



*Reflections*

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## **Adult Literacy and Women: A Present Account**

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**D***ialogues in Social Justice: An Adult Education Journal* appears at a time when promises and challenges linked to globalization have perhaps most affected the education of marginalized adults in many developing countries. Below I address four of the most crucial trends regarding adult literacy and why the focus should be on women.

### **The demise of adult literacy as a core development indicator**

**F**or many years, adult literacy was considered key to development and thus counted as an indicator in the Human Development Index (HDI), a measure developed by the United Nations Development Program to capture human progress. The HDI comprised three indicators: GDP per capita, education, and life expectancy at birth. Education in turn consisted of two indicators: the rate of adult literacy (which received 2/3 of the education index weight) and the combined gross enrollment rate for all levels of education (which received 1/3 of the education index weight). In 2013, however, after consultation with other agencies, UNDP decided to drop adult literacy. The education index today comprises two indicators, both related to formal education: mean years of schooling (defined as the time spent in school by adults 25 and older) and expected years of schooling (defined as the number years of schooling a child of entrance age can expect if the prevailing patterns of age-specific enrollment persist through time).

According to a UNDP official, what precipitated UNDP's decision to drop literacy from the Human Development Index is the advice it received from UNESCO (UIS) statisticians, academics from Oxford and Harvard, and representatives from several international agencies (but not from developing countries), who expressed the view that literacy is a "useless indicator" since the yes/no answer to the ability to read and write question yields very imprecise results. Furthermore, they felt that the adult literacy indicator no longer discriminated among countries—an important purpose of indicators—because the levels of schooling are now very high, as universal primary education was being reached in most countries.

It should be obvious that "mean years of schooling" fails to capture the literacy levels of those adults who never went to school or dropped after a few years—a sizable number, even today. This indicator does not take into account the large numbers of out-of-school young people under 25 who are not yet literate and

who comprise the bulk of literacy students, seeking a second-chance education. Mean years of schooling is also an imprecise measure of literacy because it makes the assumption that all those who passed through formal education learned to read.

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The decision to abandon adult literacy as an HDI indicator is consequential, and yet it seems to go unnoticed in UNESCO. Losing adult literacy as a *core referent* erases official concern for a key and persistent problem women face in developing countries, dismisses the reality of Africa and South/West Asia—critical world regions, and ignores the situation of growing numbers of children and adults in post-conflict and refugee situations. It can be categorically asserted that the abandonment of literacy as a core indicator will generate even greater disregard by governments for this important knowledge dimension.

### **The decline of attention to print literacy**

**E**ducation for All (EFA) objectives, implemented over the past 20 years, resulted in increased primary enrollment, almost universal in many countries. There were also improvements in access to secondary education although rates of enrollment at that level continue to be quite low in many parts of the world. The literacy goals contained in EFA, however, received weak attention and were far from being reached (UNESCO, 2015).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a major global policy that will orient public policy during the next 15 years, seek to continue EFA education goals. Among the currently proposed SDGs, Goal 4 deals with education and includes recognition of the importance of both youth and adult literacy. Nonetheless, literacy appears as a concern only after consideration of all levels of formal education, which—again—reflects the low priority assigned to literacy. The most recent document on SDG targets and indicators (UNESCO/UIS, 2015) identifies literacy as a target but its main indicator is circumscribed to the 15-24 years of age group.

Information about the developing countries themselves indicate that very few countries develop national plans for non-formal education, which is the main modality for literacy provision. Only a few bilateral agencies express concern for adult education, among these notably is Germany, which works through its Adult Education Association (DVV). DVV supports such areas as literacy and basic education, vocational training, global and intercultural learning, environmental education and sustainable development, migration and integration, refugee work, health education, conflict prevention, and democratic education. Its 2014 budget for adult education grants amounted to \$15.6 million (DVV, 2014)—a very small amount for the scope of its activities.

### **Women and illiteracy**

**W**omen continue to present two-thirds of the world's illiterate—i.e., those unable to deal with the basic demands of reading and writing in the contemporary world. Adult illiterates comprise a group whose previous social marginalization prevented them from having access to the regular educational system. Most illiterate persons are poor, often live in rural or deprived urban areas, and earn low salaries, usually characterized by long hours of harsh manual work. Illiterate women, in particular, are not only poor but generally find themselves in demanding situations of caregiving and housekeeping for spouses and children. With limited time and opportunity to benefit from

literacy classes, they remain illiterate, a condition that accounts significantly for the inter-generational reproduction of illiteracy.

