

developing countries, there is a high level of female participation. Several studies have indicated that the reasons behind this are the changing social roles of women and men. The gradual increase in the number of female heads of households, due in part to the rising number of men leaving home in search of better job opportunities, gives women the responsibility of supporting the family including taking over agricultural production in rural areas, or by entering the informal or formal labour force. Literacy is seen as a tool that will help women carry out these tasks better, once their basic needs have been met. But whether it is a social pressure, or women's new roles, other personal motivations also play an important part when making decisions.

CHILDCARE, EDUCATION AND FAMILY INCOME These are common reasons given by women, living in industrialized and developing countries in both urban and rural areas, for seeking to become literate. The importance women give to schooling their children for a better future, to providing their children and family with better health care, and the acquisition of income-generating skills, motivate them to take a more active role in literacy activities.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE LITERATE COMMUNITY It is not sufficient to be able to sign documents; women must also fill in forms, contracts and cheques, keep accounts, write letters and read those received from family members who have emigrated, send cheques, receive money, send telegrams, and read recipes and agricultural instructions. In short, women use literacy and numeracy skills for everything that can provide them with greater autonomy in everyday life.

RELIGIOUS REASONS Many indigenous groups associate learning to read and write

with Christianity, reading the holy scriptures and hymns in church. Some studies have found that religious reasons can play an important role in motivating adults to acquire literacy skills.⁴

SOCIAL CHANGE □ In countries undergoing revolutionary changes that include widespread political mobilization in support of literacy, women see this as a way to become actors in the process of change their country is experiencing. Examples are to be found in Cuba, Mozambique, Nicaragua and Tanzania.

Even where these and other motivating factors exist, the obstacles already discussed in this chapter often prevent women benefiting from literacy and, in the case of school-age girls, from enrolling in primary education, a crucially important stage in preventing girls from becoming future illiterates.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN DEVELOPMENT □ A number of studies have demonstrated the effect of women's literacy and education in both social and economic development. Women's literacy enables a better use of family planning and results in a fall in birth rate. While this relationship is not always constant, the results of the study carried out by the Demographic Health Survey (DHS) in 1990 in 28 countries in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Arab states, noted that the tendency for smaller families increased with the educational level of women. The average number of children fell to less than four among women with secondary education. Family planning methods are more widely used in countries such as Botswana, Kenya and Zimbabwe, where over 70 per cent of women have some education.

Women's education plays an important role in child care, especially in relation to infant mortality levels. A study carried out

by the Research Triangle Institute (1990) in 80 developing countries indicated that an increase of 70 per cent in girls' enrolment in primary schools, together with a comparable growth in secondary education, would after 20 years result in a decrease in the infant mortality rate of 40 per 1,000 live births. Such primary and secondary education for women would contribute to a continuation of this decrease, over and above other relevant development inputs such as increased *per capita* income, level of urbanization, medical facilities and male school enrolment. *The State of the World Population* (1990) reported that the results of studies carried out in 46 countries indicated that a one per cent increase in women's literacy rate is three times more effective in reducing infant mortality than a one per cent increase in the number of doctors.

As women's level of education rises, the number of malnourished children declines. DHS (March 1990) found that in Guatemala, where only 65 per cent of the women have had some level of education, the percentage of stunted infants aged 3 to 35 months is over 50 per cent, compared with fewer than 10 per cent in Trinidad and Tobago, where women have a higher level of education. While other factors are relevant, the educational levels of women are of paramount importance.

The same study indicated that pre-natal care and medical treatment at childbirth increases with the mother's level of education. It also has a strong bearing on whether or not children received treatment for diarrhea, one of the major causes of mortality among young children. Use of oral rehydration salts also increases with the mother's education.

Women's literacy has a positive effect on school enrolment and attendance. In Mexico, a study carried out by Muñoz Izquierdo⁵ established that adults who completed literacy courses had more

daughters with some formal education than those who had not finished their studies.

WOMEN IN THE LABOUR FORCE □

The number of women participating in the labour force in the formal sector is directly related to their educational level. The Triangle Research Institute study showed that a 70 per cent increase in primary and secondary education will, after 20 years, lead to a 7.3 per cent increase in women's participation in the labour force. Many researchers have stressed the close association between the level of education and productivity increase in the modern sector of the economy. Nevertheless, the increasing trend towards reducing the number of jobs in the formal sector most directly affects disadvantaged groups such as women.

Women's literacy also increases productivity and self-employment in the informal sector. The trend towards an increase in the number of self-employed women, or of those who work on a sub-contract basis, opens up several possibilities, particularly for those women who are their family's only means of economic support. Examples of successful activities linking literacy with income-earning are found among projects aimed at setting up small enterprises to meet market needs and ensure the continuity of economic activities.

Increased productivity in the agricultural sector is also linked to the educational level of rural women. This is shown by a study on the effects of education on productivity in agriculture in a number of developing countries. This study concluded that four years of primary education (usually considered the minimum level for retaining literacy) increased productivity by 7.4 per cent, with additional benefits in the form of increased modernization of agriculture. Production incentives, marketing facilities, distribution of seeds and fer-

tilizers and rural extension programmes are also important.⁶ Literacy helps people acquire necessary knowledge, make better use of natural resources and protect the environment; it facilitates a change in attitudes that can encourage increased productivity.

LITERACY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT □

The term 'sustainable development' refers to humanity's ability to survive by means of the rational use of renewable resources, by refraining from disrupting the ecosystem or over-exploiting natural resources, and by refraining from activities that destroy cultures or societies and instead allow them to reach their potential.

Because women play an important role in the development process, radical measures to increase literacy will enhance their participation in development and at the same time improve their status. Action

must be taken during the 1990s to increase efforts by the international community and by governments to provide women and girls with full access to education.

Women must be educated in terms of their crucial role in society, whether as producers or reproducers: they are mainly responsible for the care and well-being of their families; they play an important role as educators of future generations; they fulfil economic functions, in both urban and rural areas, that are vital for the survival of the family (the significant increase in number of female heads of household is again noteworthy).

As part of an individual's personal development, literacy is a right to which everyone – women as well as men – should have access. Acquiring it enables women to increase their self-confidence, improve their self-esteem, become aware of their civil rights, improve their income-earning capabilities and to play an active

Ugandan refugees, repatriated from Sudan under a voluntary scheme which helps them to re-establish themselves



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role in family and community decision-making. Literacy is a means for women to participate on equal terms in the process of social development and change, for quantitative and qualitative progress in society: in short, for sustainable development.

While women's literacy promotes sustainable development, and plays a major role in socio-economic change, it must be supported by the necessary structural changes in society.

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