacy rates for women are estimated at 91.9% compared with 98.3% for men. The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) frames national policies and the Directorate of Lifelong Learning has responsibility for ensuring adult literacy courses are delivered. The *Mother-Child Education Foundation* (AÇEV) is a partner organisation which has been involved in offering a range of learning opportunities for mothers and their children since 1993. It works in creative partnerships, with academic, private, public and voluntary sectors, to lever resources to add to the government funding.

Concerns about access to early childhood education, particularly for marginalized communities, along with recognition that adult would enhance any initiatives with children, led to the formation of family literacy programmes. These have evolved into differentiated strands including the *Mother-Child Education Programme*, the *Pre-school Parent Child Education Programme* and the *Pre-school Education Programme*. Adult-only programmes include the *Mother Support Programme*, the *Father Support Programme*, and the *Func-*

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<sup>7</sup> UIL (2012d)

*tional Adult Literacy and Women's Support Programme (FALP)*. Advocacy and promotional activities have been also developed, including radio and TV broadcasts.



Turkey, Father's Support Programme ©Ulrike Hanemann, UIL

The range and diversity of the programmes mean that many stages and ages of child development are addressed alongside the learning of parents. Extending the work from mothers to include fathers has helped to develop understanding of co-parenting, father-child relationships, and mother-father relationships. The *Father Support Programme* is particularly imaginative as it evolved from the *Mother Support Programme*, at the request of the women. It aims to address the parenting skills of fathers of children aged 2–10 years of age, and encourages a holistic approach to child development and parenting. Fathers have space in which to learn, examine their roles and attitudes, and identify opportunities for change. The *Mother Support Programme* is complementary to that of fathers, resulting in more holistic and consistent approaches to child-rearing. Two strands of the programme are described below.

### **Mother-Child Education Programme (MOCEP)**

This successful, intergenerational, home-based programme targets children aged five to six years, in disadvantaged situations.

These children often have limited access to early years education and many of their mothers have few or no literacy skills. The programme was designed professionally and reviewed and refined in light of mothers' contributions and experiences. It offers an holistic approach, covering cognitive, emotional, social and physical aspects of child development. MOCEP has three, linked developmental themes:

- The *Mother Empowerment or Home Enrichment Programme*, which supports the creation of a positive home environment as well as literacy, parenting, conflict management, health and sexual education;
- *Reproductive Health and Family Planning*, which raises awareness of reproductive health and rights and principles of safe motherhood;
- The *Cognitive Education programme*, which aims to equip mothers with the skills to support the cognitive development of their children and prepare them for school. These include literacy, numeracy, speaking and listening, using books and developing critical thinking, with both mother and child.

Learning is offered in adult education centres, across Turkey, by teachers and social workers who are trained by AÇEV and MoNE. Facilitators are offered follow-up training, mentoring and supervision. Weekly classes for mothers last six months and learning is additionally supported by home visits by the facilitators. MOCEP uses interactive, participative approaches with a strong ethos of peer-to-peer learning. Discussion, role play and feedback regarding how new knowledge and skills are being applied at home with the children, are regularly used. Topics covered include reading books, story-telling, letter and word recognition through sounds and pictures, colour and shape recognition and problem solving. These approaches provide children with emotional security and the scaffolding for progression and development. Mothers and children learn together.

External evaluations indicate the impact which MOCEP has made. Over more than a decade, 900 trained teachers have worked with 237,000 mothers and children. Annually, 45,000 mothers are targeted. The assessed differences between children whose mothers have been involved in MOCEP and those who have not, include





Turkey ©Mother-Child Education Programme (MOCEP)

the achievement of higher scores in aptitude and school tests, as well as positive social and personality development. They revealed greater self-confidence and increased ability to adapt to schooling.

Importantly, children demonstrated higher rates of school attendance and completion. Some of these indicators were extended to foster families. The family learning programme demonstrated how learning with both mothers and children can measurably mitigate the effects of socially disadvantaged environments. (Beckman, S. and Kocak, A. A., 2010.)

Mothers not only gained parenting skills but also displayed greater self-confidence and reported that relationships with husbands changed. They enjoyed greater communications and role-sharing and were more likely to make joint decision on such things as birth control and children's discipline. Women felt that they had higher status in the family. The evaluations sought insights into any changes in fathers and revealed that fathers' relationships with both their children and spouses were influenced by the mothers' involvement in the programme. Fathers reported that they felt that conversations and communications improved. Generally, they valued their wives' participation and expressed pride in their commitment to their children and learning. Mothers' involvement in the programme had positive impacts on themselves, their children and their spouses. This demonstrates how developing women's literacy can be empowering for whole families.

### Key success factors

- *Mothers and children in marginalized or disadvantaged situations were targeted;*
- *The programme was designed professionally to respond to children's holistic developmental needs, but moderated and revised according to mothers' experiences and feedback. This has led to a co-developed, responsive approach;*
- *Mothers' interests and concerns were addressed alongside those of their children;*
- *Mothers were able to access learning in local centres;*
- *Support at home meant that learning in the centres was applied and further supported, to optimize its impact;*
- *The broader family learning programme involves fathers. This helps in encouraging and supporting co-parenting as well as understanding the barriers which mothers face in families and in society;*

- *The partnership approach of AÇEV means that there is a broad base of support which contributes in diverse ways and helps with sustainability;*
- *External evaluations endorsed the effectiveness of the programme. This has led to extension of the work to other areas of Turkey and the world.*

### **Functional Adult Literacy and Women's Support Programme (FALP)**

The FALP targets women, with no or low literacy skills, who are over 15 years of age. Whilst some men do participate, over 98% of learners are women. They are not necessarily mothers. The programme was professionally developed, and has been reviewed and refined six times, in response to the experiences and contributions of the women involved. It includes 120 hours of curriculum, offered three or four hours per week, to groups of up to 20 women, who are facilitated and guided by trained volunteers. The facilitators, who must have completed a high school diploma, participate in initial full-time training of three weeks duration and then receive a certificate, which allows them to be official literacy instructors. A teachers' handbook, a reading manual offering information about reading approaches and activities, a student workbook and other materials comprise the background resources offered. Monitoring and evaluation is built in to the programme. Facilitators are visited at least three times per year and continuously supported by field co-ordinators, who provide technical and resourcing support, course information, and feedback to the organisation concerning potential improvements.

