

Women's Right to Literacy

Advocating women's right to access learning literacy through international development





The First Step: Women learn to read and write

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK - TAKE PART IN PUBLIC LIFE

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Foreword

“...I encourage each and every one of you to do what you can do to support the world’s women to achieve their potential and break down the barriers of discrimination.”¹

Gender equalities, greater participation by women in community and economic activities, as well as in their health and that of their families, could all be supported, enhanced and changed by literacy learning. In addition, the effectiveness of girls’ education would be increased through the development of women’s literacy.

I support these calls for action by The Literacy Working Group in the drive towards achieving the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals, in 2015. I call upon the key development agencies and organisations to take up the challenges.

Mary,

Baroness Mary T Goudie
September 2012

¹www.baronessgoudie.com/2012/03/12/women-in-society/

The Literacy Working Group

The Literacy Working Group is a small, dedicated group of volunteers, associated with the Global Campaign for Education, UK and drawn from different organisations concerned with education and international development, as well as several highly experienced professionals. We advocate that learning literacy is a global human right, which contributes to personal, community, familial and economic development as well as social and political engagement.

We call upon international development organisations and agencies to:

- 1** develop strategies for improving women's access to learning literacy and numeracy, through financial and technical support and policy development. We urge governments in the global South to dedicate at least 3 per cent of their national education sector budgets to adult literacy programming, with a special emphasis on women's literacy;
- 2** provide technical and resource support to developing countries in order to build upon their developments in family and intergenerational learning, taking particular account of their association with early years and primary education. This will contribute to the effectiveness and impact of girls' education;
- 3** offer technical assistance to heighten and accelerate the effectiveness of social and economic development policies and programmes, through strategies which integrate women's literacy in vocational and enterprise skills training, as well as in health information and training; and
- 4** ensure that teacher-training curricula, both initial and in-service, give adequate attention and time to teachers' own literacy development. This will improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning across all subjects and help in the development of positive role models for both women and girls.

Why women? Why literacy?

514 million women throughout the world are illiterate; many are unable to access effective educational programmes.

“Literacy is a right, indeed an essential part of the right of every individual ... it is also a means to achieving other human rights.”²

“...it is imperative that we redouble efforts to reduce illiteracy by 50 per cent from 2000 levels by 2015 ... focusing literacy actions on women and highly disadvantaged populations...”³

In 41 countries women are twice as likely as men to be illiterate.⁴ With over 115 million children out of school, the majority of whom are girls, the need for learning opportunities in literacy, numeracy and lifelong learning amongst women will continue for some time to come.

Tackling gender inequality and addressing the rights of women are closely tied to enhancing knowledge, power and confidence. Little or no schooling has a negative effect on women's personal development and the health and well-being of their families and communities. It limits income and employment opportunities as well as their ability to help in their children's education. Low levels of literacy can make it difficult for women to effectively participate in national and local development programmes and political activities.

²UNESCO (2005) *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006. Education for All: Literacy for Life*, p. 31. Paris: UNESCO. At: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001416/141639e.pdf> [accessed August 2012]

³UNESCO (2010) *Belem Framework for Action: Harnessing the Power and Potential of Adult Learning and Education for a Viable Future*, p. 6. Hamburg: UNESCO. At: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001877/187789m.pdf> [accessed August 2012]

⁴Global Campaign for Education (2011) *From Rhetoric to Results: Closing the Global Education Gap for the World's Girls and Women*, p. 11. At: www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/rhetoric-results-closing-global-education-gap-world%E2%80%99s-girls-and-women [accessed August 2012]

Research has documented the impact of women's education, on their health and that of their children:

“Girls who have been educated are likely to marry later and to have smaller and healthier families. Educated women can recognize the importance of health care and know how to seek it for themselves and their children. Education helps girls and women to know their rights and to gain confidence to claim them.”⁵

Additionally, educated women and girls are less likely to be infected by HIV, and be subject to human trafficking. They are more likely to make effective contributions to the family economy.⁶

Literacy contributes to self-fulfilment. Educated women demonstrate increased confidence and self-esteem, take control of their health, and are more likely to insist on



⁵UNPFA (n.d.) 'Promoting gender equality: Empowering women through education'. At: www.unfpa.org/gender/empowerment2.htm [accessed August 2012]

⁶www.dosomething.org [accessed August 2012]

⁷Leach, F. (2000) 'Gender implications of development agency policies on education and training', *International Journal of Educational Development*, 20(4): 333–47.

the education of their daughters and grand-daughters. A literate woman is better equipped to access financial services through gaining the necessary, associated literacy practices of reading agreements, signing documents and keeping records and accounts.

In addition to their roles as wives and mothers, many women have personal, social and economic imperatives and aspirations. Thus a single literacy learning programme for women cannot meet all of their many and varied needs and aspirations. A variety of initiatives will be required

to reflect, “the complex picture which is the reality of women’s lives.”⁷

We recognise that there are many programmes, projects and initiatives which have attempted to address women’s literacy. However a lack of committed policies, dedicated resources, technical expertise and the low quality of learning experiences has led to minimal impact and continuity.

