

First Things First: Female Literacy as the Key to Women's Advancement

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The potential for women's literacy to reshape the developing world remains an untapped developmental resource. This paper illustrates the positive effects of female literacy, such as increased economic security, solidarity among women, and enhanced status in the family. In addition, educated women are less likely to fall into early marriage, early motherhood, HIV infection, and street life. Mothers who are literate are much more able to run their households well and understand health education materials that directly impact the lives of their children. The second half of this paper explores some of the most effective ways of achieving increased education and literacy for women. Financial incentives prove very successful in recruitment and retention of female students. In addition, the most effective development initiatives tend to educate women with the goal of transforming them into agents, mentors, and teachers so that the legacy of literacy will extend to future generations.

One morning, during an all-school assembly at the girls' high school I attended, the head administrator presented a two-and-a-half-minute video called *The Girl Effect*. The animated film was short but its concept was powerful: educating girls is the key to alleviating poverty. Since that morning the implications of "the girl effect" have expanded in my mind to the point where it seems that promoting girls' education is the most necessary and compelling project in the world today. Educate a man and he will leave his home to find work. Educate a woman and she will have fewer children, introduce better health practices to her family and village, run her household more efficiently, and most important, advocate for the education of her children. The impact of literacy and education on a girl's future warrants global attention, and governments all over the world should prioritize female literacy in their campaigns for progress.

LITERACY'S POSITIVE LEGACY

Literacy is a game-changer in the effort to advance women's standing in the third world. In *Women and Literacy*, Marcela Ballara (1992) defines literacy as "the apprenticeship for the knowledge needed to cope with everyday needs, including the individual's relationship with the surrounding world" (p. 1). In essence, literacy is a tool for lifelong learning. Gaining literacy expands a woman's opportunities to communicate feelings and needs. According to Ballara, not only does literacy help silent women

express needs, interests and concerns, but "literacy activities for and with women motivate the organization of women's groups to support collective demands and to seek active participation in development and a better position in society" (p. 1). The development of women's groups and organizations alludes to one of the most difficult to quantify but certainly most

valuable results of female literacy: solidarity among women. Regardless of situation, the connection of women to women through education and literate action is the Holy Grail of women's advancement.

Some argue that foreign literacy campaigns are dogmatic and impose a purely Western value on those for whom literacy is irrelevant. But those who favor deferring to local norms should consider that literacy is frequently an essential tool for achieving the diverse goals that women everywhere are already pursuing. In *Women and Human Development*, Martha Nussbaum (2000) references a study in which

women in rural Bangladesh received literacy training. While the women were "initially skeptical" about what they could gain from this skill, they found literacy useful in goals they were already pursuing, such as economic security and enhanced status in the family. The women also enjoyed the opportunity to open their minds and the sense of community literacy afforded: "They expressed delight with their newfound solidarity with other women in the literacy group, which had enabled them to build a nonhierarchical community of a type previously unknown to them" (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 296). It is difficult to deny the positive impact that empowerment and solidarity have on the state of women, regardless of cultural norms.

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Literacy is also correlated with the ability to gain land rights, credit, and certain types of employment (Ibid. p. 295). The capability to wield such legal tools is essential to women's ability to lead businesses of any size.

Literacy also affects a woman's critical role as a mother. Her own education makes her a passionate advocate for the education of her children, which in turn makes her a nation's greatest asset in the effort to produce a generation of educated, productive citizens. In *A Generation of Women*, Ellen Condliffe Lagemann (1979) examines the role that education played in the lives of six influential Progressive Era reformers in the United States. Despite substantial differences in background, common threads existed among all six women. Each woman had at least one parent who fervently advocated for her education, and in every case it was from this parent that the future leader learned to read (p. 139). Formal schooling played a role, but in terms of forming passionate leaders, a parent's dedication to his or her child's exposure to ideas and skills was the most important ingredient in the development of each leader. Lagemann (1979) observes that parental pedagogy nurtured "a disposition for continuing education" (Ibid. p. 142), a trait which must be seen as the most valuable any education can instill. Literate women living in poverty are poised to play the same influential role for their children by instilling an appreciation for the power that literacy and education will play in their lives.

Education benefits women in two distinct ways during different stages of life, and both formal and non-formal education play a role. While enrolled in primary and secondary school, girls are less likely to fall into early marriage, early motherhood, HIV infection, and street life. After leaving school, education helps women run their houses more effectively—a significant ability since in many parts of the world women are the key economic actors in households and are often solely responsible for providing for their families. Formal education provides adolescent lives with structure and safety, and it empowers adult women to better care for themselves and their children. Formal schools are those licensed and registered institutions with a common curriculum and calendar. Non-formal schools are not standardized and are often operated on an independent, ad hoc basis. Non-formal education complements formal education by helping girls who start late catch up or those who drop out master basic skills (Lloyd & Young, 2009). Specific skill training such as vocational or female leadership training usually falls to non-formal institutions. While the services provided by non-formal schools are essential for ensuring widespread access to education, governments should focus on cultivating effective formal education because its necessity is clear and pressing and its effectiveness is more easily gauged (Ibid.).

