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Literacy programs as an empowering agent for women: A case study from Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

Basic literacy is recognised as the means for equipping citizens of a country. In PNG, literacy for women empowers them socially, politically and economically. Literacy gives women the means to improve their economic status and subsequent standard of living, provides access to the power of written knowledge, provides skills and knowledge that has a direct relationship to the improvement of the health and wellbeing of the family, leads to enhanced quality of life for their families and improved education outcomes for their children, gives voice in decision making, self-development and self-value; thus reducing marginalisation. Oyitso, & Olomukoro (2012) have observed, "Access to literacy is considered one of the main factors for empowerment particularly empowerment of those excluded from [a] formal system of education" (p.67). Literacy is identified as a catalyst of cultural and societal change." In PNG, there are numerous agencies offering literacy courses, such as Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and Pacific Adventist University (PAU). It is discovered that these adult literacy programs should be well-designed, organised and authentic, and structured around topics relevant to the students: social and gender issues, health and nutrition issues, marriage issues, family support systems, and practical communication methods, such as using the mobile phone, electronic banking and filling out official documents. Literacy programs are more than teaching the rudiments of reading, writing and mathematics, it is about empowering a person to become an effective and contributing member of society. Literacy is therefore, a basic instrument for empowerment. Oyitso, & Olomukoro, (2012, p.73) assert "When women are literate, it is all society that gains."

> *Societies that discriminate on the basis of gender have greater poverty, slower economic growth, weaker governance and a lower standard of living*

Introduction

Education is recognised as the means for sustainable development, for both men and women. Broadly speaking, literacy empowers and is the most important means through which people and especially women, can be developed socially, politically and economically. For women, literacy gives them the means to improve their economic status and subsequent standard of living, access to the power of written knowledge; literacy provides women with the skills and knowledge that has a direct relationship on the improvement of the health and wellbeing of the family and reduces infant mortality; literacy leads to an enhanced quality of life for their families and improved education outcomes for their children. Just as importantly, literacy gives women a voice in decision-making, self-development, self-value and reduced marginalisation. Educated "women are more able to engage in productive activities, find formal sector employment and earn higher wages, and enjoy greater returns…than the less educated women" (Oyitso, & Olomukoro, 2012, p.72). Further, "The provision of quality literacy to nearly half of the population will no doubt have a great and sustainable social and economic impact on the womenfolk. Access to literacy is considered one of the main factors for empowerment of those excluded from [the] formal system of education and development," Oyitso, & Olomukoro (2012, p.67) further "the World Bank reports that societies that discriminate on the basis of gender have greater poverty, have slower economic growth, weaker governance and a lower standard of living" (Babu, 2011, p.4).

Definition of literacy

A definition derived from Oyitso and Olomukoro (2012) states that

> Literacy is not just the ability to read and write but also, …the ability to [effectively] use the printed and written information to function in society. ...to be literate is not just to have mastered the skills of reading, writing and computing with numbers, but more than that, …to be able to use those skills effectively for communications in all aspects of one's life in social, cultural, economic and political sphere[s]." (p.57)

Literacy can be described as an effective means for poverty reduction as people have the knowledge to access financial and social opportunities. Functional literacy is therefore, "a competence that goes beyond grammar and semantics" basic to daily communication (Kagitcibasi, Goksen, & Golguz, p. 473).

Benefits

Human capital development

> Human development is defined as the process of enlarging a person's…capabilities to function in a range of activities they choose to do (Armytra, Sen, 1989)...[Encouraging] development is about removing the obstacles to what a person can do in life, obstacles such as illiteracy, ill health, lack of resources, or lack of civil and political freedom. (Oyitso & Olomukoro, 2012, p. 68)

Literacy is recognised as one of the cornerstones in removing obstacles in a person fulfilling their potential. The *Education for all Global Monitoring Report* (2008) states, "that there are 771 million adult illiterates in the world today and two-third of them are women. For women to be integrated into [a] development process, they need basic education, to enable them to become co-partners in meaningful and effective development" (Oyitso & Olomukoro, 2012, p. 66). "Sustainable human development cannot be effective if half of the human race remain ignorant, marginalised or discriminated against" (Oyitso & Olomukoro, 2012, p. 67.).

