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# Adult Literacy Programmes for Sustainable Livelihood for Poor Rural Women in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Literacy has been identified as an important tool in poverty reduction. But it appears that the focus of literacy programme in Nigeria has been on reading, writing and numeracy with its limitations in tackling rural poverty. The paper therefore proposes holistic literacy programmes through REFLECT which, in addition to reading, writing and numeracy skills, will impart skills of entrepreneurship, creativity and self-reliance as well as emancipation and survival skills for sustainable livelihoods.

## Introduction

Out of an estimated 1.2 billion poor people in the world, over two-thirds are women. They face abject poverty in want of adequate food, clean water, sanitation and health care. They often lack access to the critical resources of credit, land and inheritance. Women living in rural areas are worst affected by poverty (Pant, 2004, p. 121). The highest percentage of the illiterate, poor and unemployed are found among women living in rural areas. In Nigeria, as in other developing countries, majority of women live in rural areas (Tsaku, 2005, p. 115). These areas are characterized by poverty, hunger, illiteracy, underdevelopment and lack of social amenities. Illiteracy is one of the key deprivations that women are exposed to; others are poverty, ignorance and diseases, which limit the possibility of human progress.

Over 70 per cent of Nigerians are now classified as poor, and 35 per cent of them live in absolute poverty. Poverty is especially severe in rural areas, where up to 80 per cent of the population live below the poverty line and social services and infrastructure are limited (IFAD, 2007).

Women and households headed solely by women are often the most chronically poor groups within rural communities. Men have higher social status and as a result have more access to schooling and training. In spite of their low social status, women play significant roles in rural economic activities. Over time, the number of men migrating from rural areas in search of employment has increased, and the number of households headed solely by women has grown substantially (IFAD, 2007). This has further aggravated the poverty level of rural women in Nigeria since the responsibilities of the family are now solely held by them.

Tsaku (2005, p. 117) said a great vicious circle of illiteracy, poverty and ideological backwardness are part of the common features of rural women in developing countries including Nigeria. In this wise, Pant (2004, p. 23) contends that the role of literacy education in women empowerment and poverty eradication cannot be overemphasized. Literacy rates among rural women are of particular concern because an impressive body of research (such as Ampene, 1980, p. 2; Bhola, 1983; Tahir, 2001, p. 81; Shilubane, 2007, p. 104) clearly showed that a strong feedback



loop exists between literacy and poverty alleviation, empowerment, engagement in civil society and citizenship.

The realization of this fact has made Nigerian governments to provide literacy programmes over the years in our communities. The focus of literacy programmes has been on reading, writing and numeracy with its limitations in tackling rural poverty. This has resulted in calls for the expansion of the range of issues that literacy education programmes target; literacy education programmes for poor rural women should not be confined to mere reading, writing and numeracy, if literacy targets the reduction of rural poverty. To achieve sustainable livelihood for rural women in Nigeria, is to consciously impart in them the awareness of enterprising creativity, self-reliance, critical awareness and surviving skills through a holistic literacy programme for sustainable livelihood. This is the argument of this paper.

This paper examines the impact of adult literacy programmes on poverty reduction and undertakes a content analysis of existing adult literacy programmes focusing on whether or not they can assist poor rural women in Nigeria to achieve sustainable livelihood. A holistic literacy programme is proposed which will include, in addition to reading, writing and numeracy skills, handicrafts or agricultural and other economic activities, self-confidence and self-reliance, hygiene and childcare, family economics, creativities and critical consciousness among others through Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT).

### **Literacy and Rural Women Poverty**

Poverty may be understood in the broad or narrow sense. The former confines itself to the realm of economy while the latter incorporates social, cultural, educational and political factors. In the circumstances of developing countries including Nigeria, Tsaku (2005, p. 117) noted that absolute poverty is most common in rural areas especially among women. Among other reasons, illiteracy stands out as the major reason for poverty (Yibing, 2000).

Literacy for adults is understood to be a continuum of competencies. Basic skills, such as the ability to write one's name, are followed by 'functional literacy' which UNESCO, in its Education for All initiative, defines as the ability to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of this group and community (UNESCO, 2006, p. 30).