During adolescence, gender roles start to diverge, and girls risk falling behind boys in school and falling prey to handicaps such as early motherhood and poor health. UNAIDS found women between the ages of 15 and 24 account for 50% of new AIDS cases (Caro, 2009). A report on adolescent girls' education by "Girls Count" emphasizes the immediate benefits of education for an adolescent girl, stating that "school attendance has the potential to provide girls with protection during a phase of life when temporary setbacks can have lifelong consequences" (Lloyd & Young, 2009, p. 36). The report points to enhanced social status, increased gender equality, and improved reproductive health as benefits of education. Educated girls also experience lower rates of HIV/AIDS and fewer hours of domestic work (Ibid.). The authors of this report acknowledge that the extent of these benefits depends on the quality of schools. Indeed, a 1996 study by Mensch et al. in Kenya found that in schools where gender equality was observed to be low—where teachers frequently diminished girls' intelligence and potential—girls were more likely to initiate premarital sex. Such a trend is

significant in a region where the AIDS rate has been rising and contraception use is low (Ibid.). This study highlights the necessity of emphasizing gender equality in the educational environment. It also underscores the importance of a positive mentor—a dedicated teacher or parent—in the life of an impressionable adolescent girl.

A woman's ability to capitalize on the benefits of education beyond adolescence depends on the efficacy and duration of her education. Whether or not she graduates with a husband or child, she is poorly served if she cannot read. A 2004 study by LeVine et al. in Nepal explored the correlation between maternal literacy and health knowledge by assessing the ability of 167 mothers of school-aged children to comprehend print and broadcast health messages, read medical instructions, and provide a health narrative. A strong correlation existed between the number of years a mother attended school and her literacy skills, indicating that girls who complete secondary school better retain acquired skills like literacy. The study found that "literacy was the pathway through which the effects of schooling on health competencies were mediated" (Lloyd & Young, 2009, p. 40). Because of its diverse applications, literacy mediates the effects of school on almost all areas of a woman's life. Governments of poor countries can cultivate successful generations by building a strong foundation of formal education that focuses on gender equality and literacy skills.

COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS AND INCENTIVES

The cause for female education has attracted the efforts of many organizations and governments, and different initiatives have proven the importance of financial incentives, non-formal training, the hiring of women in the education sector, and community engagement. Financial incentives have been used both to encourage educators to enter the field of girls' edu-

cation and to encourage girls to become students. In the 1980s the government of Bangladesh offered recognition and subsidies to Islamic madrasas if they agreed to teach secular subjects like English, Bengali, science, and math. This policy, plus an additional stipend offered to female students, changed the percentage of women enrolled in these schools from 5% in 1980 to almost 50% today. In addition to achieving gender equity at madrasas,

this initiative has also recruited female teachers (Lloyd & Young, 2009). Financial incentives proved effective in Uganda when, in 1997, the government waived school fees, and the gender gap in schools disappeared (Ibid.). Martha Nussbaum (2000) notes that in developing countries a family with only enough resources to educate one child will most likely choose a boy. Financial incentives, therefore, play an essential role in increasing access to girls' education.

Several small-scale projects run by non-governmental organizations have used non-formal education to fill specific gaps in women's education. CARE led an initiative in Mali which provided 9-15-year-olds with basic literacy and math training followed by a vocational skills program, targeting children who had not been to formal primary school. The project relied on local Community Management Committees, which had specific responsibilities such as monitoring teacher and student attendance and ensuring classes had the materials they needed (Lloyd & Young, 2009). The clearly delineated responsibilities of the Community Management Committees in Mali made them an effective program component. The potential impact of these programs to benefit women is magnified when the constituents are literate.

In the case of Cameroon, women's literacy is on the rise, but women face barriers to further education. Cameroonian women play an essential role in agriculture and sustaining their families but they face limited access

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to the education and resources relevant to these tasks. The Food and Agriculture Association of the United Nations found that while men produce cash crops for exports, women are responsible for subsistence production, devoting six to eight hours a day to agricultural work, during which they produce 90% of the population's subsistence requirements (FAO Corporate Document Repository, 1992). The challenges Cameroonian women face in agriculture are characterized by lack of access. Lack of formal education limits adult female literacy (67.8% in 2007); lack of extension education leaves women to farm without proper training; unavailability of fertilizers reduces production; the impossibility of gaining credit stifles business plans, however modest. Acknowledging that women constitute 53% of agricultural workers and effectively feed the nation, the Cameroonian government has urged training and outreach programs for rural women. A promising response to the government's call to action took root at the University Center of Dschang (UCD), the principle agriculture training institution, which in 1989 asked the University of Florida (UF) to help them "bring into the curriculum the subject matter that will prepare graduates to work with rural women" (Smith & Taylor, 1991, p. 373).

