

WOMEN

LITERACY

INCOME GENERATION

Alan Rogers

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Alan Rogers

I

INTRODUCTION

Women in Development

There is a new and growing interest in Women In Development (WID) Several studies of the role of women in development have been published, and taught courses have been established in a number of educational institutions in several countries. Conferences and seminars are regularly being mounted on this subject.

The role that women play in development is generally conceived of in social terms. Even among development workers, women are stereotyped in terms of issues relating to health and family and children and food. Their role in community change is often considered less, because it is assumed that the processes of decision-making frequently exclude women (their informal role in community decision-making is less often discussed).

The relationship between women and economic development is less clear than their role in social development. This is particularly true of the relationship between women's literacy and economic development. While general statements have frequently been made about the level of literacy (often put at a national figure of 40% literacy) required for economic "lift-off" (and that must include women's literacy as well as men's literacy), on the whole the relationship between women's literacy and economic development is thought to be more indirect. A higher level of women's literacy will, it is argued, lead to improved health and better schooling for their children which will lead to higher national literacy levels, and this will in turn lead directly or indirectly to greater economic benefits all round.

While this may or may not be true at national or regional level, I do not intend in this small book to reiterate all the global or national arguments relating to women's literacy and illiteracy rates and the generally accepted need to concentrate on improving the rates of literacy among women. My immediate concern is more limited and at a more local level. It relates to the role of literacy in the immediate relief of poverty among those who attend literacy classes. The purpose of this book is to discuss some aspects of women's literacy in relation to the income-generating activities which are often promoted in the literacy classes.

Women's literacy

Interest in women's literacy has been growing steadily over the last few years. The list of books at the end of this publication - although only a partial summary of all the material which is now available on this topic - is some indication of this. Donor agencies regularly stress the importance of adding a special women's dimension to most of their aid programmes, including literacy. The British Government aid agency, ODA (now DfID), has provided guidelines to assess the ways in which any funded project will contribute to women's literacy.

But there are some contradictory trends. Several agencies have hesitations about the effectiveness of all adult literacy programmes, including those for women. The ways in which enhanced literacy skills can lead to some relief from poverty are not immediately apparent. A number of NGOs in particular are pulling out of adult literacy programmes altogether, preferring to devote the whole of the substantial resources which they have been motivated by the major international campaign Education for All to provide for education to primary schooling for children which they see in the long run as having a greater impact upon both poverty and ignorance than adult (women's) literacy programmes.

Where women's literacy programmes are being provided, they are often combined with training in income-generation skills. In part, this is because of the inheritance of the older UNESCO definition of 'functional literacy', though it has been diverted from what UNESCO meant by this term to mean something different - helping people, especially women, to gain an increased livelihood through their literacy. The two strands - literacy teaching and skill training - are combined in various ways by different literacy agencies.

This little book does not set out to urge any redress in the growing imbalance in aid programmes between primary schools and adult literacy, especially for women. Others are doing this more effectively than I could do it. Instead, it seeks to look at some of the practical implications of this combination of income-generation activities and literacy teaching.

We are here concentrating on income-generating programmes rather than other aspects of women's development such as their social roles or their community involvement. We are looking at the personal and family economic benefits which are attached to many literacy projects rather than at the alleged social benefits of women's literacy. The aim is to examine how the income-generation training programmes and the literacy training programmes relate to each other on the ground.

What then is provided here is a condensation of a process of critical reflection on a series of experiences of grass-roots women's literacy programmes in Bangladesh, Egypt, India and Kenya as well as in several other parts of the world. It does not set out to be a complete survey of the whole world-scene of women's literacy and income-generation. I am conscious of the fact that in some other parts of the world (especially the Caribbean)

the practice in both of these fields of development activities is often different from what is described here.

What the booklet sets out to do is to outline some thoughts which have been provoked by visits I made to a number of literacy programmes between 1989 and 1993. It is however not just a series of random thoughts. Rather it has something of the nature of a new agenda which has been hammered out not just during the past few years but over more than two decades of work in developing countries. Some will, I hope, find it helpful; others may simply find it (thought-)provoking. My limited ambition is that all who read it will find it stimulating to critical reflection on their own experiences. I can ask for no more than that.





II

WOMEN

Most adult literacy programmes in developing countries, to judge by our sample, are run by men.

In India, most of the senior staff of the Government of India Ministry of Human Resource Development are men, and in the states the senior administrators of the literacy programmes are men. The Total Literacy Campaign, by placing the major responsibility for the literacy programme with the District Collector, has increased the number of men making the key decisions relating to the literacy programme. Most of the State Resource Centres are run by men. While there are women in the next level of administration and especially in the National Institute for Adult Education recently established, it is largely men who make the policy decisions.

In Kenya, the government literacy programme is headed by men, although again women feature in the second tier of the administration. In Egypt, one of the senior administrators in the literacy section of the Ministry of Education and Culture is a woman but in the new General Authority for Adult Education and the Eradication of Illiteracy, there are at the moment only men staff and in the Governorates the key staff are almost all men. In Bangladesh, men have predominated at the senior levels in both the former Mass Education Programme and the newer Integrated Nonformal Education Programme.

The NGO picture is more mixed but still the key players in adult literacy tend to be men. In Egypt, CARITAS and CEOSS, the two largest players, have men at the head. In Kenya, Action Aid and most of the other major NGOs engaged in adult literacy are male dominated.

In India, there are few nationally comprehensive NGOs because of the size of the country, but BGVS, one of the key NGOs in the promotion of the Total Literacy Campaign, and PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia) are both run by men, though the adult literacy programme run by Jamia Millia Islamia is headed by a woman. At local level, women play a much larger role in NGO literacy planning.

In Bangladesh, the literacy umbrella organisation CAMPE (the Campaign for the Promotion of Education) and the largest literacy NGOs like Friends of Village Development in Bangladesh (FIVDB), Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) and Rangpur Rural Development Society (RRDS) are all run by men (the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is in a different class altogether). Here alone this situation has provoked the creation of at least one NGO which is run by and for women, which employs only women and which seeks to promote a women's view of adult literacy.

The diversity of 'women'

Perhaps this fact - that most decisions relating to women's literacy programmes are taken by men - accounts for the fact that in every programme which I looked at, women are treated as a single homogeneous group. A substantial portion of the people, comprising more than fifty percent of the total adult population of any country, is put into one basket as if they were all the same.

Men are more rarely treated like this, as having a common range of interests. Development programmes more constantly stress the varied needs and interests of men. But many people (most of them men) say that a woman has this or that interest or need, that a woman does this or does not do that, that a woman is like this or not like that - all simply because she is a woman.

What is happening of course is that women are being looked at from the outside. 'Women', when treated en masse in development programmes, is a male concept. The term refers to a sector of the population regarded from a distance. An individual woman is not seen as a person with a full range of interests, resources and concerns, but simply as 'a [generalised] woman'.

This is particularly true of women's literacy programmes. That is why almost all the agencies I met and discussed these issues with (with one notable exception) talked about 'literacy programmes for women' - 'for', note, not 'with' or even 'by' women. Someone else feels he can provide literacy programmes for women, can decide what the women for whom he is providing programmes want or need - simply because they are women. I find it unnerving the way so many men (and it must be noted that some women have come to internalise these same views) can regard all women as having the same range of interests and needs simply because they are women.

I know of course that some feminist critiques have strongly asserted that there is a distinctive feminine perspective on the world, just as there is assumed to be a distinctive male perspective. I respect this view. As a man, I do not have the ability to enter this alternative perspective, and I am bound within my own male perspective. I also accept that this distinct feminist view of reality should colour all forms of women's literacy programmes; and the conclusion of this is that women can best provide that distinctive perspective. I concur entirely - though perhaps it would be more enriching if men and women were to be able to combine to provide literacy programmes for both groups.

The issue which lies at the heart of this question is of course the issue of power and hegemony - man's domination of women which still persists in the countries I visited (and of course elsewhere).

The question of who controls the programmes is then crucial to any discussion of women's literacy. But even without any change of this control which may be a long time coming, there is a great need for an immediate change of attitude on the part of the current providers of literacy programmes 'for' women, if only to help them to become more effective - a need for greater diversity in the programmes to meet the many

different needs and concerns of different groups of women rather than a blanket approach to women's literacy.

For it is a fact that when a literacy programme is prepared 'for' women, the decisions as to what the content of that course shall be is made (whether by men or in some cases by women) on the basis that all the women participants will have certain common interests and needs simply because they are women - that the women in the slums of Dhaka will feel exactly the same as the women in Sylhet or Chittagong or for that matter in the slums of Ahmedabad in Gujarat (or Nairobi) - just because they are women. Women's literacy programmes show a distressingly similar range of interests - health, children, families, cooking etc - in other words, 'women's subjects'.

