

FUNCTIONAL LITERACY EDUCATION: IMPERATIVE FOR ENHANCING RURAL WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This paper examines the importance of women in relation to their levels of empowerment in developing countries through functional literacy education. Women issues are global and most pronounced in developing countries where limited accesses to education keep women marginalized. Functional literacy education empowers women to develop socially, economically, politically with entrepreneurial skills to achieve day to day activities to promote per capital income. This paper showcased the importance of functional literacy education to women in developing countries and made some recommendations on empowering women to achieve development for self and national development.

Keywords: *Functional literacy education, enhancement, development, developing countries*

Introduction

Education in the form of functional literacy is recognized as the cornerstone for achieving sustainable development especially for those who are excluded from the normal formal system of education particularly rural women. Most of these rural women do not have formal education and lack the ability to participate in formal decisions making in their countries. These women are highly discriminated against and marginalized also. Thus, the urgent need to empower them in developing countries became necessary because of the wide gender gap between men and women within the developing countries. Olaleye (2008) opined that the status of rural women are very low to achieve any meaningful development and this calls for an urgent need to integrate them into developmental processes of developing countries agenda as ranged on at national and international workshops, seminars etc. In developing countries, two-thirds of their population are illiterate adults while girls account also for the two-thirds of the developing countries out-of-school population (Olaleye, 2008). It is

necessary to note that Education For All Global Monitoring Report (2006) stated that there are 771 million adult illiterates in the world today and two-thirds are women. These rural women in developing countries form the majority of this population. In developing countries, for these rural women to be integrated into developmental processes and activities they urgently need basic education in form of functional literacy education, so that they can become facilitators and co-partners in development agenda of developing countries which needs serious attentions for economic growth and to checkmate unemployment rates.

Rural women in developing countries are indispensable in the developmental agenda of their respective nations. This is seen in their numerical strength, population and great potentials in evolving a new economic order, to accelerate social and political development and consequently transform their societies into better ones. Yahaya in Olawoye (2008) described rural women, especially Nigeria rural women as crucial factors of productions. He noted that, they assumed this status because they are largely responsible for the bulk production of crops, agro-based processing, preservation of crops and distribution of yields from farm sites to urban cities. In the same view, Awe (2006) perceived the importance of rural women from their roles as managers of homes in developing countries. She noted that the peace and stability at homes depend largely on the managerial abilities of women folk. She stressed that rural women, especially mothers, plan, organize, direct, and co-ordinate all the resources at home-both human and material to the benefits of all the members of the family including their husbands. Hence, effective management of the homes promote national development but whenever this is lacking there are problems. Thus, to achieve full developmental processes, the rural women in developing nations need functional literacy education. This will enable them to achieve gender parity.

In developing countries rural women need quality literacy education to be able to contribute their quota to the development of their nations. There is now the realization that sustainable human development cannot be effective if half of the human race in developing countries especially the women folk remain ignorant, marginalized and discriminated against (UNESCO 2002). The provision of quality functional literacy education to nearly half of the population in developing countries will greatly improve lives and livelihood and will no doubt have great and sustainable social and economic impact on the women folk.

In developing countries, several policies on women development had been formulated and approved. In Nigerian experiences, the National Policy on Women was approved and adopted in April, 2000. The goal of this policy was the full integration of women into the social and political status as means of developing the nation's human resources for self and national economic growth. Its

objective in Nigerian context, included the promotion of gender mainstreaming into all policies and programmes. This policy is premised on recognition of gender issues as central to and critical to achievement of the foremost agent of empowerment. It is the bedrock of women empowerment in Nigeria's case.

It is noted that education empowers women by improving their living standards. Access to functional literacy education is considered one of the main factors for empowerment, particularly empowerment of those excluded from the formal system of education and development (Olomukoro, 2012). Functional literacy education provides access to written knowledge and knowledge is power. Kagiticibais, Goksen and Gulgoz (2005), opined that there is active relationship between literacy among women and improved child healthy. Thus, extra year of education of mothers is associated with a significant decline in infant mortality and improved child health. It is noted that from every indication and acknowledgment that literacy education is the key to women emancipation.