The project collaboration between UF and UCD exemplifies a model which can inform a broader initiative to improve women's education in Cameroon and employs tactics and principles which other international projects have proven successful. Researchers from the University of Florida taught the Cameroonian students a short-course on curriculum development which sought to "enable *them* to design and implement a 'women and agricultural households' program" (Smith & Taylor, 1991, p. 374). Thus the structure of the course can be used to solve problems in the culturally and geographically diverse regions of Cameroon. The first order of business in the course was assessing women's needs and the accompanying personnel needs. For instance, meeting women's health and welfare needs requires educators in family health and hygiene, while the need for income-generating resources like land and credit calls for coordinators for women's cooperatives. Identifying the personnel needs that correspond with women's needs is a productive first step towards educational progress.

Once a program identifies needs, it must establish curriculum objectives. The UF course emphasized goals that would enable women's "*participation in rural development*," moving beyond their current *employment in rural agriculture* (Smith & Taylor, 1991, p. 378, emphasis added). Each objective correlated with areas of course content: in order to "improve agricultural production" of crops and livestock, course content was suggested on soil chemistry, climatology, and fertilization (Ibid.). These are empowering subjects which will not only increase a woman's production but will also increase her bargaining power within the household and her ability to earn income by selling surplus product (Nussbaum, 2000). No benefits will materialize, though, unless families see continued female education as a practical investment. Therefore the next step should be establishing financial incentives for women to participate in the kinds of programs that UF and UCD have developed. The Cameroonian government and outside organizations should utilize incentives to ensure that girls' education at every level—primary, secondary, and continuing—is more economical than their employment in child labor.

UF's course also emphasized the importance of connecting educational programs to women's groups. Not only can women's groups "provide current information about the needs of women farmers" (Smith & Taylor, 1991, p. 385), they also provide students and teachers with a network of female mentors. Equally important to the cause of women's education is the recruitment of female teachers. UF's analysis of women farmers in Cameroon found that outreach efforts don't reach rural women "not only

because graduates have not been trained to target women's needs, but because *women have not been trained*" (Ibid.). Girls need educational mentorship from women with whom they feel a sense of solidarity, starting with mothers and continuing with teachers and colleagues. The government can help supply these mentors by providing primary education to all women, so that as literate mothers they advocate for their own daughters, and by actively recruiting women for roles in all areas of the education system. A school with more women in roles of influence will also diminish gender discrimination and help girls feel like valuable pupils with equal potential to boys.

CONCLUSION

These steps provide a strategy for advancing the cause of women's education in Cameroon. Future government- and privately-funded programs should utilize this approach to implement a two-pronged initiative to improve the status of women and the quality of women's education, emphasizing formal primary and secondary education in order to achieve universal literacy, and providing regional non-formal programs that help women become more effective economic actors in their homes and businesses. Programs should be designed to capitalize on the tools that make all women SMILE: Solidarity, Mentorship, Incentives, Literacy, and Equality. Girls' education is a noble cause beset by significant hurdles, but our ability to share experiences and research with each other ensures that success is within our grasp. Such information resources are available to us because of the literacy we take for granted, a fact which underscores the importance of ensuring that every girl in the world has the same ability to approach a challenge with confidence that she will find a solution.

The potential for women's literacy to reshape the developing world remains an untapped developmental resource. While most third-world development efforts require ever increasing financial support and exist in constant danger of losing momentum, the campaign for women's literacy builds upon itself, and independently creates countless positive externalities. Literacy is an essential tool for all women, since it can be effectively wielded to further the diverse goals that women everywhere are already pursuing. The effort to raise female literacy levels has been executed through small and large scale projects the world over. Programs have explored various constituencies like rural adult women versus primary and secondary

school-aged young women. They have compared the benefits of formal education versus more vocational, specific training. Initiatives and studies have found that the quality of the learning environment and the length of time a student is enrolled are key indicators of the benefits she will receive from the education. All educational efforts experienced success based on how well they cultivated solidarity amongst women, provided mentorship for female

students, offered financial incentives to educate girls, effectively established literacy skills, and practiced equality in the school environment.

When women have access to a system prioritizing these criteria, the results are staggering. Women show up to school because of financial incentives. Women remain at school because they were valued on par with male students. Women learn to read, which catalyzes lifelong learning, leads to greater equality within the domestic sphere, and establishes their role as educational advocates for their children. Women also become more effective economic actors at home, where women generally bear the responsibility of providing for their families.

A significant initial investment is necessary at the outset of the women's literacy challenge, but such a push is essential to establish the woman-power that will carry women's literacy and education forward. A generation

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of literate women translates in the immediate future to an effective army of literate mothers at home, female teachers in schools, and women's advocacy groups in communities. If governments give these women the resources to establish themselves, future generations will see greater equality and improvement on myriad social welfare measures, which women have a disproportionate potential to shape.

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