Literacy, including numeracy, comprehension, interpretation and critical thinking skills, which can be applied in daily living, form the core elements of the programme. The curriculum is built around events from family life, covering 25 topical units. At its heart is a women's support component which addresses women's rights, health and hygiene, as well as child development. The approach uses active participation, communication and discussion, reasoning and debate. Ground rules are negotiated and agreed in each group relating to mutual respect and trust as well as co-operation and support for all members.

The national programme is supported by three education specialist staff members who have strategic responsibilities.

Twelve 'master' trainers work with them, providing training for volunteers, along with 24 field co-ordinators who offer support and supervision in the provinces. This provides the staffing framework to ensure effective sustainability of the programme, along with quality-assurance processes and feedback loops to report on challenges and opportunities. Many of the master trainers and field co-ordinators began as volunteers. This approach provides career progression routes for the volunteers and ensures that those people who run the programme have ample experience of working with women learners.

The programme is promoted, and women are attracted to learning, through a range of mechanisms. Posters, brochures and radio and TV are used to recruit women as well as volunteers. Local press and media are also used to raise awareness of the programme. From time to time, community briefings and information sessions are held to inform stakeholders and local leaders of the work. An education TV programme, *Our Class*, was broadcast in 2005 and another one called *Life is beautiful if you can read* was broadcast in 2011. It is estimated that over 5 million viewers watched the broadcasts daily over three months.

The organisation estimates that over 125,000 women have been positively affected, and 4,000 volunteers trained by the programme. It has been particularly effective in reaching and teaching Turkish migrant women living in other countries. Almost all have reported increases in self-confidence, personal autonomy, increased participation in household and community decision-making, and, increased, access to basic services, as a result of participation. Literacy improvements were captured through learners' diaries, trainers' reports, research and evaluation studies. They included reading newspapers and simple books, writing notes to school, reading the time and making timetables, writing names and completing a diary, travelling alone in the city, and making hospital visits. Other reports included understanding of rights in relation to marriage, reproductive health, women's civil rights and positive changes in the roles of women in their families. This range of outcomes reflects the life-wide impact that literacy learning can have. Wider impact has been recorded through the involvement of community organisations, particularly the support of imams at mosques, sponsorship of free bus passes to enable women to travel to classes, and support from private sector organisations with such things as stationery and venues. The extension of the programme

to other areas of the country is testimony to the effectiveness and respect developed for FALP and AÇEV.

### Key success factors

- *This is a professionally developed programme that works with mothers and families to respond to identified interests and needs of women. It has been refined through the involvement of women, resulting in an effective co-production of the learning process and content;*
- *The organisation has a long term commitment to working with women, not just on projects. This helps them to learn and develop in a formative way and respond to and work with women for real change;*
- *Women learn within a national framework of lifelong learning situated in the ‘mainstream’ of educational activities with quality controls in place;*
- *Literacy is seen as part of a wider concept of learning, built upon relevant life-skills and activities, incorporating far more than the ‘technical skills’ of reading, writing and numeracy;*
- *FALP is a bold, flexible programme and is not afraid to address social topics of importance to women, which may be controversial;*
- *FALP has created links across the educational and developmental sectors on such issues as reproductive rights and health, and women’s involvement in political literacy;*
- *A multi-media approach, including word of mouth via key community influencers, press, radio and TV demonstrates an holistic approach to raising awareness among the general population and attracting learners;*
- *Partnerships across all sectors, where stakeholders contribute relevant resources, have helped to create a strong, diverse base on which to build sustainability.*

#### 4.9. Bilingual Literacy and Reproductive Health in Bolivia<sup>8</sup>

*'After working in this project for three years, it has prepared me even more to acquire new knowledge. I have had opportunities to share this knowledge with women who needed it most. In this project, it made me feel important. I feel that I have changed a lot, I have become more responsible and learned to be more honest with my peers/fellows and treat people without discrimination.'* Female literacy worker

A partnership between the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport in Bolivia and UNFPA has been active since 1998. It seeks to respond to high levels of illiteracy, infant mortality and maternal mortality. It targets women in particular but not exclusively, especially those living in poor urban and rural areas. Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in Latin America with wealth and services concentrated in urban areas; it is estimated that 90% of the rural population lives in extreme poverty. Up to 40% of women in some areas of Bolivia have low or no literacy skills. Infant mortality can be as high as 55 per 1,000 live births in rural areas and 62% of maternal deaths are amongst women with little or no access to health support and service. The need for the programme was based on carefully researched data and based on a similar pilot initiative in Peru.

The programme aimed, amongst other things, to contribute to a reduction in illiteracy, maternal death and infant mortality rates within the indigenous population, using bilingual approaches of community languages and Spanish (the official language). Facilitators were drawn from teachers in the formal education system, as well as some community leaders who had completed secondary education. They attended 16–20 days of training per year, involving bilingual literacy teaching methods, programme content and organisation and management and evaluation of learning.