But there are many different women who all have their own interests, needs, aspirations and expectations. Unmarried women do not have the same concerns as married women. Women whose children are grown up have different interests from those with young children. Some women do not have children and will never have children; some women do not run a family. Some women do not like cooking.

And the immediate concerns of different groups of women will vary from region to region, even from village to village - fisherwomen, agricultural workers, professional women, those engaged in construction or labouring activities. Those who have been to school will have different aspirations from those who have not been to school. To treat all women exactly the same is to demean them. They are human beings, with a full and very diverse range of wants and intentions which need to be reflected in their literacy programmes.

It is perhaps time (despite the title of this book!) that we abandoned the word 'women' in its generic sense, stop speaking about 'Women in Development' or 'Women and Development' (when did you last hear anyone speak of 'Men in Development?'). Perhaps we should only use the word 'women' with some qualifying adjective to indicate which group of women it is that we are talking about.



Now I do not wish to be misunderstood. I do not believe that we should drop all special attention to 'women' in any of our development programmes. Many (but not all) women are in every country discriminated against, simply because they are women. Large

numbers of women are specially disadvantaged, particularly in educational terms. Those many girls in Egypt who are taken away from school because their parents cannot afford to pay the EL30 per annum which primary schools regularly demand for each of their pupils, preferring to concentrate their limited resources on the education of their sons, are victims not just of the educational system but also of the ideological constructs within that society; and they can be paralleled in Kenya, Bangladesh and India, as elsewhere. I do believe that we need to pay special attention to the special needs of those women who in all societies (including our own) are specially disadvantaged: but it is their relative disadvantage, based as it is on their 'womanhood', which is at issue and which should form the basis of any assistance which those of us, women and men, who have been more privileged may be able to offer.

It is we - the privileged - who need to change in relation to all those who have been diminished by our attitudes and actions. To call on the victims to change to meet our requirements is simply increasing the disadvantage. To treat the women who come to our literacy programmes as having only concerns which arise from their 'womanhood' and not from their individual circumstances is surely dehumanising.

The purpose of women's development

What then are the aims of those programmes which are directed towards the needs of those women who within any society are specially disadvantaged? They can fall into one of three main groups, according to one's prevalent concept of development.

First, such programmes may seek to supply what are regarded by outsiders as the 'deficits' from which this group suffers. These programmes will be top-down, based on an agenda set by the development agencies, and will largely consist of 'inputs'. Seeing these women in negative terms, as ignorant, unable to help themselves, development agencies which work on this approach will seek to promote government or aid agencies' messages: health, hygiene, family welfare - and literacy. Or seeing them as resource poor, they will seek to train them to increase their income or develop an independent livelihood.

Such views are based on an outdated 'transfer of information' (an extension) model. Literacy programmes based on this model will be full of messages or skill training to be 'imparted' to the needy student learners. It is in these programmes that we can find those providers who see literacy and other developmental training programmes as increasing the contribution of the rural and urban poor to the nation's economy.

Or, secondly, the programmes may be built on a desire to promote equality and justice, to alter society, to help the oppressed to obtain liberation. The agenda is still that of the development agency. It is they who define oppression (even in Freire's programme, the choice of generative words and the pictures in which the concepts are encapsulated are in the end chosen by the providing agency).

Here lie those programmes calling for increased participation in community or national affairs - as if participation in itself is a good thing. It is these providers who seek to break the stereotypes of what are seen to be typical 'women's activities'.

At the heart of such approaches once more are negative attitudes towards those women who are seen to be in need. Their 'basic human needs' (which of course will include the need for full participation and equal opportunities) are to be met with the assistance of outsiders. They are thought not to be able to do it for themselves.

Thirdly, however, the programmes may rest upon more positive attitude towards the participants, based on the assumption that the women who form the participant group not only know what is best for them but are able already to act in their own development. So that the aim of development programmes is to help these women to do what they want to do and what in many cases they are already doing - even when that may not be what the providing agency wants to do.



In both of the first two of these three approaches, a common programme of development (and for that matter a common women's literacy programme) may be justified. For in their terms all women (or rather, all illiterate women) who are ignorant need (the same) new knowledge which they will get from the outside, or (the same) forms of social change to bring about liberation.

But in the third approach, we are faced with something quite different. Every women's literacy group will be different because the group members will have had different past experiences and because they will possess different wants, aspirations and intentions.

Different, not just deprived

'Women' then in development programmes should not be treated as if they are a single class or category. They constitute over 50% of the world's population and they have among them as wide a diversity of interests as has the rest of the population.

And it follows from this that we should no longer offer development programmes to 'women' in general but rather to specific groups of women, related by common interests. We cannot assume that what will concern a women's group in one village in Kenya will necessarily concern a women's group in the very next village; that young women will want to know and to be able to do what older women want to know or be able to do; that those who live in towns will have the same interests as those who live in villages; that one Indian tribal or caste group of women will wish to pursue the same programme of development as a different tribal or caste group even in the same immediate neighbourhood; that Hindu and Muslim women in Bangladesh will wish to learn the same things; that Christian women in the Caribbean, Africa or Asia have the same values and desires.

It is not just a matter of making inaccurate assumptions (for example that most rural women in Egypt work in the fields in the same way as most rural women do in other countries - for they don't). It is rather that women throughout the world are very varied in their interests and concerns - we cannot say that too often. And any programme of learning designed to help them to achieve their own developmental goals will need to be tailor-made for their felt needs and wants, not just a common programme based on an agenda determined by a set list of externally-identified needs which they are thought to have simply because they are women.

And this of course applies to women's literacy programmes. Perhaps we should cease to offer any general 'women's literacy programmes' and instead direct our literacy programmes to different identified groups of women - to meet intentions which *they* have identified in ways which *they* have determined.

III

LITERACY

We need to think much more clearly about what we mean by 'literacy'. There is a lot of confusion about this concept. International Literacy Year 1990 did a lot of harm by its excessive rhetoric, and this needs to be redressed by some clear debate and discussion about the issues involved.

Over the last twenty years, there have been two major revolutions in the field of adult literacy training: but the effects of these are only being felt very slowly in the field. The modern world of adult literacy is incrementalist - that is, the older views still persist, while the newer views do not replace them but exist alongside the older views. Practitioners - some of whom are leading the advances - are also often among the most conservative in changing their patterns of behaviour. We need to discuss these changes in understanding of literacy in relation to women's literacy programmes.

Traditional approaches

The traditional view of literacy is that it consists of a state of 'being' - that of being illiterate or of being literate. It is, in this view, suggested that there are for each person three possible stages. First, there is a pre-literacy stage; people in this stage are illiterate and therefore unable to do this or that because they lack both knowledge and skills.

Those who seek to become literate will pass through a second stage consisting of education and training during which they acquire the skills of being able to read and write and to calculate with written numbers - skills which once acquired can be applied to any situation in which they will happen to find themselves. Having become literate, they have entered the third stage when they can now do something which they could not do before, 'read' and 'write'. By passing through the education and training stage, the learner has ceased to be illiterate and has become literate.

Such understandings of illiteracy and literacy as opposed poles - characteristics of different groups of people (one is either illiterate or literate) which determine their status in society - underlie most adult literacy training programmes offered by development agencies in developing countries today.

Traditional training: The basis of most of these adult literacy education and training programmes - drawing on the inspirations and commitments of people like Frank Laubach - is with school-based methods of learning literacy. Even today in all the countries I visited, almost all the adult literacy programmes are more or less like formal schooling.

They are, in fact, even if not in rhetoric, non-participatory. Although they are often labelled 'participatory' (by which the agencies mean that they have asked the student learners at what time and in what place they wish to learn), all the important decisions (what to learn, the writing of the primer material, the length of the course etc) are taken by the providing bodies, just as they are in school. And they are based on a no longer

accepted concept of the transfer of knowledge - 'I know, you don't know; I will tell you and then you will know'.

Teaching literacy then in most adult literacy classes today, both for men and women, follows school-based approaches. Some start with alphabets, meaningless copying of ill-formed letters onto slates or into exercise books. Others start with simple words, usually with pictures. Small words are then built up into more complex words through syllables.

The words are chosen for their alphabetical value, even if the words make little or no real sense to adult learners (one primer in India shows the adult women a play ball). Learning literacy under this model is assumed to be sequential, in a straight line: if you master one thing, you can then go on to master the next thing. And it is top-down: the providing agency has decided the words to learn and set them down in a primer.

In such an approach, literacy is seen as a relatively neutral set of technical skills (reading, writing, calculating using written figures instead of in one's head), skills which once learned can be used in any situation where the learner has need to read, write or use written figures. Such literacy skills are visualised as being free-standing; once they have been mastered, it is thought that they can be applied anywhere.

