



UIL Policy Brief 3

Gender equality matters: Empowering women through literacy programmes

The global gender equality challenge

Gender equality is a key principle of the global Education for All (EFA) campaign, which was launched in 2000. As the target date for achieving the EFA goals (2015) approaches, it is critically important that Member States intensify efforts to achieve gender equality in education, a basic human right. This is especially urgent with regard to EFA Goal 4 – “Achieving a 50% improvement of levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women”. The percentage of women within the global illiterate population has remained steady over the past 20 years, at 63–64 percent, even as the overall number of illiterates decreased. Of the 149 countries that submitted data on adult literacy to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 68 had achieved gender parity by 2011. In 77 countries, there were more women than men unable to read and write (UIS, 2013). If this situation does not change, it is likely to impede human development and perpetuate poverty in many parts of the world. The empowering role of literacy is uncontested, yet more systemic improvements and concerted efforts are needed to reduce the gender gap.

International and national commitments

There have been many commitments to women’s education, and more specifically literacy:

- The 1979 *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) affirmed literacy as a component in addressing gender equity;
- The *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* from the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) made specific reference to ensuring women’s right to education;
- The essence of the Education for All (EFA) Goals 4 and 5 is to improve levels of adult literacy, especially for women, and achieve gender equality in education, by 2015;
- One focus of UNESCO’s Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE, 2006–2015) has been a concerted effort to empower women and girls. The *Global LIFE Mid-term Evaluation Report 2006–2011: Looking Forward with LIFE* (UIL, 2012) revealed a mixed picture of progress towards internationally agreed targets. Only six of the thirty-two countries in this initiative that have available data recorded a net decrease in the number of non-literate women.
- In the *Belém Framework for Action*, adopted by 144 UNESCO Member States at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in 2009, governments committed themselves to improving “access to, and participation in, the full range of adult learning and education programmes for women, taking account of the particular demands of the gender-specific life-course” (UIL, 2010, p.8).

In 2013, four years after CONFINTEA VI, the 2nd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE II) found significant differences in participation between men and women in adult literacy programmes. In 75



of the 95 countries that submitted data on this issue, more women than men were reported to participate in adult literacy programmes (UIL, 2013a, p.119). Reducing gender-related differences and improving equity in adult literacy was mentioned as a major objective by several member states from all regions. Several of the featured initiatives on improving gender equality through adult literacy and education have a focus on women (Burkina Faso, the Dominican Republic, the Gambia and Honduras), while others focus on men (Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Malawi, Malta and Oman) (ibid., p.120).

Measures to reduce gender disparities in adult literacy

At the International Conference on Achieving Literacy for All (New Delhi, 2013)¹, participants from countries with great challenges in adult literacy reported on different steps they are taking to close the gender gap in adult literacy. India, the host country of the Conference, initiated the five-year Saakshar Bharat initiative in 2009 with a special focus on women. It is planned that, out of the total target of 70 million beneficiaries, 60 million will be women. Afghanistan has also adopted the target of 60 per cent female learners in literacy programmes. In Nigeria, under the National Framework on Girls’ and Women’s Education, innovative women’s entrepreneurship and skills acquisition programmes have been set up. The Indonesian delegate reported on

1 The International Conference on Achieving Literacy for All, organized by the National Literacy Mission Authority (NLMA), India, along with UNESCO and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in New Delhi in July 2013, brought together delegates from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste to discuss, among other topics, how to effectively address gender disparities in and through literacy.

innovative programmes such as *Mother's Newspaper*, where women improve their writing skills through citizen journalism. Other Indonesian programmes, such as *Women's Empowerment-oriented Life Skills Learning*, *Women's Education for Sustainable Development* and *Entrepreneurship Skills and Literacy* enhance women's ability to utilize local resources to generate an income. One of the goals of the Timor-Leste National Development Plan, which is guiding the country's literacy acceleration programmes, is to promote gender equity and empower women.

Mutually reinforcing interactions between factors such as gender, poverty, ethnicity and geographic location can create cycles of disadvantage in education. Integrated strategies which consider the multiple factors that cause disadvantage can help to break such cycles. While rural-urban rather than gender disparity is the main factor influencing literacy in Brazil, the *Literate Brazil* programme² has managed to reach 1.5 million young people and adults annually since 2003 with such an integrated strategy. The rural-urban divide is also a major issue in Nepal, and serves to deepen existing gender disparities. The strategy to link literacy with income-generating activities has given rural women more decision-making control. This approach has resulted in the establishment of 200 women's cooperatives. Following a similar rationale, literacy programmes combined with micro-credit systems have helped to empower women in Sri Lanka.

In Egypt, literacy learning has been linked to other development issues such as health, in order to make it relevant for women. Bhutan, which has many difficult-to-reach settlements, is moving towards more decentralized, flexible and mobile approaches to learning. Offering literacy learning opportunities to mothers while they wait for their children to finish classes, has proven to be a successful practice in reaching non-literate women.