Facilitators encouraged participants to learn with and from each other through participative approaches, based on *Paulo Freire's* principles and methods. Group discussion, debate and reading and writing activities were designed around reproductive health issues such as pregnancy, infant health and gender relations. Relevant materials were developed, such as posters, videos and literacy

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8 UIL (2012e)

manuals. Activities such as painting, group reading, chalkboard writing, accessing newspapers were developed, most of which were organised and led by the community and learners themselves. The bilingual approach ensured greater understanding of the issues addressed, as well as an ability to draw on learners' experiences and cultural sensitivities. Teaching was divided into basic and advanced levels with learners attending two or three times per week (over 144 hours) over periods of six to eight months. Opportunities were available to progress to more complex literacy learning relating to such topics as community health and hygiene, nutrition and sexually transmitted diseases as well as to opportunities for skills development for income generation.



Bolivia © Bilingual Literacy and Reproductive Health

From the women's perspective, the issues relating to reproductive health were addressed through increasing learners' knowledge, understanding their needs, and awareness of their health rights. This enabled them to improve basic health and begin to access the relevant reproductive medical services. Open discussions between women addressed not only issues of health but also self-care, violence in relationships, parental roles, decision-making and negotiations within families, and self-esteem. This helped to promote women's awareness of their rights. The programme

worked not only with women-only groups but with mixed groups too. The community-based learning system and sensitization activities involved whole communities, in order to try to address ideas surrounding equality and opportunities for women.

Many more women were found to be using their newly-found rights to access family planning services and primary health care, including screening for cervical and breast cancer. Reports indicated a decline in both maternal and infant mortality rates in rural areas.

Addressing culturally sensitive issues such as violence and women's reproductive health has improved awareness of women's rights among both women and men. Some women have begun to participate in wider education and civic activities and contribute more actively to income generation within communities and families. It is felt that the knock-on effect has resulted in more children not only attending school but staying there due to support from their parents. While direct correlation between improvements in literacy and health cannot be drawn as a result of this programme, learning activities are recognised as contributing to addressing these long-term challenges.

The evaluation reports considered that the context, cultural sensitivities and participatory approaches led to successes over and above any top-down strategies. Designing the programme with learners and local people promoted and respected local knowledge and understanding. The bilingual approach added to this aspect.

The planning involved not only curriculum content, but also times of learning which were sensitive to agricultural cycles and gender issues. The partnership resourced the developments through co-operation between national, local governments and indigenous organisations and community groups. Such relationships also offered opportunities to raise awareness and assert support for the programme.

*'I was just an ordinary person in my community before I was chosen to be a literacy trainer. At first I was afraid, but thanks to the bi-literacy, I learned a lot. Now, I am the president of the Moya Pampa's Central Rural Farmer's Women Organisation.'* Female literacy teacher



### Key success factors

- *The initiative was based on researched data and a pilot programme. This helped to provide a rationale as well as learn from the initial phase;*
- *A partnership approach meant that resources were pooled and optimised;*
- *Women's concerns about their own health and that of their babies provided the motivation and purpose for literacy learning. They were able to address culturally sensitive issues of contraception and reproduction which may have been banned in some other contexts;*
- *Bilingual approaches were adopted which removed barriers to understanding and communication and demonstrated respect for diversity;*
- *Community members and learners were involved in the design and production of the materials and approaches to learning;*
- *Participatory approaches meant women could openly discuss those health issues that were most important and sensitive to them. Involving men in some of these activities helped them to understand aspects of women's health and begin to address issues of equality;*
- *Monitoring and evaluation strategies captured outcomes, which linked to the aims of the initiative; this helped to demonstrate the impact on individuals, communities and wider policies, and to ensure accountability.*

### 4.10. Community Empowerment in Senegal and seven other African countries

*'Open the door for me to enter, so that I may know my human rights and the responsibilities for those rights.'* Song lyrics written by *Community Empowerment Programme* participants. (Tostan, 2012)

A three-part *Community Empowerment Model* is at the heart of the work of *Tostan*, an organisation which originated in Senegal and has now spread its activities to seven other African countries.

*Tostan* aims to put rural communities in charge of their own futures by involving them in a three-year non-formal education programme, which is rights-based, respectful, inclusive, holistic and sustainable. One phase involves discussion on democracy, human rights and problem solving, including health and hygiene and harmful-to-health activities such as female genital mutilation or cutting. The second phase develops literacy and numeracy and offers training on project management and income generation. This part of the programme respects learners' own languages and integrates the use of mobile phones in the learning activities. Classes are organised for young people and adults, and embrace women and men learning together. They use participatory approaches to learning as well as traditional forms of community learning with drama, music and song.

*'I have taught all my friends and family who are not in the Tostan program what they can do with their phones. We used to only call each other, but now we can do things like send text messages and use reminders.'* Fatou Sane, Tostan participant, Koublan, 2008. (Tostan, 2013)

The third aspect of the programme involves setting up a community management committee, which helps to sustain the community empowerment process.

While the programme is not primarily targeted at women, the focus on empowerment for the whole community means that women's empowerment is a priority. Women develop leadership skills, and through discussion and debate they train and demonstrate their ability to analyse and make important decisions which affect themselves and their families. This approach demonstrates to the wider community how women can contribute to development. Women are encouraged to take on leadership roles. At least nine of the 17 members of the Community Management Committee are women.

