

STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA THROUGH THE PROMOTION OF ADULT LITERACY SKILLS AMONG RURAL WOMEN

Aghamelu, Fidelis A. (PhD)

Philosophy Department

Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

E-mail: helen.fidelis@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Women in Nigeria and in other parts of Africa and Asia have long suffered all forms of deprivation resulting from cultural and religious ambiguities which is peculiar to the countries within these regions. However, unlike in countries like Saudi Arabia where women's (educated and uneducated) are deprived of the right to drive a car, the problem of women emancipation in Nigeria and other countries in Africa is hindered by the lack of basic literacy among women. The worst hit by the scourge of illiteracy are women in the rural areas of Nigeria. In most cases, these women do not have access to education as a result of poverty and inaccessibility to schools which are in most cases located in the urban areas. The authors are of the opinion that lack of adult literacy has led to increase in the scourge of HIV/AIDS, vulnerability to exploitation and manipulation, lack of self-esteem and poverty among women. It is believed that through the acquisition of adult literacy skills women in rural communities would have better self-respect/esteem, economic empowerment, improved standard of living, increased social interaction, involvement in politics, solving problem related to women and community, improved decision-making capacity in family and community. However, it appears that the value of literacy among the citizens in general and women in particular has not been given the adequate attention it deserves. It is against this background that the authors recommend the adoption of strategies that are devoid of political hijack. Such strategies include the improvement of budget for adult literacy at all levels of government in Nigeria. It is also recommended that there should be increased collaboration between administrators of adult literacy programmes and private organizations in the area of funding, provision of teaching and learning materials for adult literacy centres.

Keywords: Adult Literacy, Women empowerment, rural women

Introduction

Education has been viewed a tool for national and economic development in any nation. This is because through education people can gain access to resources, contribute to decision making, gain control over their lives, gain self respect and improve on their societal values and image. According to Nzeneri (2002), education is a basic human right and frees the human mind from ignorance and slavery for developmental purpose. In support of this Maclean (2008) opined that high quality and relevant education and schooling have helped to alleviate poverty, promote sustainable development, equity, justice and have helped in mainstreaming of the marginalised and vulnerable groups in society.

In light of the forgoing, Adeshina (2012) asserted that the number of functional literate persons in a country, the much better is the chances for rapid political, social,

economic, technological and cultural development. Adeshina further averred that literacy is an indispensable foundation that enables young people and adults to engage in learning opportunities at all stages of the learning continuum. The right to literacy is an inherent part of the right to education. It is a prerequisite for the development of personal, social, economic and political empowerment. Mylek (2008) saw literacy as an essential means of building people's capabilities to cope with the evolving challenges and complexities of life, culture, economy and society. A nation with a high percentage of functional literates has great potentials for advancement. Supporting this, Asnarulkhadi and Muhammad (2013) averred that where women are educated, they change the behaviour of the generation that is necessary for a better life. Asnarulkhadi and Muhammad further noted literacy and education of women lead them toward equality and improvement, which in turn help in the process of national development as it changes their image and their role within the society. It is therefore highly necessary on the part of a nation to make women educated. Adeshina (2012) stated that adult literacy skills empower women in that through the acquisition of the basic literacy skills they will have a clearer perspective of their plight, their lives and how to improve on their present plight. Basic literacy skills empower women to organize themselves to fight for their rights and privileges. Through literacy, training women from different communities have come together as collectives toward the overall goal of achieving gender equality as well as sustainable comprehensive community development. However, the need to ensure the promotion of basic literacy programmes for women (especially rural women) in Nigeria have not been give the attention it deserves.

This is evident in the barrage of political, social and institutional neglect that faces the administration of basic literacy programmes in Nigeria. It is been observed that most basic literacy programme suffer insufficient number and quality of physical infrastructures such as school buildings, school furniture and equipment, lack of books, writing materials and teaching supplies and insufficient number of qualified teachers. This has resulted in non-participation of women illiterates in the basic literacy programmes in their community. The bulk of these women illiterates reside in the rural areas and this negates the challenge of education to serve rural development is one of the main themes of the Education for All (EFA) initiative. It should be noted that 60% of the people in developing countries (70% of the population in Nigeria) still lives in rural areas (National Population Commission Report (NPC), 2004). While rural-urban statistics on education are scarce, many countries report that nonschool attendance, early drop-out of students; adult illiteracy and gender inequality in education are disproportionately higher in rural areas. Furthermores, Adeshina (2012) emphasized that there is a great deal of urban-rural disparities in educational investment and in the quality of teaching and learning are widespread and need to be redressed. These factors thus, have further increased the inability of rural women to know what their rights are and defend these rights. It is against this background that this paper sought to advance strategies that will help to promote the acquisition of basic literacy skills among rural women in Nigeria.

