

Literacy Needs of Non-Literate Women in Benue State of Nigeria

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Abstract

Advocates of women literacy and emancipation have always perceived illiteracy as the major cause of poverty, abuse and low-self esteem among women. This study investigated the extent to which non-literate women in Benue State, Nigeria perceived acquisition of literacy skills as critical to their social, personality and economic emancipations. The views of the women on the challenges of illiteracy and their coping strategies were also identified. A total of 134 women located in three local government areas were randomly sampled and used for the study. Data were collected using interview schedules and Focused Group Discussion (FGD). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. The findings were that: women perceived illiteracy as the cause of their poverty and literacy as an empowerment option and that the women would willingly go to school if given the opportunity and support. The findings were discussed in terms of the need to empower women through viable adult literacy program.

1. Introduction

Functional literacy is the basis for the realization of full potentials of individuals as it impacts strongly on every sphere of life. Acquisition of effective literacy skills is crucial for success not only in academics, but also in personality development, occupational growth and in domestic harmony. Functional literacy which goes beyond the ability to read and write is a continuous process of training, retraining and reinventing self in order to sharpen one's attitudes and interests, so as to be able to come to terms with one, think critically, identify problems and take realistic measures to solve problems. In other words, functional literacy ensures that individuals are sufficiently motivated to achieve development; self-esteem and character that will enable them live functionally in the society and consequently, achieve economic emancipation. Succinctly put, it bestows on the recipients the ability and willingness to make the right choices, face the demands and challenges of everyday life and achieve higher level of self-control (Webster, 1999).

Since the literacy level correlates with personality development and economic emancipation, it implies that illiteracy causes poverty, low self-esteem, and underdevelopment. Therefore, nations with high rate of illiteracy are poor nations, and to reduce their poverty level; functional and development orientated literacy is required (UNESCO, 2005).

The foregoing may have informed the provision in sub-section 3, section 18 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria that "government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy..." The extent to which this goal has been achieved in terms of the quality of literacy skills given to the citizenry is very controversial. However, one thing is certain, that the realization of the objective so far is lopsided in favor of the males. According to UNICEF (2002) the national literacy rate for females in Nigeria is a mere 56% compared to 72% for males. Worse still women make up two-thirds of the illiterate adults in Nigeria (Egunjobi, 2005). According to the Federal Government of Nigeria (1994), illiteracy rate among

women stands at over 61% as against 37.7% of the males. At the international scene, the situation is not any different. It has been revealed that girls who drop-out of primary school are more than boys by ten million (Action-aid, 2008) and that nearly two-thirds of the world's 780 million illiterates are women (UNESCO, 2006).

Related to this is the obvious disparity in the quality of education given to men and women. While men receive education for functional living, which leads to paid employment, women receive the "three Rs" the needle and string or cookery type (Odey, 2007) that keeps them within the realm of domestic skills. The low quality education women receive reinforces rather than reduce income differentials between sexes and makes women subservient to the men whose form of education has given economic powers and the self-esteem that goes with it.

What the woman folk require to be able to play their many roles is holistic empowerment through quality education that will enhance their skill acquisition and provide them income generating opportunities in both private and public sectors of the economy (UNIFEM, 2008). Instead of education for poverty reduction which makes women semi-literate and therefore portends more danger by removing them from the bracket of the ignorant but does not sufficiently place them within the bracket of the knowledgeable, women need higher level education, that will broaden their mental horizon, enable them achieve their full potentials and live a life of dignity as informed productive (not just reproductive) citizens.

However, despite the centrality of women education in accelerating the achievement of all the millennium development goals, women's literacy level has continued to remain at a low level, not because women are less intelligent or non-achievers but because women are "victims of unbridled male chauvinism" (Ochefu, 2007, p.59). Men have institutionalized the exploitation of women using, customs, education, socio-economic order and religious apparatus to relegate women to the background. In other words, it would appear that low literacy level of women is being used deliberately as a social control mechanism because if women are well informed they could harness their numerical strength and demand for their rights. But if women are ignorant, poor and voiceless they will be easily controlled. Ironically, the consequences of high illiteracy level of the female gender on the family and the nation is more devastating than it is on the personality of the women because of its multiplier effects on every member of each woman's household.