Education for All cannot be limited to schooling for young people; Education for All must include Education for All Women.

We therefore call upon UNESCO to join with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), in working with the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Banks, the European Union, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Islamic Development Bank, as well as with bilateral agencies financing economic and social development.

We urge them to develop strategies for improving women’s access to learning literacy and numeracy, through financial and technical support and policy development. We urge governments in the global South, to dedicate at least 3 per cent of their national education sector budgets to adult literacy programming, with a special emphasis on women’s literacy.

CALL FOR ACTION

1

Family learning and intergenerational learning help women and girls

Family learning and intergenerational approaches to literacy learning have been used in many countries across the world, to enable parents and other family members to develop their own skills and support the vital learning of their children. 'Joining the loop' in this way enables whole communities to engage in the educational process and builds sustainably on the considerable achievements of Universal Primary Education policies and programmes.⁸

Dynamic examples of family learning and literacy can be found in Uganda, Namibia, Sierra Leone, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa, as well as in countries in the industrialised North such as USA, Norway and the United Kingdom. Some models include children's and adults' separate education as well as both learning together. Interventions have resulted in increased pupil engagement, learning and achievement, contributed to raising the educational achievement levels of the whole population, and proved an important factor in the retention and success of girls.



⁸See, for example, British Association for Literacy in Development in Sierra Leone and South Africa (www.balid.org.uk).

Family learning approaches offer the opportunity for governments to build vital momentum in the countdown to the Education For All Goals 2015. They strengthen primary school learning, and meet policy commitments to reach the poorest and most vulnerable members of society.

A new OECD report indicates how parental involvement in education is pivotal for the success of children not only in school but beyond.⁹ Approaches to learning which address the needs of adults and children simultaneously have a double benefit. Policies and programmes that see education as the development of whole populations rather than only of initial schooling, assist in increasing impact and generating greater returns on investment.



We urge funding partners to provide technical and resource support to developing countries in order to build upon their developments in family and intergenerational learning, taking particular account of their association with early years and primary education. This will contribute to the effectiveness and impact of girls' education.

CALL FOR ACTION

2

⁹OECD (2012) *Let's Read Them a Story! The Parent Factor in Education*. Paris: PISA, OECD Publishing. At: www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisa2009/50298645.pdf [accessed August 2012].

Integrated and embedded approaches lead to success

Adult literacy is of great concern to industrialised countries, as indicated by the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).¹⁰ These vital skills must also be promoted more widely in the global South, where secondary, technical and vocational education systems are growing. However, waiting for children to contribute to their communities and economies will take a long time; adults are able to make a difference immediately.

Women play key roles in the poorest countries of the world, through subsistence farming, trading in micro-enterprises, in the health and hygiene of their families as well as in the schooling of their children. They are vulnerable to the influences of climate, and plant or animal disease as well as changes in land ownership, dam

building, deforestation or mineral exploitation. They learn by observing, doing, speaking and listening but knowing how to use their existing skills and knowledge to best effect demands access to literacy. They may need to read solutions to agricultural disease and failing crops; keep ledgers and accounts in micro-credit unions, write posters and letters of protest or address planned changes and proposals. Without literacy, millions of women, and their families, can be vulnerable to the dominance of others.

Literacy learning is particularly effective when it is linked to, integrated with or embedded in other learning. Such approaches produce stronger outcomes in both literacy and vocational education and training.¹¹ Women who want to be successful traders, efficient farmers, contribute to school governance and rear healthy children must be equipped with the necessary, associated literacy skills.

¹⁰ www.oecd.org/edu/highereducationandadultlearning/piaacprogrammeoftheinternationalassessmentofadultcompetencies.htm [accessed August 2012].

¹¹ For example, Casey, H. et al. (2006) *"You Wouldn't Expect a Maths Teacher to Teach Plastering": Embedding Literacy, Language and Numeracy in Post-16 Vocational Programmes – The Impact on Learning and Achievement*. London: NRDC. At: www.nrdc.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_3188.pdf [accessed August 2012].

Integrating women's literacy and health initiatives

There is strong evidence to show that women's literacy contributes to improving their own health and life expectancy, as well as that of their children:


- “educated women are more likely to use health clinics and return to the clinic if their children's health does not improve.
- educated women tend to begin their families at a later age and have fewer, healthier children.
- a 1% rise in women's literacy is 3 times more likely to reduce deaths in children than a 1% rise in the number of doctors. (Based upon a United Nations study of 46 countries.)
- for women, 4 to 6 years of education led to a 20% drop in infant deaths.”¹²

However, such information has been used often to argue only the case for sending girls to school – overlooking the needs of their mothers and older women who lost out on education when they were younger. Through their own literacy learning, women contribute more to their children's education and literacy.

Literacy for women has a noticeable ‘ripple effect’ within the whole community as they invest new skills, knowledge and resources for the benefit of their families. Many programmes have focused on functional literacy – linking literacy learning to new knowledge about health, nutrition and family planning. Women read about the advantages of improved sanitation, for instance, then learn how to construct a latrine at their home.