*Tostan* also works with men and boys and encourages them to participate in rights-related discussions. Men and women work together to promote equality and develop new social standards concerning human rights and the dignity of women and girls, men and boys. Young people and adults meet separately which allows different generations to express their feelings, attitudes, ideas and

ambitions. Their different perspectives are drawn together in the *Community Management Committee*.

Women have become community leaders, rights advocates and activists, and role models for other women and girls, demonstrating how women can take on responsibility and leadership as equals with men. Such leadership helps to challenge and change accepted norms about the roles and status of women. With training and experience, women take on roles in local councils as well as regional governance organisations. In Senegal, over 80% of the *Tostan*-trained committees are co-ordinated by women.

In addition, women and girls have been empowered and supported to make informed decisions about health, hygiene, education and finances. They help to generate social change by running their own businesses, earning money for their families. They organize campaigns to increase access to maternal and child health services.



Senegal, Mobile Phone Literacy and Development © Tostan

One of the most significant successes has been the abandonment of female genital mutilation, with communities demonstrating their support through a process of public declarations. Similar successes have been recorded in relation to child marriages. The impact of literacy learning has led to empowerment for women, to take control of their lives and to take advantage of economic

opportunities. Transformation of whole communities, however, has been the result of men's engagement in learning about sensitive and key community issues, as well as the involvement of all generations.

*'Before, we were near-sighted. Near-sightedness of the eyes is bad, but near-sightedness of the heart is worse. We have now adopted practices that we know will lead to better health for women and children in the community and have ended practices that don't. In the past, we felt we could never question traditional beliefs and didn't have the right information and social support to change.'* Man from Kolma Peu lh, Senegal. (Tostan, 2013)

### Key success factors

- *The empowerment of whole communities to address key issues and accept responsibility for self-determination is central to the work of the organisation. The concept was clearly thought through;*
- *Women's empowerment is seen as critical to the success of the work;*
- *Inter-generational approaches were adopted, which helped to 'bridge the gap' between young people and adults;*
- *Men and women work separately as well as together to try to identify solutions to the issues raised and discussed;*
- *The initiative involves long-term commitment to rural communities;*
- *Literacy learning that respects community languages is seen as vital in supporting changes in behaviour, particularly in relation to damaging health and hygiene practices;*
- *Progression steps and routes were built into the process;*
- *Teaching and learning approaches were non-formal, built upon traditional activities, but also addressed current opportunities with the use of mobile phones;*
- *Women had opportunities to exercise newly found confidence, knowledge and understanding by serving on community committees.*

## 5. Challenges and solutions

All these programmes and developments faced challenges. Some of these were identified and resolved in the planning phases. Others emerged in unanticipated ways and were addressed in formative, developmental processes. Many of the challenges are intertwined; identifying some of the difficulties faced and some of the solutions discovered can helpfully inform other developments.

### 5.1. It is not easy to implement empowerment at grass roots level

Creating a common understanding of what empowerment means in any particular country, context or community is challenging. Empowerment means different things for women in different situations (DFID, 2012).

#### Some solutions

A shared understanding about what empowerment and equality mean must be created in the planning stages, in order to develop literacy learning activities that lead to these goals. Assessing and analyzing barriers to empowerment in the planning stage, as shown in the example from Indonesia, is vital. Sometimes, women must meet together, without men, as in the examples from Nepal, Pakistan and India, to develop understanding and support one another in articulating and promoting their needs. Women's organisations, such as *Nirantar* in India, were developed and supported to advocate, promote and mobilise action with and on behalf of many women. Men too, must sometimes meet to learn and to face the challenges and issues they must address in relation to the empowerment of women. The *Fathers' Support Programme* in Turkey is a clear example of how men are being informed and challenged and are changing in their family roles. Importantly, as in Sierra Leone, women and men listening, learning and understanding together, can create new, more egalitarian power bases, develop different value systems, take risks and change attitudes.

The initiative on communication skills in Nepal considered how to develop the confidence of women to articulate their thoughts, feelings and ideas. They also, gradually, involved the men in positions of community influence to listen and respond to the women. This helped to shape men's attitudes and thinking. The *Sahajani Shiksha Kendra* work in India had also carefully planned ways in which women could be empowered, by developing multiple activities to engage and involve women in issues of economic equality rights. The strategic planning called upon legal rights and included work with authorities, such as the district magistrate. Through such strategies, development, change and empowerment were facilitated.

## 5.2. Traditional beliefs can create huge barriers to learning, for women

Beliefs and attitudes towards the roles women may or can play, as well as what, where and how they might learn, are often entrenched. This is especially so in rural and isolated settings. Nabi (2012) suggests that many of the Pakistani women with whom she worked believe that they are incapable of learning, due to generations of being treated as inferior to the men in their lives. Similarly, an evaluation study of bilingual literacy learning in Mexico revealed how women felt about their status as minority language speakers:

*'...this is what my husband tells me: 'Why don't you learn to speak in Spanish? Why don't you learn as I have seen other elderly ladies, they well learn Spanish, and you, what are you arriving at?' This is what my husband says, and I receive my affront.'*

[Conversely:]

*'Our heart becomes happy because they teach us much. We seem to be dumb, as if we are not able to think. But when we start learning we become very happy.'* Learners from Tsotsil and Tzeltal indigenous communities in Mexico (UNESCO, 2011)

Such deeply internalized beliefs of inferiority and incapability are difficult to change in the women themselves, as well as in the men. The attitudes and behaviours of men, who are usually the community leaders, dominate in many societies. They are seen as guardians of values, which can be regarded as sacrosanct and unchallengeable ways of sustaining traditional ways of life. These attitudes apply in the home and in the community. Long-standing hierarchies of power, over poor men and women, can lead to some men over-asserting power in order to retain a sense of superiority over the women in their lives.