Direct victims of illiteracy- women -who still suffer discriminations, crude exploitation and oppression, are ignored, excluded and undermined in the scheme of things (Ochefu, 2007) denied access to paid jobs and influence, while bearing the drudgery and arduousness of domestic chores. They also submissively bear all sorts of dehumanizing acts; rape, battery, sexual harassment and intimidation, genital mutilation, being inherited upon their husbands death, and being pawned out as collateral to creditors like property which unfortunately they are perceived to be according to customs and traditions.

Above all, women are personification of poverty. Women work more and earn less. They account for "67 percent of the world's working hours" and earn just "10 percent of the world's income" (Ojiji, 2007, p.10). Consequently, they constitute 70 percent of the world's 1.3 billion absolute poor (Alliance for Africa, 2004). When women who constitute a large percentage of the society live below the poverty line, the entire society is impoverished.

According to UNIFEM (2008) the cost of women's oppression and poverty are born not just by women, but by all the society. There is empirical evidence that failure to educate women impedes growth; but a "one-year increase in the schooling of all adult females in a country is associated with an increase in GDP per capital of around \$700" (World Bank, 2004 in Okonjo-Iweala 2009). Secondly, reduction in girls' enrollment into secondary school brings about increase in maternal mortality, child mortality, malnutrition (UNICEF, 2007), a higher prevalence of depression and other mental illness (UNIFEM, 2008). According to UNIFEM, while it is possible to estimate the cost of educating a girl, the cost of not

educating the girl-child is unquantifiable.

Men who perpetrate gender inequality have had to lose their own lives to critical health problems because, their wives who have been subordinated to the point of being mentally colonized could neither take nor act on decisions immediately. Businesses and property labored for by men have also been lost this way at the demise of some men. Thus illiteracy among Nigerian women who constitute a large population of the country is the worst enemy of Nigeria.

Since low education level coupled with socio-cultural discrimination is a constraint to women empowerment, the best way to emancipate women is to expose adult non-literate women, to viable literacy skills that will enhance their skills and productivity. Empowerment of women through exposure to literacy is seen as the spring board to other forms of empowerment, and as the fulcrum around which development revolves. Women empowerment through education is justified because it will serve as a panacea for dismantling “intergenerational cycle of illiteracy” (Muodumogu, 2007, p.194).

In recognition of the role of literacy in national development past governments in Nigeria made several attempts to launch adult literacy programs. However, those attempts at mounting viable adult literacy program failed (Aminu, 1992). Some reasons were given for the failure thus: the programs were ill conceived, not properly defined and poorly executed. Secondly, the literacy needs of the beneficiaries were not identified; therefore, the program contents did not address those needs.

When adult literacy program is premeditated on identified learning needs, it goes beyond the acquisition of conventional literacy and extends to skill oriented literacy which is characterized by the ability to face and solve the demands and challenges of everyday life.

Benue state is the Middle Belt zone of Nigeria that is often described as the poverty zone. It has neither oil (like the South) nor cattle (like the North). This implies that the illiteracy and poverty rates of women within Benue State are higher than they are in the Southern part of Nigeria. The possibility that most of her non-literate women are wallowing in regrets, facing a lot of challenges and must have adopted some unusual coping strategies is there. At the moment, there is paucity of records of explain the prevailing situation in Benue state. It is the conviction of the author that until what is on ground is known especially with regards to literacy needs of the non literate women, it may be difficult to successfully address their needs.

It is in line with the foregoing that this study was designed to investigate the literacy needs of non-literate women in Benue state as perceived by them. The facts arising from this study will form the basis for planning and implementing a viable, skill oriented adult literacy program as the best option in addressing gender inequality and empowering the women folk in Benue state of Nigeria. The study was guided by three research questions.

1. To what extent do non-literate women in Benue state perceive illiteracy, as having effect on their social, personality and economic life?
2. What coping strategies are adopted by non-literate women in Benue state?
3. What challenges mount pressure on upon non-literate women to desire to go to school?