And these technical skills are felt to be necessary for living within a modern society. Without them, as one learner said to me in Bangladesh, "I am a nobody; they look at me as if I am stupid". But with these skills, it is argued, the key to many doors has been provided.



Negative views of the student learners: This approach to literacy is based on a negative attitude towards illiteracy and therefore towards the student learners. Literacy is seen as the door to acquiring knowledge which those who cannot read and write do not yet possess. Thus, illiteracy in this view means ignorance - therefore the 'illiterate' are seen to be ignorant. What is more, literacy agencies which work on this model feel that the 'illiterate' cannot learn literacy on their own, they are dependent on outside help; that they cannot engage in development programmes until they have learned literacy (what may be called a 'literacy comes first' approach).

Such views lead to the conclusion that the inability to cope with writing systems leads to other disadvantages. In Bangladesh, I heard one agency during the instructor training

sessions say that those who are illiterate are more susceptible to diseases than the literate, that they cannot distinguish between right and wrong. Such knowledge, it is said, literacy will bring in its wake. Literacy will “open doors”, it will “change the lives” of the poor women in the towns and villages. All this, it is argued, will be brought about simply by the learners passing a test at the end of the literacy course.

The negative, often very extreme, views about those who cannot read or write have been dreamt up by the literate. In large part, they arise from schooling, through the unconscious process by which those who have been to school come (on the whole) to feel sorry for those who have been deprived of this opportunity.

Such views of the superiority of those who have been schooled over the unschooled have been imposed on the illiterate.

And many of the illiterate have come to internalise these views. They have come to believe that they are ignorant, that their poverty is directly related to their illiteracy, that they are dependent on others to help them. So they attend literacy classes on the whole regularly (though many literacy instructors admit that one of their biggest problems is to ‘keep the women motivated’, to fetch them from their homes when they don’t come to class). I am constantly surprised more at the fact that so many women continue to come to such classes rather than that there are some who withdraw. The internalisation of the sense of need has been very deep in many cases.

But these two attitudes on the part of the literacy agencies and their instructors - the negative attitude towards illiteracy and therefore towards the illiterate, and the over-positive attitude towards the achievement of literacy - are in fact major barriers to the effective learning of literacy. The former undermines the confidence of the participants ; and the latter, when it becomes clear (as it quickly does) that the newly acquired literacy skills do not bring prosperity or power, tends to demotivate the participants from keeping up the literacy by engaging in literacy practices.

To be quite blunt, most adult literacy programmes based on the school-based primer are a failure, even when judged solely in terms of the numbers of persons who have become able to read and write on their own with any measure of fluency.

While we can always find individual adult students who have made progress in their own terms, these are still relatively few. The test of the large numbers of ‘achievers’ in the current Indian Total Literacy Campaign will be seen if after six months we can find large numbers of rural women and men actually reading, not just able to read.

It follows from all of this that most of the programmes of literacy instruction, both for men and women, are the same. Egypt for example argues strongly that men and women, rural and urban student learners, should all follow the same path, should use the same materials, should learn the same things.

Some agencies do try to choose some different words in their literacy primers which they feel are particularly appropriate for men participants and other words which are appropriate for women. But such gender distinctions are not common until the ‘post-literacy’ stage when more distinctive materials are on occasions provided.

The Freirean revolution

In the 1970s, Paulo Freire from Brazil put into words more forcefully than anyone else a different approach to adult literacy teaching.

Freire believed strongly - like so many other adult educators of his day - that learning cannot be achieved by the transfer of knowledge from one person to another. To those who argue that it is not necessary for anyone to 'reinvent the wheel', the followers of the Freirean approach would reply that everyone needs to reinvent the wheel for themselves if they are really to learn and to use the wheel. Learning is not coming to know what others know through the passive receipt of what others may deign to give you. Rather real learning is coming to know what is true for yourself through an active process of search, reflection, thought and testing out until the results of this process have become fully a part of your own life. Learning is a process of engaging continuously with the world through 'dialogue' (interaction) and what Freire calls praxis (action designed to change your own bit of the world).

Freire and his followers take the adulthood of the student participants seriously. They point out that - unlike children - adults are able to act on their life situation immediately. They do not have to delay action until later. They came to appreciate that adults already hold potential power.

What is more, those who follow Freirean approaches to literacy point out that adults - even illiterate adults - are constantly learning. Learning is not confined to the young but is a natural process for all people throughout the whole of their lives. Nor is learning confined to schools or adult classes; it goes on in all kinds of environments and in all the different processes of daily living.

And by engaging in this continuous process of lifelong learning, adults have built up their own 'styles' of learning, a series of activities which have been described as 'critical reflection on experience leading to action'. It is this natural learning process which Freire seeks to use in the literacy instruction methodologies which he himself pioneered and now advocates so passionately.

Freirean approaches to literacy teaching are then quite different from primer-based programmes. Instead of rote learning of alphabets and spellings, Freirean programmes use a process of critical reflection through discussion, leading to what he calls 'conscientization' (that is, increased awareness of reality, making sense of reality) and thence to action to bring about changes in local reality. Much of this is facilitated through converting his view of reality into pictures which form first the basis of the discussion and then the basis for learning to read and write through what are called 'generative words', words which express social realities of common concern to the participants (e.g. family, church, landlord, slum etc).

Freire has frequently argued that literacy programmes can never be neutral; indeed that no form of education can be neutral. But in one sense, even Freirean approaches to literacy teaching are neutral. For as Freire himself insists, such literacy instruction, like all education, can be either domesticating or liberating. It is the purpose to which the education is put, it is the person who helps others to learn who is never neutral.

Those who teach literacy will either be using it to fit other people into a predetermined slot in society (as one writer in India put it in the 1970s, using figures which were current at that time, “the 30% percent literate must bring the 70% illiterate into society”) or they will be using it to liberate the participants, to help them to become creators of society, not simply members of society. If literacy can be used in either way, depending on the presuppositions of the literacy agencies, then it can be argued that even Freirean literacy is still a neutral tool; it is the users of literacy who determine how it shall be used.

And there are other ways in which some elements in Freire’s teaching are drawn from the older literacy school. First, there is still a negative attitude towards the participants. The illiterate are in a ‘culture of silence’ from which learning literacy will release them. While it is suggested that the ‘people’ (an over-generalised construct similar to the term ‘women’) are able to ‘read the world’, it is normally argued that they do this by learning to ‘read the word’. There is a hint here of the ‘literacy comes first’ school of thought. Literacy, as in the school-based approach, is reified: Freire speaks of ‘literacy’ as if it is a reality in its own right rather than a process of reading and writing. Seen in this light, ‘literacy’ (i.e. learning specific skills) is deemed to be a necessary precursor to development.

Secondly, the words which form the basis of the learning of literacy are in fact chosen by the literacy instructors. They may be drawn from the conversation of the people (Freire argues strongly that the first task of the literacy practitioner is to listen), but many of those who claim to follow his methods in fact choose their generative words from what they believe are the common interests of the participants.

Thirdly, Freire still believes in a syllabic approach to literacy. The generative words chosen are broken down into syllables and then new syllables are built up into new words. Once one has learned to read using this method, it is argued, such reading skills can be applied to any form of reading which the reader may wish to read.

Nevertheless, the Freirean approach marks a major step forward in our understanding and practice of literacy. The process of learning to read and write is no longer seen as a simple sequential process. Words are chosen because they lie within the experience of the participants, not because they are simple. Indeed some would be classified by the school-based critics as too difficult for the student learners. If there is a sequence in the process of adults learning to read and to write, it is rather a movement from the concrete to the abstract, from the immediate experience to the more generalised, which is a more natural learning process for adults.

And instead of one common primer for all student learners in a national programme, different materials are developed to meet the interests of different groups - though in much of Freire’s own work, there is little to distinguish the programmes he would offer to women from those offered to men.

The socio-cultural approach

Over the last fifteen years or so in different countries, a new understanding of literacy has been seen. Unfortunately it has not yet had a major impact on the practice of literacy teaching, although some of its methodologies have come into increasing use.

This view challenges all three stages of the traditional view.

- It asserts that those who cannot read and write can engage in development activities and can engage directly with literacy situations by using their own strategies.
- It denies that literacy is a set of independent technical skills which once learned can be applied to all literacy situations.
- And it denies that those who are literate have experienced any profound change in their life or their attitudes - they may be literate but they may still be poor.