The highly sensitive topic of female genital mutilation is an example of a tradition that perpetuates male dominance. Women must deal with the attitudes of fathers, brothers and husbands, who are often supported by older women. Generational divides can create tensions, as can the divisions between rural and urban women. Women feel they cannot question, challenge or reject received wisdoms. Sometimes women are 'permitted' to join in learning or participate in community activities, which are approved by the men in their lives. These are cited as being 'liberating' or 'empowering', but are not designed for such purposes and lead nowhere. Such patronizing approaches do not lead to empowerment.

### Some solutions

The *Adult Female Functional Literacy Programme*, in Pakistan, spent a great deal of time in the preparatory phases, interviewing young women and raising community awareness about what was planned. This helped to identify learning needs and challenges as well as to inform women, their families and the wider community. Community support was mobilized through hundreds of meetings with the existing extensive networks of organisations and leaders. Highly visible *Village Education Communities* and *Family Education Communities* were set up. These were designed to attract women into learning, but also to inform men and community organisations.

The *Fathers' Support Programme* in Turkey helped men to reflect on their behaviours and attitudes to their children's upbringing. As a result, they began to work more closely with their wives and share responsibilities. Mothers, in their programme, were able to identify problematic male attitudes and behaviours and devise practical

steps towards working collaboratively with their husbands. The joint activities, with a clear focus on bringing up their children, meant that both partners participated in processes of change.

The *Tostan* approach enabled the highly sensitive issue of female genital mutilation to be openly discussed, learned about and, in many instances, eliminated. The *Tostan* three-phase programme not only supported women and men to address such issues together, but rules about women's representation in the *Community Management Committees* facilitated shifts in traditional power bases. By exploring ideas and theories, taking part in debate and discussion, and directing learning towards a different power structure (the committee), women were able to take on new responsibilities.

The bi-lingual initiative on reproductive health in Bolivia empowered women to take greater control over their rights and their bodies. This was the result of women and men reaching greater understanding about, and respect for, each other's bodies, lives and attitudes.

The examples from Pakistan and Senegal demonstrated the importance of community languages. Women who feel that their languages are respected are more likely to develop their literacy skills successfully than those who are compelled to learn to read and to write in an official language. However, many women feel that they want to become literate in the language of power. In such cases, community language literacy can provide a bridge to such learning.

Using the press, radio and television helped in awareness raising, informing, debating and discussing learning aims and activities. The children's nutrition programme in Senegal briefed and trained journalists and radio stations so that they could contribute to a media campaign. This led to increased public awareness of the importance of learning for women and encouraged women to participate. The *Functional Adult Literacy and Women's Support Programme* in Turkey used television as well as local press and radio to promote learning. Using media not only helps to engage women but also reaches wider communities and aids more general understanding.

The *mela* in India promoted learning to new women but also publicly revealed women's capabilities. Partnerships between different agencies (i.e., health, adult learning and voluntary organisations) can also open up advocacy opportunities as they



build upon existing contacts and reach diverse audiences. Such strategies help to present women's involvement in learning and in wider community activities as normal, thereby challenging and helping to remove attitudinal barriers towards women as learners.

### **5.3. Participation can be hindered by distance and insecurity**

If women are to participate fully in learning and begin to carry greater public responsibilities, their safety must be assured. In many isolated rural areas, women are vulnerable when travelling, especially if they are alone. Public transport is usually very limited. The timing of learning opportunities can also limit women's access; walking alone in the dark presents high risks, and transport is unavailable.

Violence by men against women who seek learning is a real challenge. Frustrations about women not carrying out domestic and care responsibilities or not working in the fields to produce food can lead to aggression. Women's participation in activities outside these roles, and their exposure to new ideas and thinking, challenge traditional values. Men may find this threatening to their identities, which are based on power and authority. Even when women are 'allowed' to join learning activities, their new knowledge, insights and questions can create discomfort and psychological threats to the status of brothers, husbands and fathers. They too may not be highly literate and fear that their women becoming better educated undermines their status.

Within the month that this paper was drafted (June 2013), women celebrating the opening of a village adult learning centre in northern India were attacked by men, causing serious injuries. Although literacy learning may be acknowledged as a right, some women, due to their status, continue to be threatened and violently harmed by men when they seek to assert that right.

#### **Some solutions**

Where learning is provided close to home, at times which accommodate other responsibilities, women are more likely to feel secure

enough to consider participation. Community-based opportunities such as those offered in the Indonesian initiative, including faith venues such as mosques, madrasahs and churches, help to open up safe, local learning spaces. Mobile learning offered at home, or close to it, using equipped caravans, boats or buses, as in Indonesia and Pakistan, also addresses these challenges.

Men and women working together to discuss and address issues of gender violence was a feature of the work in Sierra Leone. Physical and psychological threats can be reduced when concerns are aired in open and supported learning environments. As with cultural attitudes, men must be involved in learning in order to be part of the change process.

The use of intermediaries who are respected by women and men helps to validate women's participation in literacy learning and overcome anxieties about participation. Health workers in Brazil supported women in gaining access to learning, and early childhood educators worked to attract mothers to learning in Turkey.

The *Reflect* circles, used in the 'speaking-out' programme in Nepal and in the post-conflict initiative in Sierra Leone, were felt to be safe environments where women could communicate openly. In the circles, rules of behaviour were negotiated and individuals were respected, regardless of gender. Moreover ground rules were agreed for how learning would be conducted and how individuals were treated. Such strategies help individuals to reflect on information. Facilitators could act as mediators and help to reduce tension, build mutual respect and dissipate potential aggression.