2. Methods

A total of 134 non-literate women located in three local government areas of Benue state were randomly selected and used for the study. Two local government areas were selected from among the Tiv speaking people, while one local government area was selected from among the Idoma people. The decision was informed by the fact that the Tivs and the Idomas are the major ethnic groups in the state, with 14 and 7 local government areas respectively out of the 23 Local Government. Since, Benue state is made up of

over 80% Christians, information was sent to churches in each of the locations, inviting non-literate women to meet with the researcher. Out of the women that turned up, 90 were randomly selected from the two locations in Tiv land, while 44 were selected from the Idoma speaking area.

For the purpose of data collection, information on literacy needs of the participants as perceived by them was collected using interview schedules, and Focused Group Discussion (FGD). The 134 participants were put into 9 groups for the FGD. Eight out of the 9 groups had 15 participants in each group, while one group had 14 participants. For the FGD, indices of lack of literacy skill on the social, personality and economic life of participants were exhaustively discussed and represented by objects. After discussion on the effect of illiteracy on their social life, for instance, participants were asked to pick stones and drop against literacy needs applicable to them. At the end, the total number of stones per literacy need is the frequency count. The data collected were analyzed using frequency counts, percentages and ranking.

3. Results

Research Question 1

To what extent do non-literate women in Benue State perceive illiteracy as having effect on their social, personality and economic emancipation?

Table 1: Analysis of Literacy needs of non-literate women in Benue state.

Section	Priotisation of Literacy Needs	Frequency (out of 134)	Percentage	Rank Order
Social	Would participate in meeting/politics	13	9.7	3
	Would assist my children with their school work	110	82.1	1
	Would demand for my right make right choices	68	50.7	2
	Total	191/402	47.5	
Personality	Not be cheated by	56	41.85	
	Knowing my reproductive rights/planned my			
	Family better	36	26.9	4
	Love to read widely for pleasure	73	54.5	3
	Love to read Bible	127	94.8	1
	Love to read signs/find my way around	86	64.2	2
	Total	437/804	54.4	
Economic	Would have excelled in business	89	66.4	2
	Would have enjoyed better family health	70	52.2	3
	Be economically independent/do no better job	107	79.9	1
	Be able to educate and support my children			
	financially	49	36.6	5
	Be able to count money/transact bank business confidentially.	70	52.2	3
Total	385/670	57.5		

Research question 1 investigated the extent to which non-literate women in Benue State perceive illiteracy as having effect on their social, personality and economic emancipation. The data analysis presented on Table 1 shows that the participants considered the need to be economically empowered more important than any other need (57.5%). This is followed by the need for personality development (54.4%) while social needs (47.5%) were the least on their priority list. A closer look at the indices of economic need revealed that the wish to excel in business (66.4%) ranked highest while being able to educate and support children financially ranked least (36.6%).

On the aspect of personality development, the participant regretted their inability to read the Bible most (94.8%), while their least regret is their lack of knowledge of productive rights (29.9%). Within social factors, the participants' regret of their inability to help their children with school work ranked highest (82.1%) while participation in politics ranked least (9.7)

Research question 2

What coping strategies are adopted by non-literate women in Benue state?

In order to ascertain the coping strategies the participants adopted, they were asked to state one thing that have helped them to survive in spite of the many challenges of illiteracy. The participants' responses are shown on Table 2

Table 2: Coping strategies adopted by non-literate women in Benue State

Coping strategies	Frequency (out of 134)	Percentage	Rant order
1. Do odd/menial jobs	11	8.2	4
2. Engage in farming	31	23.1	3
3. Take succor in religion/ complete dependence of people	45	33.6	2
4. Petty trading	47	35.1	1
Total	134	100%	

Table shows that out of the 134 women involved in the study, 47 (35.1%) took to petty trading as a coping strategy and 45 (33.6%) who were completely dependent on their husbands children or relation and most often, on nobody in particular claimed to have taken succor in religion. A total 31 participants representing 23.1% engaged in subsistence farming while 11 women (8.2%) did odd /menial jobs when available. A close look at Table 2 shows that petty trading ranked highest in participants' coping strategies, while engagement in menial jobs ranked least. This shows the extent to which Benue non-literate woman have been impoverished by illiteracy.