Those who hold this view believe that the concept of 'illiteracy' is a social construct devised by the literates. No illiterate person ever called themselves illiterate except in comparison with the literate. Illiteracy is only a disadvantage if seen from the viewpoint of those who have been educated - without education, there would be no such thing as illiteracy. Indeed, it may be argued that there is not one single blanket category of 'illiterates' but rather many different people with varying capabilities and varying experiences of dealing with different literacy situations.

Literacy under this view is no longer seen as "a fixed inventory of skills which can be assessed outside of the contexts of application". Instead, literacy, like illiteracy, is seen as a socio-cultural construct. Instead of talking about 'literacy', those who hold this view talk about 'literacy practices'. They argue that there are in every society a multitude of activities and situations which call for the use of a variety of different reading, writing and interpreting skills. Such literacy practices should be identified and used to form the basis of all literacy programmes.

Indeed, it is recognised that there are several different literacies which we all have to learn if we wish to use them. 'Local literacies' is one of the catchwords of this approach - which of course has profound implications for the attempts usually made to teach one single form of 'literacy' through a generalised set primer.

One cannot therefore 'learn literacy'. One cannot learn to 'read' or to 'write' in the abstract. All one can do is to learn to read *something*, to write *something*. If a learner is taught to read through a primer, all that the learner has learned to read is the primer. He/she has not learned to read a newspaper or a ration card or driving licence or a cinema advertisement. If the learner has learned to write solely through a primer, all he/she has learned to write is the primer exercises, not to fill in a form or write a shopping list.

The transfer of such skills from one context (the adult literacy class) to another (real life situations) needs to be assisted. Learning to read and write can most effectively be assisted in real situations using real materials rather than in artificially-created situations like an adult literacy class using specially prepared materials (a primer).

The whole orientation of this approach to literacy education and training, then, has been changed. It would seem that some of those who advocate this approach do not themselves see the full extent of the radical new approaches to literacy instruction which are the end result of their work. The main difference is a totally new approach to those who are illiterate.

Positive approach to the student learners:

First, all people, including the student learners, are seen to operate within a specific social and cultural context. They are already engaged in a variety of activities, many of which are intended to lead to their own development. Those who cannot read and write are thus no longer seen in negative terms.

Instead, it is taken as a fundamental truth that those who are illiterate are fully capable of engaging in their own development programmes. Indeed, many people who cannot read and write formal literacies (in countries like Bangladesh particularly) are nevertheless already engaged in local development activities.

Rather than being ignorant, they can and do understand their own situation and discern some possible lines of action to improve their lot. Rather than being imprisoned in a culture of silence, they can and often do speak out loud. Rather than being powerless, they can and do act in their own interests.

In other words, groups of illiterate persons can and often do engage in development, all without literacy. Instead of seeing the 'illiterate' in negative terms, this approach sees them in very positive terms. And it also sees literacy competencies as not being necessary (although they are useful) for development.

Indigenous literacy strategies: Secondly, it follows that these people, although unable to read and write, are already engaging in what may be called 'literacy strategies' - that is, they are dealing with literacy situations in their own way. They call upon many different devices to help them - tying knots in string, for example, or using colours or shapes, listening to conversations, watching and imitating the actions of others, asking other people and so on. Indeed, it has been pointed out, we all, literate as well as those who cannot read and write, adopt some of these strategies.

If our student learners then feel that their strategies are strong enough for them to deal with the situations they need to deal with, then they will not feel it necessary to go through what all their experience has already taught them will be a tedious and difficult process of learning to read and write. They will only agree to do this when they really feel the need for a new and different and more effective strategy to help them to cope with literacy situations as they arise. All that the literacy agency is doing is to help them to acquire one new strategy to deal with real situations.

Literacy training programmes then need to be based on local surveys of the existing literacy practices of the participants. What is going on? How do they already cope? What situations do they have which call upon them to read or to write or to calculate and how do they cope with these situations? What materials and literacies are there and who uses them? How do they regard the skills of reading and writing? - who do they think should become literate? What do they want literacy for, rather than what do the agencies feel they should have it for? It is on the answers to these questions (which can only come

from the participants themselves, not from any outsider survey) that any literacy teaching programme needs to be based. And as soon as the questions are phrased in these terms, it quickly becomes apparent that the answers which different groups of people, including different groups of women, will give to these questions will vary.

Literacy comes second: If this is true, then a third difference in orientation will appear. 'Literacy' comes second, not first. Instead of literacy being a pre-requisite for development, people will only be motivated to learn literacy when they feel they need it to accomplish some already clearly defined task - not just some vaguely expressed wish for development. They will only learn to read and write something effectively if during the learning process they can see quite clearly the relevance of the skills they are learning to the task which they have set themselves.

Learning to read and write something will in these cases come after the participants have already embarked on a task and will be achieved best through that task, not independently. And surely it is here that the special nature of the literacy teaching programmes provided for women will again become apparent - for the tasks chosen by different groups of women will be their own specific tasks, determined by their own local context, rather than those of men or those which others feel are appropriate for women in general.



Socio-cultural literacy materials: Finally, this socio-cultural approach to literacy teaching has powerful implications for the materials used in the programmes. For example, if handpump workers (India and Kenya) feel that they need to learn to read handpump materials, then they will not be motivated to learn through a general primer using simple child-oriented words or through generative words which deal with family or social matters like health. They will learn best through a handpump manual suitably mediated to them. When asked what each of them would like to be able to read, a group of women in Rajasthan chose several different items, but the majority of them expressed a desire to read cinema notices and they were taught successfully from these, not from the primer.

It is now clear that both children and adults do not need 'simple' words to learn to read; they will cope with apparently difficult words if they feel strongly enough about them and can relate them to their own experience (the way very young children cope with highly technical words when discussing dinosaurs or more currently computers is a demonstration of this). It can be thought of as being patronising for us to choose words which we think are simple for adult student learners

The socio-cultural approach to literacy suggests that learning to read *something* and to write *something* - things which are determined by the student learners, not by the instructors - will be based not on artificially created teaching-learning materials but on real materials. Or at the very least, that such real materials *chosen by the participants* will be used regularly throughout the literacy classes.

Modern approaches to adult learning reveal that adults do not learn *before* practising; they learn by practising. This is as true of learning literacy skills as learning other things. One does not learn to read and then subsequently read; one learns to read by reading, just as one learns to swim by swimming or to type by typing. Real materials, real activities are the basis of literacy instruction for adults more than the primer (which in most cases is a hindrance to socially relevant learning).

In answer to a possible objection that there is nothing for the women to read in their own communities, it can be said that surveys have revealed that in almost every society except those of small minority languages, there are plenty of real materials which adults can use to learn to read - newspapers and magazines, government forms, ration cards, bank notes, advertisements, political notices, extension technical leaflets, sales catalogues, public notices etc etc.

The impact which this revolution in our understanding of literacy is having on the teaching of adult literacy is enormous. It affects the phasing of the programme - so that the literacy instruction will be provided not when the agency decides but when the *student learners* are *ready* to achieve a task which they have set themselves. It affects the materials used - real materials which the learners themselves see as directly relevant to achieve the task, not materials which the literacy agency thinks is relevant to the way of life of the student participants. It affects the evaluation to be applied to the learning process - not an academic test like primary school but rather an assessment of whether the task which the student learners have set themselves is being facilitated by the new skills.

It can be argued - and those who accept the socio-cultural approach to literacy would argue in this way - that the aim of literacy education and training is not to help the people to be **able** to 'read' and to 'write' in general terms, which is all that a test at the end of the class can assess. Rather it is to encourage them to **read something** and to **write something** in order to achieve their own goal. If this is so, then the real test will come at least six months later, based on the question, not, can these women read? but, *are they* reading? And are they reading and writing material which will help them to achieve the task that they have set themselves? This will be the true mark of success of our literacy training programmes.

IV

INCOME-GENERATION PROGRAMMES

Income-generation programmes provide the best possibility for building literacy programmes on a 'literacy comes second' model. But this opportunity does not seem to have been taken advantage of. Although most of the women's literacy programmes visited during the study period had income-generation programmes attached to them, these programmes were not used fully to promote the learning of literacy skills in the way they were originally intended.



FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

The background to the provision of income-generation activities with literacy groups lies in the concept of 'functional literacy'. And the background to the rise of the concept of functional literacy is UNESCO's view that literacy must be useful. Between about 1962, when literacy was seen as that basic set of knowledge and skills which would enable a person to cope with those situations in which literacy is required for effective functioning in a person's group or community, and the Persepolis Conference in 1975, when literacy became associated, not just with economic productivity but with wider functions in

society, it was urged by all the major agencies that the teaching of literacy should be accompanied by training in other knowledge and skills.