It is necessary to note that women form a high percentage of the population and majority of them are illiterates, for them to be able to participate meaningfully and effectively in developmental agendas, they need quality functional literacy education to move on the train of development in their respective countries. To achieve these objectives, this paper examined functional literacy education as a tool for enhancing rural women development in developing countries. Enhancement in this paper implies improving and promoting rural women's status towards their empowerment using functional literacy education.

Functional Literacy Education

Functional literacy is a combination of literacy skills of reading, writing and numeracy with socio-economic or work oriented skills (Ani, 2010). It is the application of literacy skills acquired to the improvement of daily living, health care, hygiene, farming or trading. It enables an individual to apply an active independent role in society. UNESCO (2004) defined it as having acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enables a person to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his/her culture or group. Functional literacy education help adults and youths to adjust well for economic and social development. It helps the individual to be more productive and more useful to himself or herself and to the society. It is a part of adult education.

There are two aspects of functional literacy education which include work oriented and socio-cultural. Work-oriented functional literacy education teaches literacy for a particular vocation and the skills required in that vocation for the individual learners to improve their working efficiency and increase productively (Ani, 2010).

Socio-cultural functional literacy education teaches the learners the literacy for socio-cultural matters, such as family life, sanitation, nutrition, religion and civics. The two aspect of functional literacy education must be integrated in order to sustain fully the interest of the learners or participants. Functional literacy education helps the individuals to relate well with their works, other people and with the environment. Functional literacy education helps adults both men and women to be less dependent on other people to solve their own problems. It empowers the individual to have self confidence and self –reliant, hence promotes all forms of development.

Development

Development is a complex issue, with many different and sometimes contentious definitions. Desai (2008) submits that development is a generic term. This means that it has many uses and variants which variety is clarified in the context of the definition of the usage. Development is the process of enlarging people's choices, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2004). Development consists of the removal of various types of un-freedom that leave people with minimal opportunities of exercising their reasoned agencies. Development is viewed as permanent conditions of positive growths, resulting in higher levels or conditions, which are better than the previous stages or positions. (Iheanacho, 2012). Development is a process of economic, social, political and cultural change engineered in a given society by the efforts of all stakeholders both internal and external with the developing countries (Akinlayo & Oghenekohwo, 2004). Osokoya (2008) perceived national development as the development of a nation's human and material resources and education is perhaps the only means to prepare individual for participation in national development. The thrust is on the realization of human potential expressed in social emancipation and enhancement of moral, intellectual and technical capabilities. This is the type of development women in developing countries should crave for.

Development in terms of human potentials and capabilities lends credences to the Sen's theory of development and thus forms the theoretical frame work of this discussion. Functional adult literacy has been recognized to play pivotal role in human development . Thus Sen's theory of development is concerned with the expansion of capabilities which is the starting point of human developmental approach.(Parr, 2003). It is noted that the purpose of development is to improve human lives by expanding the range of things that a person can be and do, such as to be healthy and well nourished, to be knowledgeable, and to participate in community life. This development is about removing the obstacles to what a person can do in life, obstacles such as illiteracy, ill healthy, lack of resources, or lack of civil and political freedom (Oyitso & Olomukoroi, 2012). The most basic capabilities for human development are to live long life, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the

resources needed for a decent standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Thus from the Human Development Report, Dimensions, gender equality relate to differences between men and women in capabilities, education and health, labour force participation, decision-making including participation in political decisions and economic decision making, access to and power over economic resources (Okojie, 2011). The above background showcase development as multi-dimensional process involving the transformation and improvement of the economic, social, entrepreneurial and political situations of women in developing countries.

