CASE STUDY 14

ICH safeguarding and inclusive social development: literacy through oral poetry in Yemen

The example provided here shows how using ICH expressions for promoting literacy can contribute to gender equity and improve social cohesion.

In Yemen, as in many Arabic-speaking countries, rural people above the age of 35 still commonly improvise short poems that they use in daily life and conversation, as well as in conflict mediation. But while some genres of men’s poetry have been promoted and more widely disseminated in recent years, women’s sung poems, a traditional form of female public expression, are rarely heard any more. This is part of a progressive loss of women’s voice within the public sphere over the past thirty years. Women’s oral poetry traditions are sometimes denigrated as old-fashioned and unsophisticated. Women’s poetry has also been depicted as un-Islamic in some regions of the country.

Between 2002 and 2003 Dr Najwa Adra piloted an education project called ‘Literacy through Poetry’ for adults in Yemen based on the use of stories, poems and rhyming proverbs in local dialects, drawing class content from the local culture. It aimed to address the high illiteracy rate (up to 80 per cent) among rural women in Yemen. Literacy is essential for performing daily tasks, such as taking medication or applying pesticides safely, using a mobile phone, navigating urban environments, reading letters from migrant kin and acquiring information about better farming methods; it also enables further education. When asked why they wished to become literate, women often quoted an Arabic proverb – ‘Learning is a woman’s weapon’. It was also hoped that recognizing and affirming women’s poetry would encourage younger women to revive and continue their mothers’ poetic traditions, thereby empowering women in the public sphere.

Funded by the World Bank and the Social Fund for Development (SFD), the pilot project offered classes in several rural and urban locations near the capital, Sanaa. The classes were part-time and were run over nine months. Some 200 learners were enrolled in the course and 154 learners completed it. Maritza Arrastea and Fatiha Makloufi developed the curriculum. Secondary school graduates who lived in the rural farming communities were trained to deliver the course.

Dr Adra describes the project as follows:

Classes began with a discussion of a photograph of a scene familiar to the students or a topic of their choice. Students were encouraged to insert poetry and proverbs into their discussion, as is their custom when discussing issues of importance to them. With the teacher’s help, the class developed a short story based on the discussion. This story, which was written on large paper taped to the wall, along with poems and proverbs generated by the discussion, became the text through which students learned to recognize and read phrases, words and letters of the alphabet. In order to reinforce letter and word recognition, texts often focused on particular letters, words or syllables.

Texts were first written in the local dialect spoken in the community. When students developed word and letter recognition, rules of standard written Arabic were introduced. (They need to know standard written Arabic because published materials and media messages are phrased in standard Arabic.) Each text was typed, photocopied and returned to the students, so that they could learn to read their stories and poems in print as well as handwritten form. Finally, the typed texts of each class were collected and bound into a book. Each student who completed the course was given a book that she helped write.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The pilot project faced resistance in some quarters. Some young men objected to women’s education; they vandalized the classroom in one village. Unexpectedly, some rural women initially objected to the use of oral poetry as a teaching tool because they viewed it as unsophisticated.

Once these problems were addressed, the pilot had a higher success rate than other available models of adult literacy education – essentially a compressed version of the children’s school curriculum – that relied on rote learning. Learners were empowered to participate in national elections, and initiated health interventions in two of the pilot villages. They reported that they were accorded more respect within their families and they demonstrated greater interest in their children’s schoolwork. The demand for adult women’s education increased in all the pilot communities. In the second year, the project was funded and implemented by the Yemeni Social Fund for Development with no help from outside consultants.

The Yemeni Ministry of Education has not yet authorized further classes using this method in spite of continuing demand and adequate funding. Nevertheless, the method could be widely applicable in other contexts. In 2007 the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) in Tunisia recognized the project as an example of ‘best practice in women’s empowerment’.

For further information:

* Adra, N. 1998. ‘Learning through Heritage, Literacy through Poetry’. Adult Education and Development, No. 70.
* ——. 2004. ‘Literacy through Poetry: A Pilot Project for Women in the Republic of Yemen’. Women’s Studies Quarterly, Vol. 32, Nos. 1 & 2, pp. 226–43. (Available as pdf at: http://www.najwaadra.net/adrawsq.pdf)
* UNESCO website: http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=4&programme=25

1. . N. Adra, 1998, ‘Learning through Heritage, Literacy through Poetry’, Adult Education and Development, No. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)