Empowering women through literacy programmes

Women face considerable barriers to accessing learning opportunities. However, there are also stories of success, hope and possibility which show how literacy learning can support the empowerment of women, families, communities, and, ultimately, entire societies. A number of literacy programmes that directly target women or aim at reducing gender disparities have been effectively implemented around the world. Several of them are documented on UNESCO's Effective Literacy and Numeracy Practices Database³ (LitBase). They were analysed, together with other examples, to identify key factors that affect success. These best-practice examples may inform responses to identified challenges in other places (UIL, 2013b).⁴

² For more information on this and other programmes mentioned in the following text see UNESCO's LitBase: <http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ The programme examples mentioned in the following text are presented in UIL, 2013b (<http://bit.ly/1d5q0Yf>) or on LitBase.

Empowerment means different things for women in different situations. However, it is important to develop a shared understanding in order to implement empowerment at grassroots level. Sometimes, women need to meet each other without men. For example, women's organisations, such as *Nirantar*⁵ in India, are creating spaces for women to learn and interact in a private and trusted environment. In many contexts, men, too, must meet to reflect on the issues related to the empowerment of women. The *Fathers' Support Programme* in Turkey is an example of how men can be encouraged to discuss changes in their family roles. The *Community Empowerment Model* of the NGO *Tostan*, which is implemented in Senegal and seven other African countries, stipulates that at least nine of the 17 members of *Community Management Committees* are women. This has allowed for shifts in traditional power bases and for women to take on new responsibilities.

Traditional beliefs can create huge barriers to learning for women. Participation can also be hindered by distance, insecurity and language.

It is crucial that men are involved in the transformative process if they control and exercise power. The same is true for the involvement of whole communities to change power relationships and traditional power structures. The bi-lingual programme on reproductive health in Bolivia empowered women to assert their rights. This was the result of women and men reaching greater understanding about, and respect for, each other's bodies, lives and attitudes. Community-based learning opportunities such as those offered in the *Literacy and Life Skills Programme* in Indonesia, organized in faith-based venues such as mosques, madrasahs and churches, help to make learning spaces safe and within easy reach.



Literacy learning is not always attractive, motivational and relevant for women. The need to link the immediate learning needs with the longer-term strategic objectives of empowerment and gender equality poses time and resource challenges. Programmes are successful in engaging women in learning when they offer literacy classes related to their needs and gain the support for women's education of the wider community, including family members. In a Senegalese literacy programme⁶, women learned how

⁵ www.nirantar.net

⁶ NESAP Project (UIL, 2013b, p. 32–35)



to improve the nutrition of their babies. The work of the Turkish *Mother-Child Education Foundation* used women's desire to offer their children the best start in life to engage them in learning. Some initiatives identified a need which was not directly named as literacy. Examples include the women's reproductive health programme in Bolivia and *Nirantar's* work on women's employment rights in India. Some women might not have responded to a call for participation in literacy learning, if this wider purpose had not been addressed. When women form self-help groups or associate through such development-oriented programmes, they tend to appreciate the opportunity more, and demand further learning opportunities.

Very often opportunities to progress beyond the basic literacy level are limited in rural areas. There is, therefore, an urgent need to influence policies at national, sub-national and local levels. However, women are largely absent or invisible in political decision-making, management and governance activities. In Nepal and Brazil, women have been trained as volunteer community facilitators to take on community education responsibilities. Providing training opportunities to progress from being a member of the group to becoming a supervisor was regarded as an essential aspect of empowerment in India. Young women in Indonesia have been offered opportunities by the Ministry of National Education to gain equivalent qualifications to formal education. In Nepal, women were supported by the *Raising her Voice* programme in becoming members of school management committees. Developing advocacy skills, such as those demonstrated by the women participating in *Reflect* learning circles in Sierra Leone, can lead to the establishment of new community services in areas such as health and water. In India women acquired knowledge of their rights and then challenged authorities over the denial of these rights.

Literacy alone does not empower women to create and participate in change. However, literacy, as part of policies and programmes that promote equality in all aspects of life and from a lifelong learning perspective, plays a vital role in changing the lives of millions of women who have received little or no education. Experience indicates that there are no quick fixes. The greatest impact is generated by programmes that are part of lifelong learning policies and which are financially supported over many years.

Recommendations for action

Based on analysis of the aforementioned experiences and developments, the following recommendations for concrete action to be taken by facilitators, educators, providers of literacy programmes, and local and national governments may be formulated:

- Facilitators should be trained to develop specific empowering learning strategies linked to opportunities for progression within lifelong learning systems.
- Small-step progression that creates routes towards empowerment and change, as well as opportunities for the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge and skills, should be part of such strategies.
- Learning providers should assess, analyse and remove barriers to women's participation in learning. For this purpose, they should carry out research and needs assessments, use the media, and work with community leaders, influencers and families to gain their support.
- The involvement of men is a key requirement for successful change processes.
- It is critical to design learning opportunities that are relevant, attractive and motivational to women. This means that women need to be involved in the design, planning, review and evaluation of literacy learning. This also requires the professional development of programme providers and educators.
- The training of facilitators should include understanding of issues related to gender equality, creative empowerment strategies for men and women, skills to negotiate with existing power structures, community influencers and organisations to support change.
- National and local governments should develop policies from a lifelong learning perspective, to empower women through literacy learning and further learning opportunities. In doing so, they must listen to women, their needs and their stories.

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