#### **5.4. Involving men, who control and exercise power, in the transformative process can be difficult**

Involving women in learning for empowerment is only one part of the process. Deep-rooted structural constraints, which prevent the development of greater equalities, must be made visible, challenged and changed. These relate to the power of men in personal relationships, as fathers, in communities, workplaces and governments. Boys are brought up to believe in their superiority and, in some cultures, take on decision-making for their sisters.

Mothers-in-law, elder women and women who have sons often support the perpetuation of such power. In many cases, official

structures and systems, including laws, have been created to exclude women from the dialogue and decision-making which could lead to empowerment and greater equality.

### Some solutions

Many adult learning organisations, facilitators and educators have recognized that women's empowerment must involve educating men. This provides opportunities to reflect on power relationships, inequity and women's abilities, as well as review the status and education of boys. Women and men must also work together to develop mutual respect and understanding.

In Nepal, Sierra Leone, Bolivia, and in *Tostan's* work in Senegal, men were involved in learning with women. The issues of inequity, related to the context of learning, were discussed openly with facilitators, and attitudes, behaviours and feelings were explored together. In India, women learned how to challenge men in positions of governance and authority in order to claim their rights. Facilitators helped men and women to identify and acknowledge the changes needed and took steps to support their implementation.

The *Fathers' Support programme* in Turkey involves men only. The course allows fathers to explore parenting skills with children aged 2–10 years. It works in a complementary way with the *Mother-Child Education Programme*, so that men and women negotiate different ways of parenting. This leads to a greater empowerment of women and increased equality in carrying the responsibilities of parenting.

## 5.5. Literacy learning is not always attractive, motivational and relevant to women

Literacy teaching is often seen as something imparted, in a didactic way, to women and men, through the use of exercises and primers. These approaches are a dis-service to the latent knowledge and skills of many women, who engage in writing, interpret signs and symbols and discuss and negotiate on a daily basis. Women are not empty vessels which must be filled; they bring valuable experiences which must not be ignored.

Discovering and using women's existing knowledge and practices, understanding the purposes and relevance of literacy for their lives and using these to build motivational, participatory approaches leads to more effective and sustained learning. However this can make great demands on teachers and facilitators who must develop the curricula and the associated materials and resources.

Providers of learning must identify issues and topics of relevance and importance to women. Discovering what these might be takes time and consultation, working with relevant agencies and organisations and talking with and listening to women. The skills of facilitators must be developed to include participatory approaches, where women and men are involved on equal terms in identifying developmental issues and working out solutions. These include managing processes and people and offering democratic and open spaces where disagreements can be aired and shared.

Women must be partners in determining and designing their programmes of learning. Some women respond to what have been described as 'functional' or instrumental approaches. Others want to become more broadly 'educated' so that they can be more like their brothers or husbands or be equipped to be involved in activities such as a school board or become an elected member. If the learning goals are too far removed from women's lived aspirations and realities, it is unlikely that women will become involved.

### Some solutions

Women in the cited cases took up literacy learning when they related to their context and purposes and where they were offered with the support of the wider community, including family members. Such Freirian methods were used by the Brazil programme on women's health and in Bolivia on women's reproductive health.

In Senegal, women learned how to improve the nurturing and nutrition of their babies. In Bolivia, women used literacy to learn about their own bodies and reproductive health. The *Tostan* approach used literacy and numeracy as ways of developing practical skills such as income generation and project management. Women in Nepal learned how to develop speaking and listening skills in order to engage, question and challenge authorities. They became articulate by learning the language of officialdom and power. In

India, the women used literacy to understand their legal rights and claim the financial rewards to which they were entitled.

The work of the *Mother-Child Education Foundation* in Turkey used women's desire to offer their children the best start in life to engage them in learning and empower them to consider changing their attitudes and behaviours. A similar approach helped fathers to understand issues of gender inequalities in relation to family life and their roles and responsibilities. The women's literacy and health programme in Brazil also employed topics and issues which were highly relevant to women's daily lives.

Some of the initiatives identified a need which was not directly named as literacy. Examples include the women's reproductive health initiative in Bolivia and the Nirantar work on women's employment rights in India. Some women may not have responded to a call for participation in literacy learning, if this wider purpose had not been included. However, having become 'hooked' to learning, they willingly joined in literacy activities as they could see their relevance. Linking literacy to wider issues, which are relevant to women, therefore provides them with a purpose and a motivation to join in learning.

Ethnographic approaches, which not only respond to women's situations but explore, in deep ways, their current literacy activities, are also helpful. The organisers in rural Pakistan spent a great deal of time discovering what women wanted and needed. The women in Sierra Leone and India learned how to build on their literacy practices using mobile phones.

Most of the programmes were supported by partnerships, which provided policy frameworks or specialist input and information. They helped to inform and shape the curriculum, offering rich and varied interest to help women to keep on learning.

Having processes in place to review, listen to and respond to on-going issues and challenges that affect women helps to shape responsive opportunities. Monitoring and evaluation strategies in the *Mother-Child Education Programme* in Turkey, the reproductive health initiative in Bolivia and the health programme in Brazil assisted in developing reflective activities. These improved engagement and participation as well as the quality of provision; they also demonstrated impact and contributed to accountability.

## **5.6. Building the capacity of facilitators or educators, as well as volunteers, is challenging**

Many facilitators have only received minimal education and undertaken very short training programmes. It is unreasonable to expect them to offer high-quality learning opportunities to women without on-going professional development. They need the skills associated with facilitating and tutoring women, designing learning programmes, developing materials and using resources. In addition, learning about issues of gender inequity, marginalization and women's empowerment, and how to address them, is vital. Continuing professional development leads to high-quality learning provision, which encourages women to continue learning.