Aspbe (Cited in Hinzen, 2006, p. 49) points out that adult literacy is the fertilizer needed for development and democracy to take root and to grow. It is an invisible ingredient in any successful strategy for eradicating poverty and achieving gender equity. Illiteracy and poverty, according to him, are two sides of the same coin. Poverty is associated with poor nutrition, nagging hunger, shabby clothing and crowded rooms. Many writers have alluded to the potency of literacy for poverty reduction in societies. Ampene (1980, p. 2) claims that the usefulness of literacy cannot be denied; the new literate, if properly instructed and made aware that literacy is a tool for liberation and enriched living, gains confidence and dignity. Bhola (1983) argues that without literacy there cannot be development. He further sees literacy as a necessary tool for the reduction of poverty.



Shilubane (2007, p. 104) in his study, reported that all the participants in his investigation came from poverty-stricken villages where women and child abuse was the order of the day. The women indicated that attendance of functional literacy programmes had changed their mindset and their eyes had become open, they could see they were living below the poverty line. They were therefore developing a strategy of changing the situation for the better. This result was achieved because literacy programme was coupled with skills training and critical consciousness.

Similarly, Pant (2004, p. 127) reported that literacy programme in Naugaon, Uttaranchal allowed women to reflect on their everyday experiences and articulate their needs and priorities. To convince their detractors, the women argued that their newly acquired skills had contributed to the economic and social betterment of their families and communities.

In Nigeria also, Egbo (2000) compared non-literate women to literate women. The study found that non-literate women felt their illiteracy had a negative impact on their self-esteem and that it prevented them from full participation in community meetings because others assumed they were not very knowledgeable. In contrast, literate women reported being confident enough to participate in community meeting, considered they knew their rights better than the non-literate women, and felt more confident to make autonomous decisions.

Ebirim (n.d.) gave an account of the nature of adult literacy programme adopted by the Better Life Programme in Nigeria. According to her, The Better Life Programme was organized bearing in mind the limitations of rural women. The women were organized in productive units in their different communities. The units were all functional units that had elected leaders. Each productive unit engaged in an income generating activity which would yield some income to the women. Literacy teaching was then woven around the income generating activity which the women engaged in. The fact that the women learnt literacy skills and applied them immediately in their economic activities which they were working on motivated them to apply these new skills in their daily activities (Ebirim, n.d.).

The above gains of literacy programmes point at literacy programmes as powerful tools in the process of rural transformation and poverty reduction. It is through relevant literacy programmes that women's attitudes and behavioural patterns are challenged through the development of critical thinking skills as evident from the examples given. The impact of literacy programmes can be felt in the lives of the participants when the literacy programme teaches relevant content using appropriate techniques. It is on this note that an analysis of the contents of literacy programmes in Nigeria will commence.

### **Content Analysis of Adult Literacy Programmes in Nigeria**

Since the 1990 proclamation of Education for All, the Nigerian government has become more involved in promoting literacy programmes and initiatives. Agencies for mass literacy at the state level have been tasked with implementing literacy programmes (Omoyemi, 2010). In this wise, agencies for mass education in Nigeria run basic literacy and post-literacy programmes. Specifically, basic literacy gives the skills of reading, writing and numeracy to adults who have not



had the opportunity of formal education in their childhood. The programme is normally taught in local or English language which lasts for nine (9) months, after which the graduates of basic literacy proceed to post-literacy of two (2) years. At this level, the participants are introduced to other subjects such as Mathematics, English Language, Social Studies, Elementary Science, local languages and Religious Studies. People who complete the post-literacy programme are equivalents of those who complete primary school education (Indabawa, Haladu & Garba, 2002).

However, one very noticeable weakness as observed by Omoyemi (2010) in these literacy programmes is that they have not been closely linked to adults' working life or their basic need for economic and socio-political development and empowerment as traditional methods of teaching are employed. Rather than provide adults with functional literacy skills which would stimulate their interest and commitment to learning, the programmes focus largely on imparting basic literacy education, which fail to provide them with knowledge for self-fulfilment and improved living standards.

In lending credence to the above, Yusuf (n.d.) reports that 69 % of women literacy participants of his study in Kwara State identified teaching basic and post-literacy programmes traditionally, without direct reference to their socio-economic needs, as a major hindrance to learning. Similarly, observation made during the writer's supervision of the students' practical attachment at Sokoto State Agency for Mass Education, Sokoto, showed that the Agency taught literacy skills separately from vocational skills which prevented the participants from appreciating the relationship between socio-economic skills and literacy. This, among other reasons, might be the reason why Haladu (2006, p. 190) advocated for integrating vocational skills into post-literacy programmes in Nigeria. According to him, post-literacy support services (vocational skills) will certainly help in developing the basic skills of rural peasants and urban dwellers and therefore help in eradicating poverty.