This approach came to a head during the UNESCO-inspired Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP) in the 1970s. Influenced by Freire and others who had realised that literacy instruction on its own could never bring about social and economic changes on a scale big enough to materially affect the poverty and under-development of developing countries, and that what may be called ‘detached’ literacy instruction would never motivate the student learners adequately to help them through what was often a long and painful process of learning to read and write through a primer, UNESCO and its advisers came up with the concept of ‘functional literacy’.

The term ‘functional literacy’ has changed its meaning since it was first coined and spread throughout the world. There are in fact two main contenders for this title. The first says that literacy instruction, to be effective, should be based on the activities within the lives of the student learners. In other words, it called for research into the way the target group of people lived and for the writing of materials based on this way of life.

Thus farmers should learn literacy through farming terms, weavers through words drawn from weaving practices, fishing folk through material based on fishing activities etc. If in the process they were able to learn *new* practices, new methodologies, new approaches, that would be a benefit; but it was generally felt that this would occur during the post-literacy stage, when they could read with greater facility. (Incidentally, functional literacy was primarily concerned with reading rather than with writing). Different literacy materials would be needed for different groups under this approach to functional literacy.



But when it came to women, we see the worst aspects of the way in which ‘women’ were regarded as a category, a totality, as discussed in the first chapter of this book. Women were regarded as being commonly and almost exclusively concerned with the home, with the family, with health matters; and materials specially prepared for women’s literacy programmes included matter relating to these subjects. Women’s literacy materials, where they existed separately, varied very much less than men’s, because women’s interests were thought to vary much less than men’s.

Most of these teaching-learning materials were (and still are) prepared in writing workshops in which academics, journalists, experts, government officers, development

agency officers, and sometimes literacy practitioners (though relatively few grass-roots instructors and almost no student learners) were gathered together to decide on the themes, write drafts of the materials, sometimes test them in the field for understandability (but rarely for relevance - that was taken for granted) and finalise them before they were printed in bulk. Women are regularly included in these writing workshops, but they come of course from a different social stratum and often have experience only of urban, not rural, life. Although in India and Bangladesh (and of course other countries) many rural women participants spent long hours in the fields, the women's literacy materials rarely included much in the way of agricultural practice, except the growing of vegetables in gardens.

In this first approach, then, *literacy is to be learned through the other skills and activities which made up the daily work and lives* of the participants. But it was not long before this whole approach was made to stand on its head, and functional literacy became the process by which *other skills were learned through the literacy programmes.*



Teaching income-generating skills through literacy: This second approach to 'functional literacy' is thus significantly different. In practice, it means adding extra skill training to literacy programmes rather than relating everyday life to the literacy training programme. The aim is not just to learn literacy but also to learn other useful skills (primarily economic or money-earning skills but also some social and political skills) which will help the learner to cope in society.

This has of course been interpreted in different ways in different societies. In the American army, for example, 'functional literacy' is deemed to involve "the capacity to understand written instructions necessary for conducting basic military functions and tasks".

Current practice in literacy - especially for women - in most cases thus provides two strands, literacy instruction and income-generation activities alongside each other. The intention is that both will be closely related, that each will affect the other. At the same time as learning to read and write (as a general competency), the student learners should be encouraged to learn a useful skill which would advance their economic independence or the quality of their life. So that groups of student learners coming together would spend part of their time learning to read and write the primer exercises, and part of their time learning some useful (usually a craft) skill.

Throughout the world with very few exceptions, the UNESCO literacy programme was largely felt to have been unsuccessful. Although there were some spectacular successes in a few countries where great political and popular commitment was matched by substantial resources, on the whole the functional literacy approach has been abandoned in the rhetoric which surrounds international pronouncements on literacy. I suppose it has today been replaced by the Education for All programme which, originally both child and adult-centred, is now very largely devoted to promoting primary schools.

On the whole, the second form of functional literacy has come to predominate, even though the term is in some countries no longer in general use. In many national programmes, materials are being written, especially for the post-literacy stage, with a view to providing information about economic and social functions designed to enhance the quality of life of the participants; and in many cases, skill training sessions are held alongside the literacy training programmes, especially for women.

It is with this second approach to functional literacy that our enquiry is primarily concerned. The question at issue is, what is the relationship between these skill training programmes and the literacy instruction? In theory, of course, both should reinforce the other; both should be integrated into a coherent whole. But in practice this rarely seems to happen.

If we wish to categorise literacy programmes in relation to these income-generation activities, five main groups can be identified.

- (i) There are literacy programmes which lead to income-generation activities which are related to the literacy programmes: these are on the whole rare.
- (ii) Such programmes need to be carefully distinguished from those literacy programmes which are followed by (independent) income-generation activities which are much more common.
- (iii) Thirdly, there are income-generation programmes which lead to literacy programmes (very rare) – and
- (iv) income-generation programmes which directly form the basis for the literacy instruction (very very rare).
- (v) The most common form of relationship is the literacy programme which is accompanied by a separate income-generation training programme and activities; the two proceed side by side but seldom influence each other

substantially. This is by far the largest category in all the programmes I visited.

Summary of possible relationships between the teaching of literacy and income-generation activities in adult literacy programmes.

1. Literacy in preparation for income-generation activities
2. Literacy followed by separate income-generation activities
3. Income-generation activities leading to literacy
4. Income-generation activities and literacy integrated
5. Literacy and income-generation activities in parallel but separate



A CRITIQUE OF THE INCOME-GENERATION PROGRAMMES ATTACHED TO WOMEN'S ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMMES

The survey of those programmes which forms the basis of this study provokes a series of comments upon the relationship between the income-generation activities and the literacy programmes. The most general conclusion is that there is almost universally a big gap between the income-generation activities and the literacy learning programme.

1. The income-generation activities are not used in the literacy teaching programme

In almost every case, there is no direct relationship between the income-generation activities and the literacy programme. Indeed, it is clear that the participants themselves cannot see any relationship.



The clearest evidence for this is the fact that the income-generation activities are not used to help with the literacy programme. I did not find one case (although I am sure they do exist) where the income-generation activities provided the basis for learning literacy.

For example, in Kenya I found a women's literacy group whose members were seeking to earn money by keeping goats. But the participants could not read the word in KiSwahili for 'goat'. When I asked the instructor why this was so, he (note the 'he' - although I do not believe the answer would have been different if there had been a woman instructor) replied that he had not taught the word for 'goat' "because it is not in the primer".

In Egypt, women in a bakery learning to read and write from set texts were not learning words like oven, flour or yeast. In neither case was there any sense that the literacy that the student learners wished to learn should be related at all to the student learners' income-generation activities.

To judge by our examples, 'functional literacy' in the sense of an *integrated programme* is dead: or (to use a different metaphor) 'functional learning' and literacy learning may walk hand in hand but they don't speak to each other. And in these circumstances, the will to learn to read and write will falter, while the will to engage in the more immediately profitable income-generation activities will survive.

There are several reasons for this. Income-generation activities will bring immediate (or at least relatively swift) visible profits; there is no really clear way in which learning literacy will bring with it improved economic benefits. It may be nice to join that section of the village which calls itself 'literate'; there may be a social advantage in being able to 'read and write'. But since the acquisition of literacy skills is often viewed as a means for social mobility, to help one to leave the existing situation and to get a new job, and relatively few rural adult women have any prospect of moving to find a new job and must try to increase their income within their existing situation (this is of course less true of

women who live in towns), it is better to learn new income-generating skills to be used where they are than to try to learn to read and write.

It can however be argued that if income-generation activities were engaged in which required literacy for their successful implementation; if there were clearly something which the participants felt they needed to read in order to complete the task they had set themselves - in other words, if they were being helped to learn to read *something* and not just to learn to read and write in general terms, then the learning programme is likely to have been more effective.

But this did not in fact happen. None of the literacy classes used words drawn from the income-generation programmes as the basis for learning to read and write.

2. The income-generation activities chosen do not require literacy for their completion

If the income-generation activities did not provide the material for the learning of literacy skills, so too on the opposite side, it is clear that the literacy programmes did not in general provide useful skills which were employed in the income-generation activities. Almost all the income-generating activities in which the women were engaged did not call for any use of literacy skills at all.

Indeed, one got the impression that these income-generation activities were specifically chosen - by the literacy agency or by the women themselves - on the grounds that they could be done *without* the use of reading and writing. BRAC in Bangladesh used the women in their programmes to make textiles for their shops, teaching them to measure three inches and six inches with a tape measure, but in no other way were these women encouraged to use literacy in their work.

Elsewhere in Bangladesh, the women were engaged in such activities as pottery, basket making or mat weaving, even silversmithing. I saw dress-making taught with nothing more than a tape-measure, no reading or writing at all. The instructor said he (note the 'he again) was adapting the dress-making instruction manual to the level of his learners!