### **Some solutions**

In Nepal and Brazil, volunteer community facilitators were trained to take on community education responsibilities. In Pakistan, teachers were trained in adult learning methods and in Turkey teachers and social workers were provided with training. Teachers from the formal education system were trained to work with adults in Bolivia. In Senegal, the government paid for the development of a training manual to support the development of facilitators and volunteers.

Providing training opportunities to progress from being a member of the group to becoming a mate or supervisor was regarded as an essential aspect of empowerment in India.

Facilitators and leaders who developed new knowledge, skills and roles provided valuable role models to other women.

## **5.7. Opportunities to progress beyond community literacy learning are often very limited**

Informal community learning can be seen as different from and inferior to that which is available via institutions in urban settings. It can be difficult to bridge the gap between community-based, informal literacy opportunities, and wider, lifelong learning can be difficult. Adult learning organisers may experience difficulties

in providing progression routes. Many women and their families have difficulties understanding and acknowledging the value of continuing learning.

Community learning may be more acceptable to men, as it is local and tends not to involve mixed-sex groups. Far from opening up opportunities, such informal learning can perpetuate some attitudinal and cultural barriers. Organisations often do not plan wider strategic objectives, so do not think what could come after the first steps, or how learning might lead to wider gender empowerment and equality.

Without access to progression, through recognised qualifications, volunteering, employment or more formal learning, women may have difficulty using their new-found knowledge, insights and skills. In spite of participation in learning, they may remain in marginalized positions.

### Some solutions

Progression from community learning to roles of responsibility in the learning setting and training as volunteers or facilitators can be rewarding and empowering. Such opportunities demonstrate women's capabilities and open up new responsibilities in supervisory and leadership roles. This can empower women to take up positions of authority.

In India, women were trained in supervisory roles as 'mates', while in the *Reflect* activities in Sierra Leone, women took on responsibilities within the circles. In Senegal, the work of *Tostan* included structured opportunities for women to become members of a *Community Management Committee*. Women were charged with passing on their new-found knowledge to other mothers, helping them to develop communication skills. In Brazil, networks of volunteers were created. Young women in Indonesia were offered opportunities to gain equivalent qualifications to their contemporaries who had completed schooling. The Nepal group introduced new steps and stages as women's knowledge and confidence grew. Women were able to identify what learning they wanted and needed in order to fulfil new roles effectively. Identifying such progression opportunities provided motivation to continue learning and empowered women to be involved in transformative processes.

## 5.8. The challenge of influencing policies at national, regional and local levels, is huge

In many countries, women are highly under-represented in decision-making, management and governance activities in local communities, schools, clinics and governments. This is in spite of governments' commitment to gender parity and rhetoric that women must be treated equally with men. Many governments have yet to publicly acknowledge the role which adult and lifelong learning, including adult literacy, can contribute to social and economic development and the empowerment of women and men. If adult literacy and learning remain a low priority for policymakers, the millions of women with little or no education will remain marginalized (Oxfam, 2005). Their voices will not be heard in families, communities or at any level of governance.

### Some solutions

Literacy learning that is designed to empower women, as well as work with men to change attitudes and behaviour, can lead to women's greater participation in governance. The programme in Nepal set out to achieve this by working with those in positions of power, persuading them to enter into dialogue with women, to aid understanding of governance processes, and to identify ways in which women could contribute. In India women acquired knowledge and understanding of their rights and then engaged with and challenged authorities over the denial of these rights. Women learned how to use legal knowledge to enter into dialogue with governors. The *Tostan* Management Committees provided opportunities for women to use their knowledge and skills to engage with men on equal terms and to be active contributors to the local governance organisations. The structures of the Committees ensured that women had opportunities available to them. Similarly, women in Nepal were supported in becoming members of school management committees. Identifying role models helped women to realize what is possible.

Effective approaches encourage women to accept responsibilities within the learning environment, support empowerment and help them to recognize personal attributes and abilities. Acting in minor supervisory roles, becoming volunteers and assisting with



planning and delivery are steps towards empowerment as women demonstrate their capabilities to themselves and others. Such routes must be consciously developed and supported and links to local governance mechanisms secured.

Women's organisations, such as Nirantar, provide platforms for women to articulate their rights and advocate in collective ways. Developing advocacy and lobbying skills, such as those demonstrated by the women in Sierra Leone, can lead to the development of new services such as health and water. Such successes encourage women to take on more responsibilities and lobby for further services.

## 6. Recommendations

It is impossible to claim that literacy alone empowers women to create and participate in change. However, literacy, as part of policies and programmes to promote equality in all aspects of life, is a vital part of the change process for millions of women who have received little or no education.

The analysis of these imaginative and promising developments, leads to recommendations for action for future developments.

### 6.1. Develop specific learning strategies to empower women

Participation in learning does not automatically lead to women's empowerment. Providers, facilitators and teachers must offer learning that leads to the changes they seek.

#### Actions

Facilitators and teachers must:

- *Plan learning activities that create routes towards empowerment and change;*
- *Plan incremental strategies and activities that eliminate or reduce the identified attitudinal and cultural barriers which women face and lead to different power relationships;*
- *Mobilise partners from official organisations and the voluntary sector. They can bring more knowledge, resources and public endorsement to the learning. They can also act as referral and advocacy agents;*
- *Offer learning spaces for men alone, in order to address some of the challenges they face and explore their responses to women's empowerment;*
- *Develop shared learning opportunities for women and men to encourage joint understanding and solutions.*

## 6.2. Assess and analyse barriers to participation in learning

Programmes of learning that are designed to empower women must be clear about the barriers and challenges which women face, so that strategies can be designed to respond to them. Identifying and resolving barriers such as distance to travel, male attitudes to women's roles and capabilities, and power structures, open up participation in learning.