¹²SIL International: www.sil.org/literacy/wom_lit.htm [accessed August 2012].



But literacy alone is not sufficient. Women may learn to read information but if they are unable to put this into practice, benefits will be limited. Providing and opening up access to health services, which are linked with literacy programmes, would have the greatest impact on women's lives. Their families would also benefit and returns on the investments in health would be increased. Literacy learning and social programmes must be integrated.

The answer to improving women's health and well-being lies within and beyond a functional approach to adult literacy. Programmes based on Freirean approaches to literacy as empowerment – such as the Reflect approach¹³ – have offered women the opportunity to reflect on their situations and to act for change, for example on health issues. Ethnographic approaches, such as LETTER,¹⁴ can

build upon the kinds of local literacy practices people have already developed.

Benefits lie not only in literacy related to health issues but also in the confidence, mobility and improvements in self-esteem that women can gain through learning together in the safe space of an adult literacy group. Women begin to challenge unequal relationships between women and men, and tackle hidden health problems associated with gender violence. The World Bank's 2012 World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development emphasises how the improvements in women's education need to be accompanied by improvements in their rights and voice within society.¹⁵ With the growth of information and technology communications in rural areas, women's access to learning opportunities has increased too.

CALL FOR ACTION

3

We call upon aid agencies, banks, and development organisations to provide technical assistance to heighten and accelerate the effectiveness of social and economic development policies and programmes through strategies which integrate women's literacy in vocational and enterprise skills training, as well as in health information and training.

¹³www.reflect-action.org

¹⁴Uppingham Seminars: www.uppinghamseminars.co.uk/page3.htm [accessed 2012].

¹⁵World Bank (2012) *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank. At: <http://go.worldbank.org/CQCT-MSFI40> [accessed August 2012]

The quality of learning depends upon good teachers

The poor quality of much education provision in developing countries contributes to poor retention amongst school pupils as well as prevents the achievement of many of the EFA goals.¹⁶

Girls' participation and retention in school, particularly in primary school, and their levels of achievement, depend to a very large extent on the supply of quality teachers who possess or can gain local community recognition and can serve as role models for younger people. This is particularly so for women teachers who have a strong influence on families and communities.

However, many teachers have a limited range of literacy competences. It is therefore important that attention should be paid, in both initial and in-service teacher-training, to curricula which develop both the literacy skills

and practices of the teachers, appropriate to the context in which they will be teaching. Encouragement and support should be given to teachers to use and develop their own literacy practices. Projects and research have demonstrated the value of teachers and trainers building on the literacy expertise and experiences already held by both learners and their teachers.¹⁷

Developing the literacy competences and practices of school students should be part of the task of every teacher, not just the specialist literacy teacher. Training methodologies should include not only discussion but also appropriate writing and reading activities as well as ways of communicating with and engaging families and the community. The role of schools in helping to develop the literacy environment in the community should form part of all teacher training activities.

¹⁶UNESCO (2007) *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008 Summary. Education for All by 2015: Will We Make It?* Paris: UNESCO. At: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001548/154820e.pdf> [accessed August 2012].

¹⁷For example, the LETTER project in India, Ethiopia and Uganda. See: www.uppinghamseminars.co.uk/page3.htm [accessed 2012].

Similarly, personal literacy development must be a key part of the training of teachers (facilitators) of adult learning and literacy. They are often local young women and men with minimal schooling, chosen by the local community and given little training and support. Their training should include substantial elements to help them understand

literacy practices in their own communities and among their literacy learners. At the same time they must enhance their own literacy and numeracy practices.

CALL FOR ACTION

4

Working in partnership, aid agencies, finance organisations and policy-makers should:

Ensure that teacher-training curricula, both initial and in-service, give adequate attention and time to teachers' own literacy development. This will improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning across all subjects and help in the development of positive role models for both women and girls.

Conclusion

We believe that our calls for action will lead to more effective programmes, for gender equity, family health and personal and economic skills. They will increase community support for girls' education and enable women to make greater contributions to local and national decision-making.

We therefore strongly urge individuals, organisations and agencies to work towards making these a reality.

Modest adjustments in development policies and programmes could produce great rewards in the global drives for Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals.

Women's Right to Literacy calls for action are supported by the following organisations

The Literacy Working Group members, drawn from:

- ActionAid www.actionaid.org
- The British Association for International and Comparative Education: <http://baice.ac.uk>

- The British Association for Literacy in Development: www.balid.org.uk
- Feed the Minds: www.feedtheminds.org
- Myton Community College: www.mytoncommunitycollege.org.uk
- The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education: www.niace.org.uk
- The University of East Anglia Literacy and Development Group: www.uea.ac.uk/ssf/literacy

The International Council for Adult Education also supports these calls for action: www.icae2.org

To contribute to discussion, debate and evidence and support these calls to action, visit www.niace.org.uk/current-work/womens-right-to-literacy

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