Functional literacy education: imperative for enhancing rural women's development in developing countries

Functional literacy education is not just the ability to read and write but also include the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goal, develop knowledge and potential. Akinpelu (2008) opined that to be literate is not just to have mastered the skills of reading, writing and computing with numbers, but more than that. It is to be able to use those skills effectively for communications in all aspects of one's life in social, cultural, economic and political spheres. Functional literacy empowers and nurtures inclusive societies and contributes to the fair implementation of human rights. For mothers, functional literacy education leads to an enhanced quality of life for their families and improved education outcomes for their children. Functional literacy in the workplace and in the community, as well as in the society and in the developing countries will promote the economics, social and cultural development of all people holistically, (UNESCO, 2005).

Imhabekhai and Olomukoro (2007) pointed out that literacy is a basic instrument in social transformation and modernization. It is noted that functional literacy influences or promotes the rate of development and its possession or otherwise facilitates or retards the level of each country's development. Functional literacy is seen as a tool for all forms of developmental efforts including poverty alleviation and reduction of illiteracy rates in developing countries. The rapid development of developing countries is only possible when various governments embrace the issues of functional literacy attainment of women folks. Functional literacy is a foundation on which education is built. Functional literacy is a *sine qua non* for development in developing countries. It is on record that various education forums had stated the gains of functional literacy for women in the world.

These include United Nations (UN) Literacy Decade running from 2003 to 2012 giving impetus to reducing poverty and illiteracy Boliva (2010). This Boliva stated that investing in women's literacy carries very high returns by improving livelihoods which lead to better child and maternal health and favours girls' accesses to education. This indicates that functional literacy gives

women sound voices in their families, in political life and on the world stage since it is the first step towards personal freedom and broader prosperity. The adage that says when women are literate, it is the society that gains is correct and this is quite highlighted in social development, political development and economic development of women.

Functional literacy education is seen as the most powerful active agent of socialization which will promote transformation of both human and material resources to grow the economy and improve human standards of living. It plays a tremendous role in reforming and preparing an individual to tender active and useful services both to the family and society at large. It is noted that functional literacy education gives women sound voices in their families, political life and on the development agenda of the world. Functional literacy education is the starting point towards personal freedom and broader prosperity (Boliva, 2010).

Functional literacy education seen as an imperative for enhancing women's development in developing countries have various benefits in the scope of social, economic and political benefits both to women's group attainments and their various countries at large. These benefits are discussed briefly below.

Political benefits of enhancing women's developments using functional literacy education in developing countries.

Women have important roles to play in political developments of developing countries because of their large proportion in population sizes. These large populated citizens are illiterate and consequently, their level of participation are low in national building agendas in their respective countries. In addition, cultural values which emphasize women's primary roles as wives and home makers in developing countries context are psychological barriers to women. As a result of this culture, women are less interested in politics as they see politics as the duty of men and their world. (Okojie, 2011). In developing countries, women should be given functional literacy education to enable them participate in developmental agendas in their countries. In developing countries women should be allowed to acquire proper awareness of their innate potentials, right and higher responsibilities in societies. Functional literacy is the empowerment skills developing countries women need to become initiators and participate in political decision making processes for active economic growth for self and nations at large.

In developing countries with high rate of illiterate women in place, empowering potentials of functional literacy education can strongly transform and translate more women into participating in various political activities and thus contribute to the quality of public debate, policies and to the favourable democracy that will enshrine good governance to grow the economy and peaceful co-

existence. Hannum and Buchman (2003) opined that educated people are more likely to vote and voice tolerant attitudes and democratic values than illiterate people. Burchified (2002) viewed that among Nepalese women folk, those who ran literacy programmes demonstrated more political knowledge of representation than those not involved in any literacy programme. Egbo (2002) opined also that in Nigeria, literate women have more confidence to participate in community meetings unlike the illiterate women. In western countries and many developing countries literate women had contributed effectively to the political developments and good governances within their societies. Typical examples are Mrs. Indira Ghadi of India, Mrs. Bandara Vaile of Sri Lanka, Mrs. Aquino of Phillipines, Margaret Thatcher and Therease Mayer of United kingdom and Sir leaf Ellen Johnson of Liberia who ensured the political stabilities and good governance in the countries (Efedi, 2008). In Nigerian situation, notable women that contributed strongly to the development of Nigerian nation are Dr. Ngozi Iweala, Professor Dora Akunyili, Mrs. Chinwe Nora Obaji etc. The role of women had gone beyond the four walls of their respective homes and extents to all spheres of human endeavours in the development processes of their respective countries (Oyitso & Olomukoroi 2012).

