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## **GENDER APPROACH TO ADULT LITERACY AND BASIC EDUCATION**

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## **Gender Approach to Adult Literacy and Basic Education**

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REPEM**

Social indicators improved in Latin America and The Caribbean during the last decade. As an example, infant mortality decreased and children access to primary education increased.

These advancements have been followed by facts that undermined women's situation, such as unequal income distribution, informal employment and poverty increase, massive women participation with unequal employment conditions, decrease in the quality of life, less and ineffective social spending

Poor women of the continent have made substantial contributions during the last decade with significant participation in solving community problems, organizing efficient grass-root groups, contributing with economic support to their families, and in many cases developing activities that replaced the state social role. (Unicef).

Women's movements have shown substantial capacity to support poor women basic needs and acquire good knowledge to solve community problems through women organizations and networks, replacing in several cases the role of the social state.

Women movement achievements have been significant. The integration of gender proposals in legislation and in many development projects, the recognition of citizenship and civil women rights as well as the ratification of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations Against Women score among the results of their mobilization and work beginning from grass-root organizations. (Unicef op.cit.)

Although there still is no evaluation of its performance, Women's Offices created in various countries of the continent have contributed with a basic platform for knowledge and information on women's situation in the continent and with design actions for their own benefit.

The "feminization of poverty", portrayal of the past decade, stands as background for the nineties which started with comparative successful advances in the process of economic opening, but has only benefited a restricted group of the population. Poverty has rise again, sadly affecting girls, women and the elderly.

Relation between poverty and women education is widely accepted, therefore the macroeconomic situation has to be taken into consideration when we refer to women

illiteracy. The existence of more than 25 million illiterates women in the region broadly illustrates the above relation and figures shall continue to increase, unless structural changes are implemented to overcome the poverty situation that is overruling women educational needs.

### **Illiteracy facts: women fare worse**

Population increase, poverty, economic and political programs far beyond the satisfaction of the population basic needs, in addition, difficulties for school age children to enroll in primary basic education, count among the reasons for illiteracy increase (in absolute numbers) in the world.

Unfortunately, the available data does not provide with an accurate picture of the illiteracy situation around the world. Countries differences on definitions of a literate person, difficulties in data collection and interpretation result, in an under estimation of the current situation.

The UNDP Human Development Report (1993) and the World Bank Report (1993) acknowledge 15% of illiterate women in 9 countries of the region and in 3 countries more than 50% (Guatemala, Honduras and Haiti) with significant disparities among sex and urban/rural areas.

World wide, the illiteracy rate is 25% higher for women compared to men, disparities reach 15% in Latin America and The Caribbean with increasing differences among less industrialized countries and economies based on agriculture production. Central America and Bolivia stands for 20% of disparities between men and women (Cartaya V. 1994)

Moreover, illiterate women are concentrated mainly in rural and marginal urban areas, where social economic inequalities are more evident.

Unfortunately, analysis on women illiteracy lack research and publications, therefore the author takes this opportunity to refer to the situation on the base of the few systematized experiences and research produced by popular educators working with girls and women illiteracy.

### **Why we are illiterate: a critical analysis of girls and women illiteracy**

In our societies, women fare less than men. Since their early ages they have less access to formal education and in many cases to food and health care. This discrimination that starts in early childhood tends to continue along their lives.

In most of the low income homes , women perform reproductive and productive roles leaving to a secondary place the income generation activities. In many cases women from rural and urban areas are also involved with community administration and work ( Moser C. 1991)

Reproductive, productive and community roles are considered as family responsibilities to be assumed by women and because these activities usually take most of their daily time, it is common that women can seldom attend educational activities due to lack of time.

In fact, women with scarce resources and occupied with productive, reproductive and community activities have many difficulties to share their spare time with literacy activities , specially if they are under nourished and in poor health conditions.