### Actions

Learning providers must:

- *Plan and carry out research at the outset to help identify barriers to empowerment and learning; understand what women want or would like to learn and, in the process, raise awareness of the planned learning opportunities;*
- *Develop clarity about the sort of changes aimed for, such as women taking on new responsibilities, becoming members of governance systems or mobilizing for change (for example, securing water supplies, health services or girls' education);*
- *Remove the barriers relating to venues, distance to travel, child or elder care, and timing of learning;*
- *Use the media, including press, radio and television, to raise the public profile of women's learning opportunities and inform women and the wider community;*
- *Work with community leaders, influencers and families to raise awareness and inform them, gaining their support for women's participation in learning.*

## 6.3. Include men in learning for women's empowerment

Inclusion of men in learning addresses the issues of traditional power relationships and structures. Without their involvement, women's attempts to gain empowerment are likely to be unsuccessful.

## Actions

Learning providers must:

- *Develop a clear rationale for including men in learning for women's empowerment;*
- *Assess when, what and how men will learn, including men-only as well as joint activities;*
- *Provide training for facilitators and teachers on gender inequalities and the role of men in empowerment strategies;*
- *Provide training for facilitators and teachers on how to facilitate women-only, men-only and joint learning activities, as well as mediate difficulties;*
- *Work with families, community leaders and officials to gain men's commitment to learning.*

Facilitators and teachers must:

- *Act as mediators in situations which may be challenging and potentially lead to aggression and resentment from men as their power is challenged.*

## 6.4. Design teaching and learning that is relevant, attractive and motivational to women

The learning experiences in which women are involved are vital in facilitating change. The approaches to learning, as well as the content of learning programmes are essential aspects of the empowerment processes. Quality experiences that lead to tangible changes will mean women continue to want to learn and move on to further opportunities.

## Actions

Learning providers must:

- *Involve women in the design, planning, review and refinement of literacy learning;*

- *Identify topics, issues and contexts that are important to women, such as rights to work, access to services, family life and relationships, conflict and violence, health and citizenship activities;*
- *Conduct evaluations to help to demonstrate the value and impact of the programme to wider audiences.*

Facilitators and teachers must:

- *Employ participative approaches that offer women their 'own space' for exploration, expression and discussion;*
- *Value and use speaking and listening as essential aspects of literacy learning. This must include community as well as official languages;*
- *Discover and assess what women already know, do and understand in relation to literacy activities, by adopting 'ethnographic' approaches;*
- *Build in monitoring and evaluation, with women, in order to develop improvements.*

## 6.5. Build the capacity of volunteers and facilitators

Learning which is dull and unrewarding can confirm to women that they are incapable of learning. High-quality learning experiences encourage women's participation, support further learning and earn their respect. This relies heavily on the education, skills and knowledge of facilitators, whether they are volunteers or paid employees. Facilitators of women's literacy learning must not only teach literacy but issues of gender empowerment too.

### Actions

Learning providers must:

- *Train facilitators to provide creative and diverse approaches;*
- *Develop facilitators' own knowledge and understanding of literacy;*

- *Raise facilitators' awareness of gender inequalities, marginalization and women's empowerment; train them in techniques to teach women about these issues too;*
- *Develop the skills of facilitators to negotiate with existing power structures, community influencers and organisations to encourage and support change;*
- *Train and value women volunteers as partner facilitators.*

## 6.6. Provide opportunities for progression

Accessible community learning must lead to change and progression. Without such opportunities, women remain in marginalized situations and their learning becomes a support mechanism for their existing situations rather than a vehicle for empowerment and transformation. Women who become interested and excited by their first learning steps will want more opportunities.

### Actions

Facilitators and teachers must:

- *Ensure that incremental, small-step progression routes are in place within the curriculum, to stretch women's learning;*
- *Review and reflect on learning regularly, and consult with women about their progress and any different approaches and content they might wish for;*
- *Include opportunities for peer-to-peer support and roles of responsibility within the learning setting;*
- *Use role models to talk about their experiences and demonstrate their journeys of empowerment.*

Providers must:

- *Create pathways for learners to become teachers;*
- *Negotiate with partners, community organisations and governance agencies to set up volunteering and design learning that provides the knowledge and skills to train women in these volunteer roles;*

- *Reimburse expenses for those volunteers who cannot afford the costs of involvement, such as travel;*
- *Use partnerships to identify potential opportunities for paid work as well as further learning and support women with training to take up such opportunities.*

## 6.7. Develop policies to empower women through literacy learning

Policies provide frameworks for development and communicate concepts, values and purposes. Women's voices must be heard in the discourses that influence policy development. Policies created for but not by women are not conducive to women's empowerment. Those programmes that were supported by local or national government departments were more likely to secure funding and to achieve broader results, for example in girls' education, children's health or reproductive health.

### Actions

National, regional and local governments must:

- *Develop policies, within frameworks of lifelong learning, which are well funded and include long-term strategies;*
- *Record and communicate concepts of empowerment for women, men and whole communities as part of policy drafting;*
- *Develop and widely communicate the concepts and relevance of adult literacy;*
- *Listen to women and their stories.*

Learning providers must:

- *Monitor, gather data and report to governments, in order to identify whether policies are working, for whom, where and how.*

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