Economic benefits of enhancing women's development using functional literacy education in developing countries

In developing countries, functional literacy education will promote and create jobs, high per capita incomes, enhanced productivities, fiscal capacities increase skills which will result in high employment capacity. These are indices of economic benefits of empowering women. Literacy education properly designed and provided, is understood to impart skills and knowledge to participants and make them more productive in self-employment or in employment by others (UNESCO, EFA GLOBAL Monitoring Report, 2006). Efedi (2008) opined that literate women create incomes or wealth for their families through their good and benefiting employments whether in private or public sectors.

It is noted that functional literacy education had been formed to have positive impacts on self-development and economic status. Education has been consistently shown to be a major determinant of individual's income alongside professional experiences as stated by Education for All Global Report (UNESCO, 2006). It is perceived that educated women are morally able to engage in productive activities, find formal sector employments and earn higher incomes and enjoy better returns for their education than the less educated women. In developing countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Iraq, Iran, Costa rica etc women have limited accesses to productive resources such as land, credit and wage employments. Women hardly or rarely have ownerships to land and as such

cannot use land as collaterals to obtain credits at the point of need. (Okojie, 2011). These trends, had to change in developing countries if economic, technological innovations and holistic developments are to be achieved. Empowering women towards development and promoting their active involvements in development processes require political and economic goodwill to establish enabling environment, which is functional literacy education for their full and active participations in developmental agenda (www.ccsent.org/res.August. 2012)

Social benefits of enhancing women's development using functional literacy education in developing countries

World bank (2003) states that there is always a strong positive association between mother's education and child mortality because low maternal levels of education results authentically in poor child malnutrition and poor quality of care for children. The report went on to reveal that educated mothers are also more likely to educate their children, especially girl child, thereby increasing productivity and incomes of the next generation. This means that literate mothers would be able to instill in their offsprings the right attitudes and behaviours expected of them by the society and that will have resultant effects on developing countries' economies.

In the context of developing countries, functional literacy education has vital social benefit in areas of increased life expectancies, reduced child mortality, educating their children. Functional literacy education paves way for further learning as stated in article one (1) of the World Declaration on Education For All in Dakar, Senegal (2000). Functional literacy education is essential learning tool of basic education. A child denied the right and chance of a quality functional literacy education is deprived of his/her life tools and termed handicapped for life, unable to cope with situations requiring reading, writing and arithmetic unless given the second chance, education as a youth or adult to cope with the happenings.

Studies had shown that increase in female schooling had been followed by declining child mortality and fertility in subsequent decades. This increased female education should be holistically promoted by various governments in developing countries with low girl child enrolment into school. In general, functional literacy education wipes away ignorance, political apathy and promotes mutual co-existence, religious respect, acceptance of individual differences, cooperation among different strata of societies.

Conclusion

This paper had examined how functional literacy education can enhance women's development in developing countries. It examined the various benefit of enhancing women towards achieving development for the entire society. Some recommendations were made.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made

Government of developing countries should expand effective functional literacy education into primary and secondary schools curriculum.

Adult education programmes should be adequately funded by governments of developing countries.

In developing countries, governments, Non-Governmental Organizations in charge of promoting education should create effective awareness programmes on the values and importance of women education to the socio economic development of their respective Nations.

Government of developing countries should train skillful adult literacy facilitators to empower them to perform effectively on the job

Government of developing countries should promote the training of qualified adult literacy facilitators with high salary rate to enable them cover large areas and liberate poor masses (women) from ignorance and poverty.

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