

# FINDING A DEFINITION

**L**iteracy properly understood is not only an initiation in the three Rs but also an apprenticeship in coping with the modern world.

COLIN POWER, UNESCO ASSISTANT  
SECRETARY-GENERAL.<sup>1</sup>

BEFORE WE CAN APPROACH THE SUBJECT in any depth we must first understand what is meant by the term 'literacy', particularly as it relates to industrialized and to developing countries. While the meaning of the term may vary according to the required level of literacy and numeracy, the causes and consequences of illiteracy are nevertheless similar, whether for individuals or societies. Literacy is more than knowing the three Rs.

Literacy is the apprenticeship for the knowledge needed to cope with everyday needs, including the individual's relationship with the surrounding world. Hence literacy and post-literacy activities make up a single education process, and literacy policies and strategies must necessarily include both in one action.

'Functional illiteracy', a term used in industrialized countries to refer to those who possess basic literacy and numeracy skills which are not sufficient for proper functioning – i.e. remaining unable to read or write or to make sense of written material – continues to have negative effects at individual, familial and societal levels and is a formidable obstacle to sustainable development.

## **T**HE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF ILLITERACY

□ These are most acute in developing countries where poverty is generally closely associated with the high illiteracy rate in these countries. Ninety-five per cent of the

illiterates of the world are concentrated in developing countries, especially in South-East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Women are the most affected: one-third are illiterate, compared with one-fifth of men. Among the reasons for this are the economic crisis and adjustment policies implemented during the 1980s, which led governments to make substantial cuts in health and education spending. These measures have also had negative economic results for women, resulting in what is known as the 'feminization of poverty'.<sup>2</sup>

Less investment in the education sector and the feminization of poverty are reflected in fewer schooling opportunities for young women and girls. Socio-cultural factors have aggravated educational deprivation. Extremely poor families tend, when possible, to educate their sons, who are seen as potential providers of greater future income. Young women and girls are therefore relegated to domestic and agricultural tasks. Unequal access to schooling and high drop-out rates are important causes of illiteracy among girls and young women, and their number will increase the already large number of illiterate women if urgent measures are not implemented to solve this problem.

In a literate society, it is necessary to know how to read, write and calculate. Those who lack this knowledge find their options limited and their way of life more difficult. Acquiring literacy allows silent women to find a language and express their needs, interest, and concerns. Literacy activities for and with women motivate the organization of women's groups to support collective demands and to seek active participation in development and a better position in society. In this sense, literacy for women is empowering.

## **L**ITERACY PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN

□ Literacy activities can provide a context and a reason for gathering togeth-

# THE CRISIS

a. barreto  
a. batista  
1988

THE GOVERNMENT'S EXTERNAL DEBT HAS RISEN TO \$38,000,000. HAVING PROMISED TO IMPOSE NEW AUSTERITY MEASURES, THE GOVERNMENT WILL BE ANNOUNCING A NEW CURRENCY DEVALUATION TOMORROW !!

AND IN THE OFFICE...

DID YOU HEAR THE NEWS ABOUT THE DEVALUATION?

WHAT'S THAT? ARE PRICES RISING AGAIN?

PROBABLY, BECAUSE DEVALUATION OCCURS WHEN OUR MONEY LOSES VALUE AGAINST GOLD & THE U.S. \$.

AND WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH OUR EXTERNAL DEBT?

DEBT? WHAT DEBT? I DON'T OWE ANYBODY ANYTHING! I ALWAYS PAY MY BILLS

YOU DO RITA, BUT OUR GOVERNMENT OWES LOTS OF MONEY TO THE IMF AND OTHER FINANCING AGENCIES LIKE THE WORLD BANK AND CITIBANK

THE DEBT ORIGINATED WITH LOANS TAKEN OUT YEARS AGO BY THIRD WORLD GOVERNMENTS SO THAT THEY COULD INVEST IN LARGE-SCALE PROJECTS

AH! BUT THAT'S THE GOVERNMENT'S DEBT, NOT OURS.

YES, BUT THE DEBT AFFECTS ALL OF US DIRECTLY

HOW?