Social benefits: Life expectancy, reduced child mortality

Kagitchibasi, Gosken and Gulgoz (2005) note that Goody (1977) and Olsen (1977, 1996) suggest "Literacy has been seen as a highly potent catalyst of cultural and societal change" (p. 473). Ramdas (1990) (cited in Oyitso & Olomukoro, 2012) has argued that increased female literacy is the key to benefits for society in general. A literate mother has the skills and knowledge to provide better child care and healthier children, understands the importance of providing balanced nutrition, comprehends the advantages of a small family norm, has the skills to promote learning and education, and can instil "in her offspring the right attitudes and behaviour expected from them by the society" (p. 71). "Boliva (2010) stated that investing in women's literacy carries very high returns: it improves livelihoods, leads to better child and maternal health, and favours girls' access to education" (Oyitso & Olomukoro, 2012, p. 70). "They also use more family planning and have fewer and healthier children than non-literate women" (Kagitchibasi, Gosken & Gulgoz, 2005, p. 473). "Literate women are found to enjoy a higher status in the family than non-literate women" (Olateju, 2007, p. 158).

"Educated mothers are more likely to send their children to school than the uneducated ones" (Oyitso & Olomukoro, 2012, p. 73). Links have been established between parents' educational level and children's achievement and "research studies show that children whose parents have less than a high school education tend to have the poorest performance on reading tests" (Kogut, 2004, p. 28) and further that mothers' literacy level predicts children's literacy development (van Steensel, 2006). "Effective adult literacy programs are not only important for adult literacy learning but are also important for the literacy development of children and adolescents" (Lynch, 2009, p. 509). Purcell-Gates's (1996) research, cited by Lynch (2009), "also showed that children's early literacy achievement related to parents' engagement in specific types of print literacy activities, particularly those with more complex levels of discourse for leisure and entertainment" (p. 510). A child denied their right of a quality primary education is disadvantaged and handicapped all through life. Literacy, reading, writing, arithmetic and life skills are important to have the ability to succeed in life.

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Economic benefits

Educating women also improves the level of economic development in a country. The higher the level of educational status for women, the more developed the nation. Imhabekhai and Olomukoro (2007) (cited in Oyitso & Olomukoro, 2012, p. 70) have pointed out that "literacy is a basic instrument in social transformation," including for empowering women in the process of economic development and reduce poverty. Further, Oyitso, & Olomukoro, (2012) observe that, "Aderinoye (2004), quoted in Adekola and Abanum (2010) says that the difference between the developed and underdeveloped countries of the world is related to the level of literacy among the populace" (p. 70). In short, newly literate women have a positive ripple effect on all the economic development indicators. "The role of women in the economic development of the nation cannot be overemphasised. They constitute 70% of the group that produces food for the nations. They cultivate and grow food to feed the families and the nation at large" (p. 73). "Efedi (2008) said literate women create income or wealth for the family through their good and benefiting employment whether in private or public sector" (p. 73).

Table 1: Church and university programs contributing to women's literacy

church		
program	**program details**	**contributing elements**
Sabbath School	engagement with Bible based life development principles and practices	- program planning - participation in performance - discussion and rational support
Annual International Women's Day celebration	celebration of womanhood including adapting to the establishment of social equity	day of celebration – church program, discussion, luncheon and social interaction and networking, promoting determination to - preach in church - pray in church - share written material and if necessary communally read before the formal presentations - discuss written material to be used for the formal presentations - engage in all aspects of life
Partners in Ministry programs	monthly sessions incorporating both teaching skills and sharing information	- health programs - sharing and reading together religious written material - health programs on women's cancers - budgeting and financial issues - how to read and fill-out government forms
Women's Ministry programs	outreach – services directed to the broader community	visits to the local hospitals to read Bible verses and to sing
	inreach – services directed to a personal community	Sabbath morning special prayer sessions and devotions taken by the women
Adventist Youth programs	each Sabbath afternoon, the AY program includes sessions that enable people	some topics: - how to choose a marriage partner - parenting skills - systematic Bible reading skills
Branch Sabbath Schools	Sabbath morning visits to local villages	- sharing of written material - presentations of worship programs, with an emphasis on engaging children
Health Summit	yearly health summit	information sharing and network establishment