Usually times they cannot attend literacy or education activities due to their husbands opposition . Men seldom agrees that women leave home on a regular basis, specially if is late at night or far from home and also sometimes, when activities are developed with mixed groups or if the teacher happens to be a man.

Others obstacles such as religion can constrain women' participation. The fact that some religions subdue women roles to the domestic domain, focuses even more their role as mothers, becoming a burden for its further involvement.

Educators and researchers agree that the main reason for women lack of participation in educational activities is the poverty situation where they have been living since birth. Girls have difficulties to attend formal schools and adult women to participate in literacy, specially if they are at an extreme poverty level and with unfilled basic needs . ( Lind and Johnston 1990, Chlebowska 1991, Ballara 1992).

The "feminization of poverty" is a clear reference to women over representation among the poor. This inequality speaks by itself, in fact women face increasingly risks to become poor because of family rapture, divorce or separation, husband migration, undermining "women social active" <sup>1</sup>

Feminists groups analyze women illiteracy, highlighting as the main responsables, women' subordinate situation and partners fear on women achievement to a more equalitarian position through the increase of the educational level.

Feminists argue that the patriarchal ideology rises obstacles on women participation because society expects certain conducts and behavior to be performed in domestic roles, conducts that relegate women to an inferior situation and assign

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<sup>1</sup> "the access that a person has through their social environment, to resources, services and wealth" Anderson J. 1994:24.

them only "natural" roles such as family care and education. Also the sexual division of work and men control over women sexuality is a impediment for women participation in education. (Stromqvist N. 1991)

Literacy and education contribute to the development of critical thoughts and can jeopardize the expected conducts imposed to women by the society. It is a risk and a threat for those who benefit from women' subordinate position, submissive attitude and unpaid work. Therefore, those who feel threaten, use various means and present several obstacles to hinder women and girls participation .

These issues that are deeply rooted in the patriarchal society and that certainly contributes for a better understanding of the women educational situation, are rarely referred among the reasons underlying their high illiteracy rate, increased drop-outs and difficulties in attending regular educational activities.

Better educated women means more social and economic benefits to their families and the society, literacy and education contributes to women' self-esteem and increases its participation in family and at community levels. But the uncertainty of new behaviors, makes it difficult for men to accept the advantages of an educated partner, specially if the acquired knowledge could weaken his control on the family power

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It is common to hear stories on how men, using a variety of arguments, rise obstacles to women' participation in educational activities. Some husbands can go as far as locking up their wives, using phsicological pressure and even battering them when they are involved in literacy activities.

If learning to read and write helps to rise awareness and is a mean to obtain power, partners should be prepared in sharing it.

**Literacy activities addressed to girls and women and organized by the state and by women NGO's**

Governments usually organize these activities at national or local levels for a population where no distinction are made between men and woman, whereas, women NGO's linked to the feminist movements, implement literacy activities at local levels addressed to girls and women and including as well other activities . Government literacy programs seldom contain a gender approach. Topics present

women performing roles that consolidate the sexual division of work. Women are seen in their traditional roles and if reading and writing is linked to learning skills they emphasize domestic roles such as child care, nutrition, vaccination, family gardens etc.,.

A quick review of literacy programs in Latin America and The Caribbean reveals that home economics and sewing and didactic materials with a sexist orientation are the common topics. Clearly, the programs are based on an organizational model that do not identify women situation neither integrate their needs and concerns .

Women situation are not taken into account. Educational activities are organized in places and with time tables unsuitable for women and girls regular attendance. The learning process is planned and structured in a sequence that assume girls and women regular and permanent attendance and no attention is given in the introduction of innovative and flexible methods adapted to their own learning pace and timetable. Moreover, usually these programs are organized without planning any support services that could ease girls and women's workload and guarantee their regular and permanent participation.

Usually literacy programs organized by Women NGO's and addressed to women and girls are identified as gender and literacy educational activities. They use a feminist approach and focus on women condition and situation, their practical needs and strategic interests.<sup>2</sup> . They work on issues such as subordination, discrimination, sexuality, violence, double and triple working schedule. These programs are locally implemented and the learning processes is linked to other activities such as income generation.