In Egypt, I met a women's group in a village which was imaginatively running a small haberdashery shop for the rest of the villagers. One member went to the nearest town once a week and brought back buttons and zips and thread etc which were then sold to the village. *But none of the transactions was written down*; they were all simply memorised.

The same was true of a rice-selling project in Bangladesh and a brick-making project in Kenya. The members in charge of these group activities kept all their accounts in their heads and their cash under the bed: they did not possess a bank account. In Kenya, one project developing rural industries with women run by one of the national NGOs taught the women to keep their accounts through the use of colours rather than through numeracy.

In other words, the literacy agencies in these cases were actually strengthening the non-literacy strategies of coping with literacy situations rather than encouraging the participants to use their literacy skills practically to advance their activities. It would seem that the participants themselves did not feel that the literacy skills which they were

learning on other days of the week were necessary for their chosen activity or that these skills would in fact help them with this task. The reason for this approach on the part of the agencies would seem to relate to their expressed opinion that such literacy and numeracy practices were too difficult for the group members.

This was not of course true in every case. Sometimes income-generating activities were engaged in which did call for literacy for their maintenance. In one project in India, the women were engaged in dry lettering and sign-writing, a marvellous use of literacy for income generation and one which in many countries is greatly in demand.

But in most cases, even when engaged in activities which did require literacy for the successful completion of the tasks, the women did not use their own literacy skills which they claimed they had acquired through the literacy programme.

In two cases in Kenya where women's groups had bought land and set up shops, the women in each case hired an educated young man to keep the accounts and other records for them, in fact to do all the paper work. Similarly, in the many savings and credit groups which accompanied the literacy classes, especially in Bangladesh, the literacy work of keeping accounts was undertaken by the literacy instructor or one of the NGO officers, not by the women themselves.

In other words, different literacy strategies were adopted rather than the direct use of literacy skills to keep their accounts or to write their records.

What seems to have lain behind these cases were the attitudes of the instructors who said they did not believe that the women in these groups were capable of undertaking these tasks for themselves. In other words, the negative attitudes of the instructors towards the student learners (which had been internalised by the student learners themselves - they too regarded themselves as not being able to do this work for themselves) had become a demotivator for these women, discouraging them from learning to read the necessary shop materials, to write up the necessary accounts etc

I therefore noted two things: that the income-generating activities did not provide any material for learning literacy in the classes; and that the income-generation activities were normally of a kind which did not call for the use of literacy. The gap between the two was very wide. So that once again it is clear that functional literacy, in the sense of a closely related literacy and skill training programme, the one dependent upon the other, did not take place, despite the rhetoric of the literacy programmes and the titles sometimes attached to them.



3. The income-generation training and activities are more important to the participants than the literacy instruction

In some programmes in Kenya, the literacy classes are held on two nights of the week and the income-generation classes on another two nights. In every case I visited, more women turned up more regularly for the income-generation training and activity programmes than for the literacy - often two or three times as many women. To give one example, out of 39 registered student learners, five turned up for the literacy classes and 19 for the income-generating activities. Indeed, some literacy classes had been abandoned; only the income-generation programme had continued.

There are several reasons for this. First, the subject of the income-generating skills training had frequently been chosen by the groups of student learners. Such choice may have been exercised within limits, it is true. Sometimes the literacy instructor was unable to teach the required skills, in which case other trainers, if available, might be brought in. But even with this assistance, there was always a limited range of income-generating activities available to the participants. Nevertheless, the activity had in most cases been chosen by the student learners - and there is of course much more motivation among adult student learners for those areas of work which they have chosen for themselves.

Whereas with the literacy element, there was no choice. The primer had been written by the national literacy campaign or one of its agents, and the grass-roots instructors had been trained to follow it in sequence. The participants were there to do what they were told. Greater motivation attaches itself to those activities which the participants have chosen for themselves.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, greater progress had been made with the skill training than with the literacy training. The greater speed of progress with the income-generation skills training was apparent to the learners, while the slow progress with the literacy was equally apparent. This sense of progress had increased the motivation of the group towards the income-generation activities, but equally had increased the demotivation with the literacy programme.

This probably also reveals that the greater problem in the minds of the participants is their poverty rather than their illiteracy. They could see the income-generation activities providing some immediate relief to their poverty more easily than they could see increasing their literacy skills contributing to the improvement of their quality of life. This is no doubt a reflection which should encourage literacy agencies to adopt the 'literacy comes second' model rather than continue with the 'literacy comes first' approach.



4. The income-generating activities are frequently stereotyped to what is assumed to be women's roles

The internalisation by many of the women participants of the negative attitudes of the literacy agencies is perhaps most clearly revealed in the kinds of income-generating activities undertaken in many women's literacy programmes. These activities are, as we have seen, largely chosen by the women themselves, and the choices made show that most of the participants have come to accept the sexual division of labour which exists in their own society and the narrowly defined roles assigned to most women.

In almost all cases, the income-generation activities were stereotyped to existing women's activities - sewing, spinning and weaving, candle and soap making, basket making. In the Kenya Youth Polytechnics, "women and girls are monotonously enrolled in tailoring and dress making courses". In Bombay, women make bags and jam. In the Helwan Polytechnic Institute (Egypt), men were directed into courses on carpentry, wood-working, wall painting, plumbing, electrical work, photography, leather working, tailoring, typewriting and the repair and maintenance of typewriters, while the women were offered sewing and seamstress courses, mechanical and hand knitting, needle work, macrame, food industries, home economics, and the maintenance of knitting machines. The preparing and processing of food is a common element in the activities which accompany literacy programmes for women. In Ghana, a special variant of this is a project encouraging some women to grow, process and sell foods suitable for babies.

Each of the choices is of course made within a cultural setting. Thus in Bangladesh, several women's groups have taken up renting *khaz* land (surplus land from the government) on which to grow new crops; but in Egypt where the involvement of the poorer rural women on the land is much less than in most part of Asia or elsewhere in

Africa, this has not occurred. In Kenya, the women sometimes keep small gardens, especially around the newly supplied water pumps. In the field of agriculture, women's income-generating activities are usually confined to vegetable growing; the main cash crop development programmes through agricultural extension are reserved for men.

There are of course reasons offered for this approach. It is argued that it is surely better to build on the existing knowledge and experience of the women concerned rather than to help them to move into entirely new fields of activity where the new knowledge base required is large (I have never heard such an argument used in relation to men). Such a statement is to accept the roles assigned to women by men. It is also to suggest that women are less able to learn new things than men.

In several of the Kenya groups, the income-generation aspect of the work had declined; the women were doing needlework and other artistic activities designed to decorate their own houses rather than for sale. In part this reflects the facts that many poor women's economic activities in this country are done within the home rather than outside in a place of work, and that these activities are of a subsistence nature and are often unremunerated, though they may contribute more or less substantially to the family's livelihood.

And these women seem to have accepted this as a given in their own world. In every case where I saw this, the women had also failed to achieve any break-through in learning literacy skills.

There are of course some examples of women breaking the mould of traditional 'women's activities'. In southern Andhra Pradesh (India), some women attached to a literacy programme were being taught to repair television sets so that they could get a job in a local factory (none of them did so; and the subject had been proposed by the agency, not by the women themselves).

In Bangladesh, some groups of women working with one agency had set up a street-side restaurant or tea-house, traditionally a man's job. The investment was not high. One of these tea-houses was eventually forced out of business by the police at the behest of rival local men, while another survived but without making a great income out of the activity. In Kenya and in Ahmedabad (India), groups of women are engaged in making cooking stoves in clay and metal (*jikos* in Kenya and smokeless *chulas* in India) and in one case brick and roofing tile-making, heavy work often regarded as traditionally men's work. In Madras, the YMCA help women to make furniture - cane chairs and settees.

But in very few of these programmes do the women use their literacy. There are exceptions, of course: in projects in India and again in Kenya, women are learning to maintain and repair the pumps which supply their villages with safe clean and reliable water. In both cases the women are being encouraged to use their newly acquired literacy skills for this task.

This latter example suggests one important way in which a small number of the skill training programmes which are attached to women's literacy programmes have been used to enable the women to become at least more independent, if not greater income-generators. By entering into the cycle of women's everyday life and identifying those points at which women's dependency are greatest, it is possible to help them to acquire greater independence by learning to cope with those situations directly themselves.

Some significant social changes are contributing to this development. The absence of men from the family, going out of the village or town to earn more money, has in some cases left the women of the family to cope alone with those activities which in the past had been done by all the members of the family, including men.

In Egypt a group of women in a literacy programme is learning to undertake smaller (non literate) domestic electrical repairs for themselves rather than wait for a man to come along to mend a fuse or change a plug, and they are also provided with an opportunity to learn to maintain and repair their own knitting machines (only very few of them chose to take this programme).