Political benefits

Personal empowerment through literacy can translate into participation in the political process, and through informed discussion of policies, the enacting of democracy. "Educated people are to some extent more likely to vote and voice more tolerant attitudes and democratic values" (Hannum and Buchman, 2003; cited in Oyitso & Olomukoro, 2012, p. 73). Literate women have contributed to the political stability and peace of their country.

In summary, educating women has the potential to improve all aspects of life: everyone in society benefits if women are educated.

Literacy programs in PNG

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is desperate to improve women's access to basic literacy. Basic Literacy Programs in PNG and the access by women's to literacy programs must be well-designed, culturally appropriate, linked to authentic reading and writing resources, consider social and family issues, and as well financial facilities.

Provision of literacy programs

Designing and implementing well-planned, organised and non-formal adult literacy programs can empower women. In PNG, most of these

Pacific Adventist University		
program	**program details**	**contributing elements**
social inclusion activities	gender equity programs	counselling and ongoing support
	family and social learning	- sewing classes - cooking classes - banking and financial sessions
	HIV education	clinic support
	disabilities provision	achieved by: - acceptance and access to support if needed - physical access provided to spaces - sign language in church programs
	child protection and development	Sabbath Schools, Pathfinders, education programs
	environment	- campus communication regarding feral animals - recycling ideas and practices
Food for Life	improving life for people who are disadvantaged	- providing food for people living on the local rubbish dumps - building, equipping and financially supporting new elementary schools in the Port Moresby district - supporting HIV sufferers in hospitals
academic schools	School of Education	- yearly literacy training course for all teachers - service type education program to education providers that cater for students with all forms of disabilities (eg Cheshire Homes, Red Cross) - week of activities to celebrate Christian Education
regular health services to residents of PAU and surrounding villages	nurses	individual medical appoints
	specialised services	- diabetics testing - HIV testing - malaria test
	prenatal and postnatal care	- birthing facilities - regular times for baby clinic - regular times for immunisation

programs are provided by church agencies. Literacy programs have a flow-on affect, strengthening the churches' capacity for development. By building the institutional capacity of PNG churches, churches are better able to contribute to strengthening governance in PNG, and improving service delivery (Anderson, 2011, p. 1). Church literacy programs, based on 'life in all its fullness' (John 10:10), entails reframing the mission of the church to address issues of social and political concern, or 'living the gospel' through social action; holistic service for integral human development; and transformation. Through generating an understanding that men and women should be living in 'Christian partnerships', more equal and equitable gender relations can be fostered. Churches, with their networks and influence, have the potential to effect significant change in attitudes and behaviour (Anderson, 2011, p. 11; see Table 1).

Church sponsored courses are usually free of charge, commonly held at a church community hall and organised by female trainers. Churches, with sponsorship from Aid Agencies have a choice of programs. The most common program conducted consisted of a 120-hour curriculum, the Basic Literacy Program, provided by the Ministry

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of Education, and run over three to four months involving participants for three to four hours, three times a week. Some churches have designed their own programs. All have varying levels of success.

Provision of broader educational training

Whichever type of literacy program is used, research has shown that adult literacy levels remain low despite a large number of adult literacy programs being implemented (Guy, 2005). Some research (Duffy, 1992; Janes & Kermani, 2001) has shown that providing literacy skills only is seldom enough. When people learn to read, they do not automatically gain access to all the information they may need because privilege or prejudice, such as that associated with class or gender, is a strong determiner of who can know what. In the PNG context, physical and social isolation, status in the family and lack of access to practice one's new skills, can deter and diminish the usefulness of the literacy classes.