Research question 3

What challenges mount pressure upon non-literate Benue women to desire to go to school?

Table 3 Factors that challenge non-literate Benue women to desire to go to school

Challenging factors	Frequency	Percentage	Rank Order
1. Inability to be able to read the Bible	82	61.2	1
2. Inability to help my children with school work & check their results	26	19.4	3
3. Inability to locate places, read road signs, instructions, manuals	25	18.7	4
4. Inability educate/help my daughters in sex education	10	7.5	6
5. Inability to engage in paid jobs	41	30.6	2
6. To read generally, write/read letters & speak English	10	7.5	6
7. Read & sign documents/bank transactions	10	7.5	6
8. To read menu at restaurants	10	7.5	6
9. Express love to husband & children	7	5.2	10
10. Acquire skills (knitting, poultry and fish farm cooking continental food etc)	13	9.7	5

Out of the 134 women investigated in this study, 119 would want to go to school. When asked to indicate their most pressing challenges that would motivate them to enroll in adult literacy program, an overwhelming percentage that is, 61.2% would go to school just to be able to read the Bible. Here is what one of the respondents said; *I didn't go to school. I am poor, am suffering, if only I can read the bible, I will be getting consolation from it.* Forty women (30.6%) would desire to go to school in order to engage in paid jobs, while 26 (19.4%) and 25 (18.7%) would subscribe to literacy classes in order to be able to check their children's class work, and to be able to locate places and read road signs, respectively. Also 9.7% would be motivated to go to school just to acquire skills (poultry/fish farming, how to cook continental dishes), 7.5% would love to be able to write and read letter, read menu at restaurants, conduct bank transactions confidentially, and give their daughters sex education, while 5.02% would want to be able to express love to husbands and children. Most of the young women expressed their need thus, *if only we can save ourselves the embarrassment of not being able to read the menu in restaurants. It robs us of our self-esteem and makes one feel as if one is wearing rags no matter how gorgeously dressed.* Based on the information in Table 3, one would conclude that the participants' illiteracy challenges are many and diverse and that the participants appeared to be committed to embracing literacy

4. Discussion

The study focused on non-literate women's perspectives on their literacy needs. Specifically the study attempted to ascertain the extent to which the participants would blame their poverty level, personality under-development and social exclusion on their lack of literacy skills. The study also investigated the

participants' challenges of illiteracy that would compel them to want to go back to school and their coping strategies.

The findings revealed that: the participants perceived illiteracy as the cause of their poverty and as a means of empowering them economically, that women would willingly go to school if given the opportunity and support. The findings will be discussed in terms of the need to empower women and the need to mount functional adult literacy programs.

Women Empowerment – if the family is the nucleus of the society, women are the hub of the society. What the individuals in the homes and the society become is greatly influenced by the quality and quantity of education the women receive. This is because women's devotion to their many roles, their attitude and interests are related to their level of literacy. According to UNIFEM (2008), women play multiple roles and in each of these roles, the ability to be educated and healthy, to have voice and influence, and to enjoy opportunities and choices are critical. Unfortunately, this study revealed that the participants' greatest regret of not being educated is the fact they are not financially independent. Female gender's poverty level has risen to the extent that poverty has been feminized. This is because disproportionate number of the female sex is the most wretched and the poorest of the earth (Odey, 2007). This finding agrees with the world view that illiteracy adversely affects the economy and that poverty has multiple effects on the health status of the family, the education of children and the personality development of the individuals within the home.

Poverty heightens the subordination of women in the home and in the society, and makes woman voiceless, and vulnerable. Hence, 50.7% of the participants wished they were bold enough to demand for their rights and to make right choices as well. Globally and nationally, advocates of women emancipation and empowerment agitate for increased women participation in politics, but this study revealed that, that is the least concern of the women involved in the study. Their concern is the basics of life: to be informed about what goes on in the society (44%), to be able to assist their children with school work, know their rights and be skillful enough in order to live above poverty margin.