In Kenya and India I saw groups which had learned to mend their own sewing machines and another group which had learned to repair bicycles.

The aim of the group in India which were learning to maintain and repair water pumps was quite specific - to take over the role of men in this respect. But interestingly, in all of these cases, the women involved had not used these newly developed skills to help other people or to earn any income - they were simply for their own situations, to reduce their dependency on men for different activities in their way of living.

There is, as these examples show, an important point which some of the advocates of 'breaking the mould' forget in relation to the development of women's income-generation activities in areas where such activities have not been common. In many societies, it is already a major step forward for poor women to engage in any form of income generation, to achieve an independent income of their own - a step which frequently brings about a direct reaction either from the men in the lives of these women or from others who feel their own livelihood threatened.

But for women in such societies, to expect them not only to earn for themselves but also to undertake a task which traditionally has been seen to be the legitimate field of men may be too much of a step to be taken at the same time. There are signs of course that such changes are already happening in different countries in the course of existing social change. In parts of India, for example, threshing rice used to be men's work; it is now often done by women. In many other places, training for secretarial or tailoring work represents the necessary filling of areas of work in which men had until recently predominated.

Nevertheless, so strong are the traditional stereotypes in many contexts that it is often difficult enough to encourage the women participants to undertake any form of income-generation activity, let alone for them to do this by entering into fields normally dominated by men. To urge them to take two steps at the same time - to earn an independent income and at the same time to do this in a non-traditional way - may be asking too much of anyone. It may be better to make advances by relatively slow stages - from dress-making to making army uniforms as in Delhi, for example.



5. All the literacy-sponsored income-generation activities are in the low-level income yielding bracket

All the income-generating activities undertaken within the context of ‘functional literacy’ classes have low levels of incomes. In Bangladesh I saw some silver-smithing by women (and men) - again without any literacy involvement. These were traditional economic activities for the rural inhabitants in that part of the country. They worked together while they met in groups but all the members did their own work and earned their own income. None of them employed anyone else, and the goods they made were made to order, not in advance for general sale. They did not invest large capital in stock, and therefore even this programme did not earn the participants large sums of money. The only high-income-level activity I saw was a luxury carpet-making project in Gujarat - in essence a factory run by a local developmental NGO using women workers, onto which literacy classes had been attached.

Where the income-generation activities have been suggested by the literacy agencies, it would seem they are keen to keep the women within a narrow band of income-generation. They see their women learners as poor, and the task of their programmes as relieving to some extent that poverty, not to generate the entrepreneurial spirit, to create wealth. And those women who choose their own income-generation activities appear to accept that their proper place is among the more poorly paid workers - they seem not to have realised that their work could develop into small businesses.

6. The income-generation activities usually take place in the informal economic sector

Almost all of the activities taught to the women and engaged in by the women in the literacy programmes I saw lay in the informal sector. They are more rarely in the areas of employment, nor are they normally intended to lead to wage-earning employed work except where the NGO itself employs them, as BRAC is doing in Bangladesh or the matchmakers of Tamil Nadu.

In part, this is because of the stereotyping of these activities. Women, it is felt, are already very busy. Their economic activities are necessarily limited by their 'other duties'. The 'right' sphere for women's economic activities thus must lie in the informal sector. Women cannot really expect to break into a man's world. They produce saleable goods in their own homes and engage in individual petty trading. They keep poultry, lots of poultry; they grow mushrooms, make textiles, or grow vegetables, and sell the produce informally among themselves or in the very local market.

Even when the women form their own groups and (for example) purchase a grinding mill by which they undertake a service for their neighbours, as in India and Kenya, the scope of their economic activities is almost always limited to the informal sector and to a very restricted region. And the literacy programmes accept and encourage this narrow range of economic activities.

Such an approach not only ignores the fact that there are many men in the informal sector; it under-estimates the amount of time which many rural and urban women already spend in economic activities, especially in agriculture and vending. One recent estimate by ILO suggested that 80% of all the world's vendors are women. But training in vending occurred in very few of the literacy programmes I visited in these countries except in one project in Bangladesh (two roadside restaurants/tea shops).

Several programmes in Bangladesh, India and Kenya have helped the women in the literacy programmes to form 'co-operatives' to engage in their income-generation activities, especially to run retail shops. But close examination reveals that in most of these cases, there is very little 'co-operation'. What sharing there is is largely confined to the mobilisation and the provision of resources and to the distribution of the profits (if any). The key element (what many would argue to be the essential element which turns a profit-sharing group into a true co-operative) of joint decision-making about the programme is absent.

7. The training provided is very limited in its scope

This no doubt accounts for one further feature of these skill training programmes designed to enhance the income-generating abilities of the women in literacy programmes - the very limited range of instruction which is provided for them.

In all cases, the women are being taught how to make things. But they are very rarely indeed being taught how to sell them. Any market research into the products' viability usually tends to be done by the agency concerned, not by the women learners. I found no case where the women were being trained to go out to find markets, to adapt their products to meet local demand, to draw up budgets and to offer to provide estimates of the cost of products, to purchase the raw materials at the most advantageous rates, to keep careful accounts and to draw up a true balance sheet which would show a profit or loss at the end of the trading period. They are not being shown how to mobilise credit or being enabled to develop any of the other management skills, certainly not how to recruit, employ and supervise other people.

In other words, the women are being taught to work for others who would do all of this, or they are being persuaded to keep their income-generating operations on a very small self-employed scale. It is almost as if the literacy agencies have decided that these women proto-industrialists must not be allowed to become entrepreneurs in case they might become a threat to already established interests.



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There are of course other issues surrounding the income-generating programmes which accompany many literacy programmes for women. For example, there is the question of who are the ultimate beneficiaries. In some places, notably in Bangladesh, when the women began to earn, some of the men stopped passing over to them any part of their earnings for household purposes; in others, men took over some of the projects when they proved to be successful. Certainly in many cases I found examples of income-generating activities which simply added to the wide range of work which the women were already undertaking - even when they took them up willingly.

Just as important is the question of whether the projects are individual projects (even when pursued in small groups) or whether they are genuinely group projects. In other words, in some cases, all or some of the profits from an individual's labours go to support the group's activities, and in a very few cases indeed, the decisions about the activities are taken jointly by the group members.

In other cases, the profits go entirely to the individual concerned. Practice on this varied; but a general rule seems to be that when a group undertook a project jointly, the number of participants tended to decline, leaving a small core to carry on the work. Often, the group is held together by the enthusiasm, commitment and sometimes the self-sacrifice of one person. This was the case with the Kenya *jiko*-makers.

Such issues are important for the success of any venture. But the main thrust of our study is to see how such income-generating programmes relate to the literacy teaching-learning programmes. And the conclusion must be that such a relationship is in almost every case very tenuous indeed.

V

CONCLUSION: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

It has been the argument of this book - on the basis of a survey of several literacy programmes in different countries, in which a programme of income-generation skill learning has been attached to the literacy instruction - that in practice this twin approach to learning literacy has not worked and does not work. In almost every case, the income-generating activities have taken over; they have assumed a greater importance in the lives of the women participants than the literacy programmes.

This is of course entirely understandable. The income-generation activities provide some immediate returns; the literacy will not show any fruits for a very long time - if at all. The women student learners have other strategies to cope with literacy strategies. For them, increasing the means of providing themselves and their families with a secure and better livelihood comes first. For the learners, unlike the literacy agencies, literacy comes second or even further down the scale of individual priorities.

The reason for much of this failure is that these literacy programmes are built on a traditional model of adult literacy programmes - that literacy training is a process of the transfer of a set of independent technical skills from the literacy instructor to ignorant and unskilful rural women. And the income-generation skills development programme is based on much the same premise - that the women participants need to learn new skills which they do not possess in order to engage in new activities which they do not pursue at the moment. In other words, the women in these programmes need to learn two sets of skills in order to change the pattern of their lives.

But if the new insights concerning literacy - that literacy is seen as a set of culturally determined practices which both literate and illiterate persons engage in - are correct, then it follows that a new pattern of literacy education and training and of skills training will emerge. Taking a more positive view of the women in our programmes, we can see that they are already engaged in various activities, both of a literacy nature and of a livelihood-sustaining nature. And many of them want to develop these existing practices further.

It is surely on these existing practices that we should build our literacy and income-generating programmes - not to try to persuade these women to change their lives but to help them to do rather better what they are already doing.

It may then be argued that the best way to promote literacy with groups of women is to accept *their* sense of priority and to adopt a 'literacy comes second' approach. Rather than say - as most of the literacy agencies I saw in Bangladesh, Egypt, India and Kenya said - that literacy is the door to development, a tool which needs to be mastered first and then used for developmental purposes, we should assign to it a more appropriate role, that of a useful but not essential tool which can help people to cope with certain situations rather more effectively than they are coping with them in other ways at the moment.