Conceptualizing Literacy

Literacy is the ability to write and numerate with understanding, and being able to use the skill in one's daily socio-economic activities. Obanya (2004) defined literacy as the ability to read and write with understanding of a simple statement (in one's own

language) related to one's daily life. According to UNESCO (2010), literacy is at the heart of basic education for all, and essential for eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy. In the same vein, the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (2006) defined literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning which enables individuals to actualize their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to take full and active part in their community and the larger society. This ultimately leads to functional literacy; i.e., the ability to adapt to new and changing circumstances and requirements. Thus, literacy is a tool that equips rural women intellectually, empowers them economically and makes them socially and politically relevant.

Conceptualizing Adult Literacy

Adult literacy programme can be categorized into two: basic adult literacy and functional adult literacy programmes (Ezimah, 2004). The Basic Adult Literacy Programme is mainly designed to arm or furnish the students with the rudimentary skills of reading, writing and computation through the use of the local languages, especially in the mother tongue. The objective here is to equip the learners with basic skills of communication and understanding of their environment. Basic literacy can be defined as the ability of an individual adult (man or woman) to read, write and communicate in known language(s), as well as the ability to do basic mathematical computations far beyond basic literacy level. Barton (2006) asserted that the notion of basic literacy is used for the initial learning of reading and writing which adults who have never been to school need to go through. Similarly, the International Council for Adult Education (2003) viewed basic literacy as a form of learning to read and write (text and numbers), reading and writing to learn, and developing these skills and using them effectively for meeting basic needs. On the other hand, functional literacy, however, is seen as the broader concept of literacy functional adult literacy programmes combine both the teaching of literacy, numeracy and vocational skills. The objective is to equip recipients with skills and knowledge that could make them employable and useful in other spheres of life on completion of training. According to Nwafor and Agi (2013), the components of adult literacy programme are as follows:

- i. Reading; i.e., ability to read up to a particular grade level
- ii. Writing; i.e., the ability to write clearly and reasonably in a particular language.
- iii. Mathematics: "Numeracy" or the ability to perform basic mathematical operations needed in daily life.
- iv. English as a second or other language (ESOL): The teaching of English speaking, listening, reading and writing skills to those for whom it not a native language.
- v. Cultural literacy: Familiarity with the background knowledge of the cultural heritage of one's society.

Adult Literacy education thus is a dynamic process of learning in which women gain access to knowledge and skills to critically reflect on their social reality and take collective action to transform it. It is a strategic intervention for empowering women

in the wider struggle against inequality and injustice in society. Literacy for poor women is essentially, advocated as a means for acquiring knowledge and skills through which they can begin to understand and analyze unequal gender relations in society and changes the nature and direction of systemic forces that marginalize them. Thus, literacy education is a critical component of the strategy for women's empowerment. It is an education that would enable women to obtain access to the intellectual and human resources they need to transform the material and social conditions of their existence (Silawal, 2003).

Conceptualizing Women Empowerment

Empowerment is multi-dimensional and refers to the expansion of freedom of choice and action in all spheres (social, economic, and political) to shape one's life. It also implies control over resources and decisions. The most common use of the term "empowerment" refers to increasing the power of the low-power group, so that it more nearly equals the power of the high power group (Bhadra, 2001). Further the term empowerment is defined as the process of gaining control over one's own life while supporting and facilitating others' control over their lives. Empowerment is defined as a benevolent but unilateral transaction in which one person enhances another's ability to feel competent and take action, that is, enhances another's power-to (Patricia, Darlington & Mulvaney, 2003). Chattopadhyay (2005) also defined the term empowerment as the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets.

According to Young (1993), empowerment enables women to take control of their own lives, set their own agenda, organize to help each other and make demands on the state for support and on the society itself for change. In the same vein, Sahay (1998) saw empowerment as an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It implies decentralization of power and authority in the deprived, oppressed and powerless people who have not been able to participate in decision making and implementation of policies and programs of both government organizations as well as in societal matters. Empowerment of women is not only essential but also imperative for all round development of a nation.