The few analysis that refer to these activities show encouraging results, better than the ones organized by the state. (Ballara 1992) One can assume that the positive results arise from the fact that the organization, topics and methods responds to girls

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<sup>2</sup> The terms women position and condition have been elaborated by Kate Young. Women condition is understood as the material situation that women face ( poverty, lack of education, work loaded, lack of skills, etc) and women position refers to the social and economic place that they have in respect to men.

Women needs and interest concepts have been developed by Maxine Molyneaux (1985)<sup>2</sup>. The author relate "the needs with the function of the social roles that are assigned and determined by use, customs and ideology. Interest is a social category that gives unequal access to resources ( social and economic) that are socially valuable and to the political power " ( cited by Young K. 1991:21).

Practical needs emerge when women have to perform the roles assigned by the sexual division of work. Strategic interest refer to structural issues in relation to women. They represent their needs as a social category wit unequal access to the social economic resources and the political power. It refers to women awareness of their subordinate situation and discrimination and the need and possibilities to change them ( Young K. opposite.)

Practical needs and strategic interests are dependent variables from age, class, race, ethnicity, women life cycle.

and women needs. NGO's should be encouraged to systematize their experiences and identify key issues of success to be included in literacy activities with a gender approach.

Nelly Stromqvist ( 1991) suggests educational proposals with women literacy programs establishing a balance between the knowledge to be achieved and the knowledge they are in need. Stromqvist suggest to include knowledge about how to bargain in an effective way with men; how to make women aware of their oppressive condition; the patriarchal ideology and cultural subordination. Topics such as salary differences, double/triple work schedule could also be added, as well as those that contribute to women' self analysis of their situation .

In a recent publication, several women leaders from the NGO's feminist movement of the continent, have identified some women' basic learning needs. ( see Vargas V., Murillo R. et. al 1994). They suggest that besides giving an answer to women immediate needs, one should included as well, topics such as the pleasure of learning, esthetics and sexual pleasure. Women should learn how to modify their environment so they can have a wider space in the political and social citizenship and in the society in general.

As a further step, Vargas and Murillo sustain that women needs and interests are processes in construction that include negotiations and confrontations with the society and its powers. Therefore, women basic learning needs to include also , "what and how to negotiate, how and when to consider other interests, when and with whom to make alliances ". ( op.cit page 8)

These proposals go beyond women basic learning needs. It rises questions such as which skills should women have and learn, leaving an open space to include among the latter, subjects such as citizenship, democratic practices, personal and social power distribution.

Effective educational activities addressed to women should answer their needs and concerns through participatory approach and women evolvment in all stages of the program. Even if the programs implementation are lengthier and eventually more costly, flexible , dynamic and innovative methods should be considered that are adapted to women learning pace, and timetables that ease girls and women attendance to literacy activities.

Planning literacy activities in small groups increases participants self-steem and linking these activities to sound income generation activities or to a development project makes the learning process more efficient and effective.

Finally women attendance would definitely increase if facilities are created to ease

their workload while attending literacy courses. Therefore programs and services such as food supply, child care and even groups that provide moral support should be organized together or as part of the program implementation .

### **Gender approach to adult literacy activities: issues to be included**

Gender allude to social roles that can be modified or influenced ( gender) and differs from the biological that cannot change. Gender as social category make references and allows analyses of different roles, responsibilities, rights, opportunities and limitations of men and women within the family, community, society and culture.

As Rosario Aguirre explains ( 1993), gender concept refers to a socio-cultural characteristic that can be acquired and changed. It allows the distinction between the biological and the social. For the author, the importance of this concept lays in the emphasis put on men and women relations including socio-cultural and historical features determined by their inter action and their division of functions. These characteristics can be modified in time and change according to the culture.