‘Literacy comes second’

This means that it would be better to abandon the current approach of creating special groups for the specific purpose of learning literacy - whether for men or for women - even when income-generating skill training is appended to the literacy programme. For in almost all cases, the income-generation activities will assume a greater importance in the minds of the participants than the literacy. General literacy programmes should now perhaps be abandoned except in some special cases such as a period of more or less revolutionary change which will call for massive social changes on a wide scale with high levels of popular motivation - as in Cuba in the 1970s or South Africa today.

Rather it would seem better to work with already existing groups of people (especially groups of women) who are already engaged on some developmental task and to assist them *in that task*, progressing from there to literacy teaching when the group itself identifies the need for this new set of skills to help them with their own task. Functional literacy is learning to use literacy skills *in real situations* rather than in special classes. It may be more effective than for literacy agencies to work with groups who wish not just to learn literacy in the abstract but who have a common intention to learn literacy skills in order to use these skills in a real situation which they have already chosen for themselves.

We have seen above one way in which this can be done, by helping the groups of women to examine their own lives in order to identify those points at which they are dependent on other people for assistance, and in some of these cases encouraging them to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills (which may or may not include literacy skills) which will enable them to become independent of such assistance. Breaking into the cycle of dependence by building up the confidence of the participant women and by helping them to develop the required techniques, while at the same time using such activities for the teaching of literacy skills, may be a very useful approach to this programme of addressing women’s literacy and their income-generating needs.

But there is a more effective approach. Groups of women already exist with their minds already set on a common task which they have commenced even without possessing literacy skills. If such groups become aware that the practice of literacy can help them with their chosen tasks, they will provide fertile ground for teaching literacy to women. Such groups may be assisted to cope with the literacy situations which will inevitably arise in the course of their work through the development of their own literacy skills.



To give one or two examples:

- in Banda (India), a project by Nirantar designed to help women learn how to maintain and repair water pumps led to the development and use of literacy skills. To many people, this is the wrong way round: surely literacy should come first, the training to maintain and repair the pumps second. But the programme has worked most effectively.
- in Kenya, the Kenya Water and Health Organisation (KWAHO) which has for years been working with village-level women's groups, with water committees and with volunteer village-level workers, is now exploring with those women ways in which they feel that some literacy training can help them in their already identified tasks.
- in Egypt, women engaged in a programme in the North Sinai desert weaving mats and selling them in the local markets have now themselves realised that they need to learn specific literacy skills if they are to develop this programme further.
- in Bangladesh, where there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction among many NGOs with 'straight' literacy programmes, one organisation records a level of demand for literacy which they cannot cope with. Starting with activities such as small savings and credit groups, health and sanitation programmes and income generation activities for women, Saptagram Nari Swanirvar Parishad is now seeing a grass-roots demand for literacy instruction which most other agencies would envy.

Conclusion

To start with existing groups of women who are already engaged on a development programme of their own rather than form new women's literacy classes; to start with assisting these groups in their chosen activity rather than to start by teaching them literacy; to use the developmental activity as the basis for learning an appropriate literacy - this would seem to be a better recipe for promoting women's literacy than the other way round, to start with literacy and then to progress to income-generating activities or even to undertake both activities at the same time. We need to start where the student learners are; and if their priorities are with income-generation rather than literacy, we need to accept this and to work with it. We should not try to mould our student learners to our own picture of the world, but to help them to clarify and to reflect on their own picture of the world until they can change their world more effectively.



The need for training

If, however, we are to work with local development groups which already exist; if we are to help each group to meet its own goals, to advance its own programme; and especially if we are to use the activities of the group as the basis for learning a particular kind of literacy for an immediate task (here brick making, there keeping goats; here sewing, there jam making; here reed weaving, there the provision of water supplies etc), how can one build such a programme into a national programme? How can one develop this approach to literacy on a large scale? It will always be possible (as a UNESCO Literacy Adviser once told me in Delhi) to find a number of experienced and able grass-roots instructors who can adopt such an approach; but how can one make it into a mass movement? How can we enable the local instructors to identify or create, develop and utilise materials appropriate to the particular context and circumstances of their own group of learners?

It would seem that two things are needed. First, it would be useful to localise the literacy programme. National campaigns except in periods of major revolution have rarely been successful. The localisation of the Total Literacy Campaign in India does seem to be

having some good effects. Certainly, nationally produced literacy materials in a multi-lingual society like Kenya seem to have been singularly ineffective.

Secondly, much more training of village level instructors will be needed - on-going, not just initial, literacy training. And this training should not be on the same model as the training of school teachers - for that would be to introduce entirely inappropriate models of literacy teaching into work with adults. Rather the model should be the training of social development workers. The key component of the training in this approach to literacy teaching will clearly need to be to increase the confidence and openness of the village-level literacy instructors, to help them to be rather more willing to learn from the women's groups with whom they interact and rather than 'teach' them, to try to help them to develop their own programmes further.

Such local instructors will need to learn to examine their own literacy activities and to develop ways to use these practices as the basis of much of their literacy learning programmes. In other words, they will come to serve as role models - which implies of course that such instructors need to be chosen more because they are reading than because they **can** read.

And they need to learn how to work with their student learners and how to identify and where necessary adapt appropriate 'real' materials for the particular task which their particular group of women is already engaged upon. In both of these tasks, they will find that their student learners will be able to help them.

And part of their work will be to help the group members to learn not just to read these materials but also to use them. They will need to learn to identify the existing literacy practices of the participants in their literacy classes which will arise during the other activities of the group and to use these as the basis for developing the writing and calculating skills of the group members. They will need to learn from their student learners about the task which the group already has in hand; and those within the group who may have some literacy skills need to be encouraged and enabled to help the other members of the group to develop literacy skills of their own - if and when they so wish.

New approaches to the teaching of literacy, particularly with women, which are already growing in various parts of the world, as much part of the women's movement as of literacy programmes, have much to offer. One example is the Language Experience Approach to literacy which has been developed in South Africa and other countries, listening to and writing down the words of the student learners and then helping them to read their own words; such an approach may help to make the literacy programmes more culturally relevant and thus more effective.

Encouraging the student learners to choose or even develop their own learning materials (learner-generated materials) may be another approach. Developing literacy programmes through a literacy-comes-second approach would seem to assist with the development of 'really useful literacy'.

This will of course place great demands on the literacy agencies and instructors, calling for them to develop culturally appropriate literacy materials and methods of learning. But such demands need to be faced and met if those who wish to help women to learn literacy

while they go about undertaking their own tasks, dealing with their own problems and developing their own life context, are to be assisted and facilitated with this work.

Literacy, education and social development: All of this would suggest that the proper home for women's literacy is not in the educational programme (not even adult education) but in social development.

As long as women's literacy programmes form part of the educational assistance programmes of both national governments and aid NGOs, they will partake of the nature of education - that is, they will be regarded as a preparation for some possible new future. For that is what education (schooling) really consists of. Whereas social development consists of assistance with the process of living as it really happens now. A UNESCO commission saw this in the early 1970s. In a famous but now rather neglected report, a distinction was drawn between on the one hand formal schooling, which they saw as 'Learning To Become' something which you are not yet (i.e. for children, learning to become an adult or to become a particular kind of worker), and on the other hand adult and non-formal education (in its widest sense) which they saw as assisting with the process of 'Learning To Be' what you already are.

Seen in this light, women's literacy programmes are not a process of 'learning to become literate' but a process of learning to help with current and immediate tasks, not of learning to take future action but of learning while acting immediately on their world to change it.

The same is true of course of women's income-generating training. As long as this is seen as part of education (i.e. in this case, part of vocational training programmes), it will once again be future-oriented. The student learners will be learning for some future better, more prosperous, new existence. But if women's income-generation training programmes are seen as part of social development, then they will form part of the process of helping with immediate tasks.

Again, as long as literacy learning programmes remain part of educational development, the training of the instructors will be modelled largely on school-based teaching rather than on the personal development processes of the social development workers - and they will remain to a large extent ineffective.

I believe that it is essential that women's literacy and income-generating training programmes should be separated as quickly as possible from educational programmes and be firmly located in women's social development programmes if they are to become more effective. The link with 'education' is a barrier to success in these programmes.

The main purpose of linking income-generating activities with literacy programmes is so that the literacy being learned is not only directly relevant to what the women want to do and in many cases have already begun to do but can be used from the start in real situations - that the literacy can help forward the very activities which will relieve poverty and improve the quality of life of the participants. Without that, learning literacy skills will remain largely irrelevant for many women.

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