Going further, Keshab (2013) categorized women empowerment into five types. They include social, economic, educational, political and psychological empowerment. According to Keshab, social empowerment refers to the enabling force that strengthens women's social relations and their position in social structures. Social empowerment addresses the social discriminations existing in the society based on disability, race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. On the other hand, economic empowerment has to do with forces that strengthens women economically. That is why the author sees economic empowerment as tools that alleviate women from the shackles of poverty. Furthermore, educational empowerment refers to the instruments that help to develop an individual's intellectual horizons, wellbeing and potential for empowerment, while political empowerment refers to women's participation in the political field and in various decision-making bodies is an important tool for empowerment. The

participation of women at all levels of governance structures is the highest need of this hour for women's actual empowerment. Through psychological empowerment women not only transgress the traditional and patriarchal taboos and social obligations, they also transform their selves and subjectivities. When women join educational institutions, political parties or decision-making bodies; hold white collar jobs, take decisions and travel different places; occupy land and wealth they feel psychologically powered and build their self confidence, recognize their self-worth and take control of their own income and body. This joining in any institution and occupation gives them opportunities to see and to know more of the world than those who have stayed behind at home.

Problems of Adult Literacy Programmes for women in Nigeria

The growth and development of adult literacy programmes in Nigeria has been hampered by some factors. These factors are as follows:

1. Most adult education centers are cited in public schools where the facilities are not for adult learners, but for their children. It will be impossible to expect the adults to subject themselves to the same conditions for which they had withdrawn their children from public schools.
2. The planning agency for adult education and non-formal education lacks the technical capacity for data collection and analysis. For this reasons, information relating to real illiterate adult population and school drop-outs has been most unreliable, conflicting and confusing.
3. Adult literacy programmes are not seen as distinct components in education in terms of funding, rather they are treated as an appendage to formal education when it comes to budgetary allocations and national planning. Hence it has been poorly funded. It has been difficult for government to adequately fund adult education and non-formal education programmes.
4. There has been dearth of adult educators. The unfolding facts have serious implications for the attainment of Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria. In Nigeria today, rural women have continued to face major development challenges including a high incidence of poverty, illiteracy, poor-health conditions conflict and the relentless surge of HIV/AIDS. These have been further revealed by the shortage of qualified adult educators.
5. The adult education and mass literacy programmes lack the organizational means for bringing different forms of adult education programme within the purview of educational planning, since educational planning activities are confined to the formal education system. Priorities have not been set for allocating scarce resources to adult education and non-formal education due to the absence of educational planning.
6. Lack of widespread knowledge about recent policy initiatives on adult Education.

Strategies for the Empowerment of Rural Women through the Promotion of Adult Literacy

The "Design for Action" adopted at the First International Conference on Adult Education (ICAE) World Assembly In Dar- esalam 1976 proffered the following strategies-

(a) **Participation of women in decision making:** Both adult educators, instructors and rural women should be allowed to take part from on start in decision taken in adult education programme. This will help them to be aware of what is happening in the programme which they are participants. They will be given the opportunity to express their felt needs, interests and choice.

(b) **Funding Agencies:** The “Design for Action” on adult education recommended that funding agencies concerned with International Development assistance should give priority to programmes that will-

- i. Develop a strong adult education infrastructure, particularly in countries
- ii. Where adult education is least developed, like Nigeria.
- iii. Identify levels of training and self-help needs in terms of competence, Management, delivery, and evaluation.
- iv. Assist organizations that are actively involved in the organization and development of the rural poor.
- v. Make direct provision for equal integration of women into social and economic development.

(c) Adopt the strategy for action through Nations, National and Community based organizations.

(d) The UNESCO World Conference on Adult Education at Tokyo recognized that adult education will not flourish unless there is a commitment to it in each country, a national infrastructure for stimulus and coordination, and the cultivation of cadres of trained and experienced personnel to enlarge adult education programme. Without these essential strategies or factors neither adult education as a field nor adult education for development will have much chance to be effective.

(e) **Improvement of training/Development of Workshops:** There should be a strategy for adult education national associations to work together for improvement in the quality, type and accessibility of both long-term and short term adult education training for women and men. Short workshops could focus on effective adult learning and teaching to groups of full-time adult education organizers who are in a position to pass their learning to teachers of adults. On some cases, resource team may travel to countries to take course in adult education

(f) **Training in Research:** Adult educators should receive training in theory and practice of participatory research and complementary qualitative research techniques. The research may be carried out on methods of social investigation, training manuals and materials need to be devised.