DEVALUATION AND THE OTHER AUSTERITY MEASURES ARE A RESULT OF THE DEBT. OUR COUNTRIES DON'T HAVE ENOUGH MONEY, BECAUSE THEY ARE PAYING OFF THEIR LOANS, SO THE GOVERNMENT HAS TO REDUCE PUBLIC SERVICES...

...SUCH AS HOUSING, HEALTH, EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES, AFFECTING WOMEN THE MOST BECAUSE THEY ARE THE POOREST...

GULP!

REALLY!

OFFICE

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE? GET TO WORK! THE DEVALUATION HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU

er to discuss problems and seek solutions. Women often find it easier to talk freely and share their experiences when no men are present. For many women, in both South and North, literacy programmes are an important social experience which also provide support for dealing with their personal concerns. They help to break the isolation deriving from their home environment or employment. Relations developed in such groups support women in learning how to ask for help when needed. In the long run, participating women gain more self-confidence and self-esteem.

Such activities also provide an alternative for those who find it difficult to engage in other courses, either because cultural or religious patterns hamper their participation in mixed groups or because lack of time makes it difficult for them to cope with a regular schedule. Learning to

read, write and calculate makes women self-reliant; able to make decisions concerning their own lives, take better care of themselves and their family, protect the environment and natural resources, support their children's education and get better jobs.

Nonetheless, women in developing countries do not always regard literacy as an immediate and important need. Their condition of oppression and poverty is often an obstacle to understanding that being literate could help them to achieve a higher status in their community. In such cases, activities should first be organized to solve their survival needs. Later, at the participants' request, a literacy course can be launched to enhance their standing in the community.

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1. Colin Power, UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Education, International Literacy Year 1990. in *ILY: A Year of Opportunity*.

2. For more information on the subject see Jeanne Vickers (1991) *Women and World Development*. Zed Books. London.

## 2 THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

**T**he statistics highlight the *de facto* discrimination against women in education. Various forms of patriarchal and economic oppression subordinate women according to the history and culture of each country and region... Lack of access to school accounts for most adult illiteracy. The traditional sex division of roles in the family and the society exclude most girls from learning literacy through schooling.<sup>1</sup>

DESPITE ALL EFFORTS, in 1990 there were 948 million illiterates in the world – a figure which has not changed substantially since 1985. If efforts to deal with the problem are not intensified, projections for the year 2000 indicate at best only a very slight decrease (see Table 2.1).

Rapid population growth, poverty and certain political and economic mechanisms in society, all linked to incomplete coverage of primary education for school-age children, are at the root of the constant increase in the absolute numbers of illiterates in the world.

It is a fact that more women than men are illiterate, and there are many reasons for this. In most societies women have lower status than men. From childhood on they have less access to education, and sometimes to food and health care. As adults, not only do they frequently receive less education, but work longer hours, have lower incomes and little or no access to ownership of property.

**Discrimination against females starts early. In many developing countries more girls than boys die between the ages of one and four, a stark contrast with the industrialized countries, where deaths of**

**boys are more than 20 per cent higher than those of girls.<sup>2</sup>**

In all the developing countries, the percentage of literate women is lower than that of literate men. Socio-cultural factors and discrimination against women are the basis of this situation. Such discrimination can take different forms, as the following example shows.

Girls receive less health care and food than boys. A study in Bangladesh showed that 14 per cent of girls, as against 5 per cent of boys, are malnourished. Women typically work about 25 per cent more hours than men, but their total remuneration is less.<sup>3</sup> Women are usually concentrated either in the rural areas or in the informal sector of urban areas, where pay levels tend to be lower than in the formal sector of the economy. Gender-specific inequalities are reinforced by unequal access to education. Girls often are simply not sent to school, or drop out earlier, thereby increasing the level of illiteracy among women.

This chapter examines gender-specific discrimination and how it is reflected in the educational statistics, with particular reference to developing countries, and then goes on to assess the social benefit to be gained from literacy for women in terms of sustainable development. It will stress the fact that, despite the motivation manifested by numerous women wishing to participate in literacy programmes, many obstacles often prevent their full participation.

**T**HE LITERACY GAP □ According to UNESCO, in 1990 there were 917 million adult illiterates in developing countries (97 per cent of the world's illiterate population), and a relatively insignificant number, 32 million (3 per cent) in the 'developed' or industrialized countries, as can be seen in Table 2.1.