To address the ineffectiveness of some adult literacy programs, it has been suggested that programs should have strong links to adults' daily lives (Kagitcibasi, Goksen, & Gulgoz, 2005). Learners must use discourse within the community to engage in authentic activities, and engage in value placed literacy events.

For example, Lynch (2009, p. 510) cites the following three sources.

> Zubair (2001) found that in rural Pakistan, some of the print literacy practices of women entail reading prayers, newspapers, magazines, novels, medicine labels, cards, and calendars. Writing activities included letters, diaries, record keeping, messages, poetry, and short stories…. Participants in another study, who were all low-income mothers, liked word games, romance novels, and autobiographical writing that may support the need to express feelings, the need for recreation, and to escape from daily life stresses and activities (Finlay, 1999). Mace (1998) claimed that literacy might serve as a temporal excursion from the mundane…Purcell-Gates (1996) found that engagement included fliers, coupons, advertisements, television notices, grocery lists, name writing, and more. Indeed, for many of the reported studies, children would observe parents engaging in many of these literacy events (p. 510).

It is also suggested that participants use their literacy skills to discuss subjects such as communication in the family, child discipline, first aid, health and family planning, and citizenship rights. These topics can approach social and gender issues, such as the importance of marriage records, issues relating to marrying late, having a small family, and supporting the education of the girls in the family. Literacy skills can incorporate practical communication methods, such as using the mobile phone, electronic banking, following electronically recorded instructions, and filling out official documents. Literacy programs are more than teaching the rudiments of reading, writing and mathematics, it is about be[com]ing an effective contributing member of society.

Linking literacy programs to financial services

Literacy is linked to economic empowerment. In the PNG context, the majority of women wish for economic security. Microcredit is more than access to money; it is access to financial services. It is a self-help program that enables women to secure economic and financial strength. The effect of women having the capacity to save, access credit and banking services, has been more successful than when women just have access to credit subsidies (Babu, 2011, p. 7). The effect of women having contributed to the financial situation at home, earned greater respect from both their husbands and children; and more importantly, has avoided family quarrels about money (Babu, 2011, p. 6). Generally, women feel empowered, more confident, enjoy mobility and have a greater ease in visiting banks and financial institutions.

Women empowerment initiatives such as microfinance operations and micro enterprises have been a powerful tool is to assist women to operate and own their own business. Basic literacy, linked with these opportunities, has an enabling factor for women. The main benefits for linking literacy and access to financial opportunities is in inducing a multiplying effect. First, the income to families improves. Secondly, women have the confidence and self esteem to be independent, communicate, network, interact and enhance personal freedom. Lastly, economic independence can raise the family finances above the poverty line.

Conclusion

The UN secretary General Ban-Ki-Moon said, "that if women are empowered through literacy, considering their multiple roles in the society, they will contribute greatly to the development of the nation. Women need greater access to educational opportunities, skill acquisition and positions of authority to be truly empowered" (Oyitso & Olomukoro, 2012, p. 69). Literacy programs, with a link to financial opportunities can improve [the] living conditions of women; and, allow women to participate in

processes that will enhance their development at home, in the community and at national levels. Basic literacy education is linked to skills acquisition, access to information regarding health, nutrition status, legal rights and financial services, enhancing women's development socially, economically, [and] politically. "Education, formal or non-formal, is the foremost agent of empowerment" (Oyitso and Olomukoro, 2012, p. 67).

Effective programs, such as Functional Adult Literacy Programs, connect women to the public sphere and have the potential to create a sense of competence. Thus, while most learning still takes place within the context of the community, the public nature of the activity broadens the participants' horizon. Literacy provides a distinct advantage to these previously illiterate women in urban society. Literacy is therefore, a basic instrument for empowering women in the process of social transformation, modernisation and economic development. When women are literate, everyone in society gains! TEACH

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