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Women's rights to adult education as a means to citizenship

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Abstract

A fundamental reason for the advocacy of women's literacy is its contribution to the attainment of citizenship, that is the claiming and use of public space and power. Following a presentation of basic trends and public policies in literacy, this article reviews the diverse theoretical understandings of literacy. It discusses normative arguments regarding the provision of emancipatory and sustainable literacy programs for women and the development of an expanded view of citizenship that considers not only the public space but also the private realms of everyday life. Such objectives, the article asserts, can be attained only if literacy is conceived as part of a political project that encourages dialogue and reflection to foster individual and collective agency.

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At the dawn of the 21st century, illiteracy is a problem that still confronts many countries. Literacy remains a strong societal value as the right to education is invariably recognized as a human right. Yet, as several have noted, education is the most widely and systematically violated of all recognized human rights (Oxfam, 1999).

Many scholars have addressed literacy and much theory and practical experience has accumulated on the subject. At the adult level, illiteracy is basically due to differential distributions of power that results in little or no education for marginalized populations, although in some regions of the world it represents a very slow

transition from an oral society to one increasingly dependent on the printed word.

Important developments are now shaping the conceptualization of literacy for women's empowerment, especially through the construction of a full and expanded citizenship. This debate considers both empirical and normative aspects, so it becomes necessary to establish a difference between them. The central point of this essay is to examine what citizenship implies for women and how literacy can contribute to an active citizenship. This paper takes as a point of departure the distribution of literacy among women and men today and what we know through systematic research about the acquisition and uses of literacy. Then it moves through theoretical treatment of

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citizenship and democracy to finally arrive at the potential and challenges literacy offers women.

1. Literacy conditions and policies

Of all the educational statistics, the most poorly measured is that of literacy. Often, it refers simply to an individual’s self-reported assertion that he or she can read. While schooling has been expanding rapidly, adult literacy shows slow progress.¹ Aggregate figures for the whole world indicate that there has been a decrease in illiteracy from 33% illiteracy rate in 1990 to a 20% rate in 2000 (UIE, 2000). However, in absolute terms there has been practically no decrease in the number of illiterates, since there were 875.8 million in 1990 and some 875 million in 2000 (UIE, 2000). Further, while access to basic education has been expanding, UNESCO estimates that there are between 100 and 115 million children out of school—many of whom will not attain literacy in the future.

Literacy rates vary significantly among the developing regions. As Table 1 shows, the rates are the smallest in South and West Asia, closely followed by Sub-Saharan Africa. The disparities by sex vary also considerably by region. They are smallest in Latin America and the Caribbean and widest in South/West Asia, the Arab states, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Similar patterns of disparities were observed between 1990 and 2000, which further reflects the historic and economic challenges facing literacy acquisition. Since the number of illiterates remains high despite an average access to primary education in developing countries now close to 80%, the main explanations for the persistence of illiteracy are that access to formal education is not being accompanied by successful completion of the primary education cycle and that the schooling received in those grades by some

Table 1
Regional trends in literacy rates for population 15–24 years of age

World Regions	Men		Women		GPI for 2000
	1990	2000	1990	2000	
Developing countries	85.7	88.0	75.7	80.1	0.91
Arab states	77.2	83.1	55.1	68.5	0.82
East Asia and the Pacific	96.9	98.0	93.1	96.4	0.98
South and West Asia	71.1	77.5	51.2	61.2	0.79
Sub-Saharan Africa	74.1	81.3	59.0	71.3	0.82
Latin America/Caribbean	92.7	94.8	92.8	95.3	1.01
Developed Countries	99.6	99.7	99.5	99.7	1.00
World	88.2	89.9	80.0	83.4	0.93

Source: UNESCO, (2003), Table 3. The gender parity index (GPI) measures numerical parity between men and women with a coefficient of 1 for total parity. Coefficients below 1 indicate disparities to the disadvantage of women. UNESCO (2003, p. 109) considers that coefficients between 0.97 and 1.03 should be taken as indicative of gender parity.

groups is not of sufficient quality to create regular or proficient readers.

From a gender perspective, three of the five developing regions exhibit considerable gaps in the literacy of women and men. While the proportion of illiterates shows gradual decrease, women continue to represent the majority of the world’s illiterates. To address literacy effectively we must design literacy programs with a specific focus on both women and gender issues.

2. Policies on adult education and literacy

A number of global policies today steer government attention toward a few crucial educational goals. The Education for All (EFA) commitments made in Jomtien in 1990 and reiterated at the World Forum on EFA (Dakar, 2000) aim at reducing illiteracy by half by 2015. Commitments to literacy were expressed at the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), and the V International Conference on Adult Education (also known as CONFINTEA V, Hamburg, 1997). To further promote the specific importance of literacy, we have embarked on the

¹The UNESCO Institute for Statistics is currently engaged in a project that seeks to improve the measurement of literacy by giving careful tests to small samples of individuals to examine their performance along three basic domains (prose, document, and quantitative literacy). Its Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Program (LAMP) will measure five levels of literacy skills.

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