Teaching literacy traditionally as described above, despite the robust and relevance of basic and post-literacy curriculum as evident from the literacy curriculum, will continue to domesticate women. It will hardly liberate women from the shackles of poverty, marginalization, exploitation, discrimination and ignorance.

It was in this context that the University Village Association (UNIVA) initiated the UNIVA Functional Literacy Programme (UFLP) to promote the development of literacy and live skills among adults, which has led an improvement and growth in literacy rates (Omoyemi, 2010). At this point, one will advocate that state agencies for mass education in Nigeria copy this good initiative and even do more through what the writer calls holistic literacy for sustainable livelihood for poor rural women in Nigeria.

### **Holistic Literacy for Sustainable Livelihood for Poor Rural Women in Nigeria**

Literacy with a holistic perspective is concerned with the development of every person's intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative and spiritual potential. In adopting a holistic approach to literacy, one must address the question of what women need to learn. Since women play substantial reproductive roles, literacy programmes should provide them with the



skills and knowledge that would make the execution of these tasks less demanding of time and energy. At the same time, since a considerable portion of women's subordination can be traced to their lack of financial autonomy, basic literacy skills should be integrated into vocational skills and productive skills. But none of this would be sufficient if women are not given the opportunity to realize that they live under conditions of subordination and are not given the skills to modify these social conditions. In this case, a holistic literacy should teach emancipatory skills in addition to reproductive and productive skills.

Holistic literacy involves not only reading, writing and computing on a self-learning basis, but also skills in citizenship, production and living, sanitation and health, environment, etc. Other specific contents that should be available for literacy programmes for women, for example, are skills in self-confidence, independent thinking and self-reliance, hygiene and childcare, family economics, among others.

The proposed contents should be taught using the Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT) technique. REFLECT is a merging of the theory of Paulo Freire with the practical methodology of PRA. In a REFLECT programme there is no textbook – no literacy 'primer' – no pre-printed materials other than a guide for the facilitators that is produced locally (preferably with the input of the facilitators themselves). Each literacy circle develops its own learning materials through the construction of maps, matrices, calendars and diagrams that represent local reality, systematize the existing knowledge of learners and promote detailed analysis of local issues (Archer, 2000, p. 260).

Archer goes on to explain how pictures are used to label aspects of the graphics that groups produce. Words can then be added to these and these are the first step to literacy. As time goes on, songs, drama and poetry can be added to the graphic representations with an emphasis on active construction of texts rather than passive reading. Where texts are produced to take forward local action, they are written jointly with input from people with varying degrees of literacy all contributing and every word written up visibly for all to see. The focus has been on using these texts, produced by the community, to secure external resources. Writing formal requests to local government and other agencies, preparing petitions, undertaking detailed research, developing a community census and demanding formal documents of registration have all been part of the process. The challenge of all literacy programmes has always been to create uses for literacy after the period of learning. Here this challenge is confronted head-on, with the aim of becoming a 'literate' community as the first step, seizing the power of literacy from those who presently wield it (Archer, 2000, p. 274).

### **Conclusions**

Attaining sustainable livelihoods for poor rural women which UNDP (1997, p. 6) described as people's capacities to exercise choice, access opportunities and resources, and use them for their livelihoods in ways that do not foreclose options for others to make their living, either now, or in the future, through literacy programmes, should go beyond mere teaching of reading, writing



and numeracy. Sustainable livelihood is the all-around development of poor women, which means the satisfaction of not only basic needs but also social, economic, political, spiritual and cultural activities. The attainment of this, among other things, lies in what I call an effective holistic literacy programme through REFLECT approach.

### Recommendations

The practicability of this proposal lies on the following recommendations:

1. Agency for Mass Literacy in different states should test-run holistic literacy programmes for women in their domain. This requires them to organize seminars and workshops for their staff to understand holistic literacy and REFLECT technique. Effort must also be made to motivate literacy instructors in teaching literacy holistically.
2. Political will and the evolvment of a functional policy on financing literacy programme is also important in advocating for holistic literacy in Nigeria. A functional policy on financing literacy programme will show the political will of the government in implementing policy for reducing poverty among rural women in Nigeria through literacy programmes.

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