Other strategies for promoting adult literacy for empowerment of rural women according to UNESCO in Onyisi (2010) include the following:

1. Cultural/social strategy: There should be a cultural/social strategy which will delete differences of social class, caste, gender, race, religion, and all stages to life. There should be a national and institutional commitment to making learning opportunities for all.
2. Strategic partnerships and linkages: Partnerships and linkages include the following strategies: forming relationships internationally and forming relationships with other groups in society. This strategy is for sharing knowledge and know-how. Partnerships and alliances based on common interest, mutual respect and desire to attain social justice, globally and locally,

enhancing the sharing of skills research opportunities, and staff and student development.

3. Equipping adults with reading and writing skills: This strategy will be very useful to adults in their literacy adult education programme. It will enhance their reading and writing skills. This is an important strategy in Adult literacy programme.
4. Development of Projects- Investment should be made on development Projects in the rural areas. This is to enhance increase in production of various needs of people and the economy. Without investment on project in these areas, the economy will be in a mess, and under this situation sustainable development cannot be achieved.

Conclusion

Adult literacy is an essential tool for national development. However, it appears that little focus have been given to improve the quality of adult literacy programmes in Nigeria in line with the education for all initiative and guidelines. This has further increased the level of poverty and corruption in the country. It therefore becomes imperative that efforts and strategies should be put in place to improve the deplorable state of adult literacy education programmes in Nigeria with the view to empowering rural women and emancipating the shackles of poverty, inequality and illiteracy. This is because of the formidable role adult literacy plays in the empowerment of women especially those in the rural areas in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the forgoing, the following recommendations were made:

1. Government at all levels in Nigeria should make concerted effort in improving on the revenue allocation for adult literacy programmes. This will help promote outreach and coverage of adult literacy programmes in rural communities in Nigeria.
2. Government and her agencies should show full commitment towards adult literacy programmes and empowerment of women. There is need for administrators of adult literacy programmes and the political elites to work hand in hand to ensure the fulfilment of the goals of adult literacy programmes in Nigeria.
3. There is need for high level collaboration between the administrators of adult literacy programme and private organization towards the provisional of additional funding source and infrastructural provisions for adult literacy centres.
4. Government at all level in Nigeria should develop and implement fully-costed policies, well-targeted plans and legislation for addressing adult literacy, education for rural women in Nigeria.
5. Adult literacy centres should be built and well equipped with learning facilities to attract participants at the rural communities. This will motivate rural women to participate fully in the programme. The use of halls, primary schools, churches as learning centres should be totally abolished.
6. Awareness on adult literacy programme should be created through the mass media and the development of community outreach centres.

References

- Adeshina, A. O. (2012). Assessment of the utilisation of basic literacy education for sustainable development among adult learners in rural communities of oyo and ondo states, Nigeria. *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development*, 3 (6), 58-70.
- Asnarulkhadi, A. S. & Muhammad, N. N. (2013). Literacy and women empowerment for sustainable development In Nigeria. *New York Science Journal*, 6(8), 104-109
- Chattopadhyay, A. (2005). Women and entrepreneurship. *Journal of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting*, 5(1), 23-34.
- Ezimah, M. O. A. (2004). *Knowing adult education: Its nature, scope and processes*. Owerri: Springfield Publishers Ltd.
- Keshab, C. M. (2013). Concept and types of women empowerment. *International Forum of Teaching and Studies*, 9 (3), 17-30.
- Maclean, P. (2008). *Education for peace building and sustainable development: Delusion, Illusion, or reality?* Retrieved from <http://www.daneprairie.com>
- Mylek, J. (2008). *Literacy – Fundamental to development*. The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand.
- Nwafor, N. H. & Agi, C. W. (2013). Adult literacy and the need for post-adult literacy institution in Nigeria. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 4 (4), 469-474.
- National Population Commission Report (NPC, 2004).
- Nzeneri, I. S. (2002). *Hand book on adult education*. Onitsha: J.C. Brothers Bookshop.
- Obanya, P. (2004). *The dilemma of education in Africa*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nig.) Plc.
- Onyishi, J. C. (2010). Effective utilization of adult education in achieving sustainable development in Nsukka local government area of Enugu state (Master's thesis). Department Of Adult Education and Extra Mural Studies, Faculty Of Education, University Of Nigeria, Nsukka
- Patricia S.E. Darlington & Mulvaney, B. M. (2003). *Women, power, and ethnicity – Working toward reciprocal empowerment*. New York, London, Oxford: *The Haworth Press*.
- Sahay, S. (1998). *Women and empowerment: Approaches and strategies*. New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House.
- Silawal B. (2003). *Literacy, education and women's empowerment, literacy and nonformal education division of basic education*. UNESCO.
- Stella, E. (2010, September 9). No justification for marginalizing women, girls. *Leadership Newspaper*, p. 13.