Substantial research has documented the positive outcomes associated with women's literacy (meaning specifically the ability to read and write as opposed to years of education in general). These benefits include greater self-esteem and self-confidence, improved roles in decision-making at home and community, enlarged social networks, deeper awareness of their social environment, and enhanced understanding of the importance of education for their children (Stromquist, 2009). In terms of social and personal benefits, these are solid reasons to support women's literacy.

Today the pervasive internal conflict in Middle East countries and the remnants of conflict in several African countries are generating large number of refugees, many of them women and children, thus creating displacement and unsafe environments with very limited access to print. Refugee children often face interruptions for several years in their education, which further adds to the stubborn proportion of illiterates.

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The intergenerational reproduction of illiteracy is a persistent phenomenon that strikes many developing countries, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa and South/West Asia, where a combination of limited infrastructure and restrictive norms regarding public space pose particular challenges for women. Against these stark realities, many nations and development agencies continue to exhibit the narrow belief that simply providing formal education to the young will somehow diminish adult illiteracy. This view ignores empirical evidence about the significant failure rates to complete primary education in several regions of the world, which means that the

formal system is still generating illiterates, whose education will have to be provided later through reading and writing programs for them.

Literacy is especially important for women because it can be a major tool for their emancipation, and it should not be forgotten that many do not have a voice of their own. Literacy programs in the hands of women-led NGOs with knowledge of non-formal education methodologies and a transformative vision can—and have been—major institutions for successful literacy initiatives. The Action Agenda for Financing for Development, a crucial document which sets the norms for the allocation of development funds for the next decades (UN, 2015), mentions the need for women's empowerment seven times, yet it does not link women's empowerment to literacy. Moreover, it makes the reference only in association with formal education.

On a related issue, it must be noted that the Gender Inequality Index (GII), introduced by UNDP in 2010, considers three indicators: reproductive health, labor market participation, and empowerment. Two indicators have been selected to measure women's empowerment: share of parliamentary seats and higher education attainment, the latter defined as education attainment of secondary level and above. While it makes sense to measure higher levels of education, the disregard for the presence of illiteracy makes this crucial gender problem invisible. So we now have a compound problem with the absence of literacy as an indicator in two measures with extremely crucial global consequences: the HDI and the GII.

### Globalization and literacy

The complex phenomenon of globalization has brought among its many impacts new roles for some international agencies: education agenda-setting and in formulation of policies (Robertson, 2012; Milana, 2012). Through the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) and the European Union (EU), much attention is given to education as a means of making countries competitive in the marketplace, a competition that in their view requires “high level knowledge” (CEC, 2007; OECD, 2015). A recent publication sponsored by OECD proposes a new definition of literacy: it is “not just the ability to read simple words” but “the capacity to understand, use and reflect critically on written information, the capacity to reason mathematically and use mathematical concepts, procedures and tools to explain and predict situations, and the capacity to think scientifically and draw evidence-based conclusions” (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2015, p. 21). Such a framing of literacy clearly presumes formal education and even an advanced level, likely university education.

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UNESCO has, since its founding times, been a supporter of education as “indispensable for the dignity of man.” It continues to consider adult education important for “full participation in society” (UNESCO, 1997, pp. 1 and 24) and holds that it should be based on “inclusive, emancipatory, humanistic, and democratic values” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 5). Yet, it can do little to counter the move by more powerful agencies, such as the World Bank, EU, and OECD, toward uncontested priority to employability and the formation of highly skilled workers. With limited financial resources and reduced legitimacy, UNESCO is unable to challenge the policy convergence we see today in favor of higher education.

### Concluding thoughts

In an increasingly competitive world, in which production and consumerism prevail, there is less space for social justice and inclusion. Thus, attention to the plight of marginalized groups, such as poor women, rural populations, ethnic minorities, although still acknowledged in public discourse, is not reflected in concomitant policies. Adult literacy—including programs for women—faces major policy challenges today and, unfortunately, current developments do not provide grounds for an optimistic prognosis of its recovery.

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### **Biography**



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