Research is yet to invent the statistical instrument that could capture the chuckles, exclamations, the indifference the participants exhibited when asked if they would have loved to participate in governance and if they could have had control of their reproductive rights. Only 9.7% of the women thought they would have joined politics and 26.9% thought they would apply their reproductive right if they were educated. This implies that most women believe that they have no right to aspire to be anything other than woman – a label for child bearing and rearing only. This may not be unconnected to the fact that the women who defied men's intimidation and ventured into politics and other male dominated professions met with asperity, astringent criticisms and were at times openly insulted.

This continuous oppression and exploitation of women have gradually robbed them of self-esteem. At the work place, the woman is an exploited worker, at the home front; she is subordinated with little status. Consequently, even when women put up struggles for emancipation, their struggles end at requesting the state to "let us in" instead of "set us free" (Deckard, 1976, p.458).

Women have to be set free so that the society can be rid of diseases, infant mortality, crises and poverty. This can be done if the society empowers women educationally. Access to quality education is the foundation of women empowerment. When women are empowered, the society will benefit. Women will gain control over their lives and be able to claim their rights and not ask for it" (Onwenu, in Nwogu, 2004, p.238), families are healthier, rate of school drop-out reduces significantly, agricultural productivity improves and income increases (UNICEF, 2007).

The Need to Mount Functional Adult Literacy Programs

There is a lot of imbalance in female representation at all levels of the government. Women need to have equal opportunities with men for Nigeria to meet the 7-point agenda of the Federal Government and to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). These might not happen if measures are not taken to address the low literacy level of females. If the adult female non-literate population is allowed to remain illiterate, a good percentage of their children will be illiterate too. Mothers play significant role in the literacy acquisition of their children. A good percentage of the women involved in this study wished they were literate enough to help their children with school work.

Thus if the non-literate women in Benue state are exposed to adult literacy, they will be able to impact on not only the education of their children, but also on the health, economic well being of the family and to achieve self-control and self-esteem (Webster, 1999). Another important fact that emerged from this study, though silently, is the fact that most of the women involved in this study, especially the younger ones, have been robbed of their self-esteem. The embarrassment and humiliation these women face each time they ask people to sign documents, read letters or menu for them is rather dehumanizing. These women need to learn how to read so that they can acquire the power to magnify themselves, to multiply the ways in which they exist, to make their lives meaningful and interesting (Huxley, in Dechant, 1971).

Government agencies and NGO's have in the past attempted to mount adult literacy programs that failed because they were not well planned and properly articulated. Effective adult literacy program should be skill oriented and tied to the literacy needs of the recipients. The curriculum content should be relevant to their needs. For instance the women in this study will learn to read faster if their reading materials are based on Bible stories, buying and selling, and social etiquettes.

Instructional strategies, learning styles and learning materials should also be considered. Adults do not learn as fast as children. Adults need a plethora of reading strategies that will enhance reader-text interaction and encourage readers to construct, examine, and extend meaning from text to problem solve in real life situations (Muodumogu, 2007). This kind of adult literacy is needed to address the issue of the imbalance in the society.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has identified illiteracy as the course of poverty among women. Women would readily subscribe to adult literacy program as an empowerment option. Literacy, therefore, is crucial in the personality development of the female gender. Until the female gender has a sense of self worth, she will not be able to articulate the essence of women emancipation. She needs to be emancipated from herself first because the long tradition of suppression of women has made the woman to perceive herself only as a breeder of children and possession of the men folk. Unfortunately she passes this belief onto the girl child for continual perpetration. She needs social independence.

There is, therefore, need to empower women by giving them functional and skill oriented literacy that will enhance their economic, social and cultural spheres of life. When this happens, the mind of the girl child will be liberated, and her mental horizon will expand so that she will be able to take decisions that affect herself, her family and the community, and, then launch her into the political realm.

The government and other concerned agencies and individuals should therefore prioritize the establishment of viable adult literacy program, to integrate the large percentage of illiterate women who are sitting at the sidelines of life fully into the society so that they can contribute meaningfully to the development of mankind.

The agency for adult and non-formal education should intensify efforts towards involving some international donor agencies in funding the education of non-literate women in Benue State. This will

empower the women to facilitate their children's literacy skills acquisition. If this is achieved, the chain of intergenerational recycling of literacy will be broken.

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