Gender is not a women synonym , but a term that replace the so called "sex roles". Gender is a term used to make references to women and men social relations.

Meyen W. and Vargas V. (1994:27) underline that " gender implications goes beyond social construction acquired in the relation between sexes. It refers to a wider process: is a concept that pretend to include a group of social processes that are instable and complex, build by and through the related parts (Flax 1990). Therefore is not only a relation between man and women but a constitutive element of a general social relation ( when they are based on differences understood between sexes) expressed by relations nets and social institutions through symbols, norms, social and political organizations and in personal and social subjectivities. Also, is the first form -persistent and recurrent- but not the only one that represent power relations" . ( Scott, 1988)

A substantial element of these thoughts, lays in the relation approach between genders: in time and space individuals tend to develop several social relations ( e.g. nationality, ethnicity, race, gender , etc.) with various responses that sometimes can fail into contradiction.

It acknowledge the plurality among social individuals including the use of several identities and strategies with personal demands for its own space, for a voice in society, and for the satisfaction of their particular demands. This autonomy recognizes diversities, differences and pluralities in social individuals who try to acquire power on their own lives.



These particular demands, as described by Meyer and Vargas, are processed through the social individuals personal and collective actions, and conflicts can appear when the social actor confront, rising obstacles among each others autonomy.

The struggle for autonomy is a learning field that presents topics such as building alliances, how and when to consider other interests, how and what to bargain, how to dialog with society.

For popular education, introducing a **gender approach to adult literacy** means to include subjects on gender relations, social individuals plurality, the concept of autonomy and its conflictive approach between social actors, and alliances and negotiations, and on how to relate with the society.

Therefore among the learning needs to be included in literacy programs, topics such as discussions and information about the genders situation and on how it interrelates within the family, community and in the society, should be focussed on. This would help adults (men and women) to prepare themselves to face with positive attitudes the changes introduced with the new acquired knowledge, and to overcome threats and uncertainty emerged between couples by attitudes and role changes .

A gender approach to adult literacy should also include information about the main topics on women conditions and positions as well as its practical needs and strategic interests.

Gender approach in adult literacy means to include topics about women' and men and their participation in equal conditions in the development process and for the improvement of their life conditions.

Gender approach needs to include the above topics in adults educators training courses, as well as in the teaching and learning materials in order for the participants , men and women, or girls and women only to have opportunities to discuss them .

### **How to implement adult literacy with a gender approach ?**

If the task is to develop activities addressed only to girls and women it would be necessary to study the already existing experiences and identify the key issues of success to be included in the educative process.

To plan adult literacy activities for groups with men and women participation, one has to take into consideration the obstacles and difficulties that women face when joining

mixed groups already addressed in this paper.

If the alternative chosen is to work with mixed groups, it is important to organize at the initial stages of the educational activities, small separated women sub groups as part of the literacy main groups, with the tasks to strengthen the learning process and to discuss women particular problems. This proposal could help to overcome lack of self-esteem, discrimination or even uneasiness related to their participation in mixed groups. As in these groups women may still drag along their feelings of their subordinate situation. These feelings play an important role in their passive attitudes, weak engagement to group discussion or drop-outs.

Using either approach, only with girls and women or in mixed groups, requests studies about what, how and when to introduce the gender issues in literacy activities.

When developing activities at a local level, one should began observing the community genders situation and women positions and interests. Studies with focus on gender relations must be carried out, including expected changes on the family dynamic due to women education, on family and the community views on gender on the power obstacles and on how are alliances established and negotiate.

The above proposals need trained educators in gender issues, well prepared to carry out studies with a participatory approach on the above subjects. Educators need an accurate gender knowledge of the community where they are working, to enable favorable group discussions and analysis on gender issues and to allow the needed changes among participants.

Gender approach should be included in didactic materials and in ease-of-reference support material with discussions guides to be provided to educators to help to build awareness sessions with all participants.

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