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Adult education and indigenous people: Addressing gender in policy and practice

Nitya Rao^{a,*}, Anna Robinson-Pant^b

^a*School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ, UK*

^b*Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ, UK*

Abstract

Adult education programmes developed for or by indigenous communities rarely seem to have addressed gender inequalities. Yet, compared to mainstream adult educational interventions promoting instrumental approaches to ‘functional literacy’, such programmes often appear highly politicised, starting from a standpoint of promoting indigenous peoples’ rights. We look at the reasons for the absence of gender analysis from policy and research on indigenous adult education and highlight key issues within indigenous adult education, when viewed from a gendered perspective, particularly language, assessment, learning structures and programme objectives. Drawing on case studies of indigenous adult education programmes in South and South-East Asia, we emphasise the need for participatory, non-hierarchical processes in adult education that can provide legitimate space for multiple voices within indigenous groups, without enhancing the sense of marginalisation. The principles underlying indigenous adult education programmes can help planners to challenge and respond to gender inequalities.

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1. Introduction

Adult literacy classes in South Asia usually consist of a large majority of women. Shaped by the assumption that educated women make better wives and mothers, with lower fertility rates (Cochrane, 1979) and a lower incidence of child

mortality (LeVine et al., 1991), such programmes invariably adopt an instrumental approach to women’s empowerment (Longwe, 1998). The curriculum is often based around women’s reproductive role with materials about family planning, nutrition and childcare. International policy on adult education has tended to emphasise the importance of educating women in terms of increasing their contribution to development—but failed to take a gendered perspective on programmes and curricula. Despite the success of

*Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: n.rao@uea.ac.uk (N. Rao),
a.robinson-pant@uea.ac.uk (A. Robinson-Pant).

small-scale NGO programmes in promoting a more politicised approach to women's literacy (for instance through legal literacy programmes to provide information to women about their rights), international donors and national governments have used a more limited definition of 'functional literacy' as skills for employment or improved livelihood. Only recently has the 'rights' perspective been recognised in policy documents (see UNESCO, 2002) and begun to influence programmes to consider what kind of education women may desire as individuals, rather than as wives and mothers (Robinson-Pant, 2004).

By contrast, adult education programmes for indigenous groups in South Asia have arisen from and responded to the struggle for indigenous people's rights. This struggle is not new and, following the period of decolonisation in the 1960s globally, has become recognised as a part of the 'long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power' (Tuhivai Smith, 1999, p. 98). There are more than 5000 indigenous and tribal groups, comprising almost 300 million people (of whom 190 million are in Asia), living in 70 countries across the world. Together they account for 4% of the world's population though in countries such as India, with about 400 tribal groups, they make up close to 8% of the population of the country (UNESCO Institute of Education, 1999). They include diverse groups such as the 'scheduled tribes' or 'adivasis' in India, the 'orang asli' (original people) in Malaysia and the Maoris in New Zealand. Each of these groups is different in their language and culture, and also differentiated internally along lines of class, gender and age. Yet in the international arena, they are often clubbed together, distinguished by their different cultural world-view consisting of both a custodial and non-material attitude to land and natural resources.¹ The colonial heritage (particu-

larly the loss of land and resources), the impact of globalisation and with it an increasingly privatised and materialistic world, and the domination of western practices, has led many of these groups to share their experiences and mobilise across country and regional borders, asserting at this level a collective indigenous identity. As Tuhivai Smith (1999, p. 110) points out: 'The international social movement of indigenous peoples is at all levels highly political'.

Within this context, adult education has been intrinsically linked to a more politicised notion of 'empowerment' (though this term is rarely used) as indigenous groups use a discourse of rights and of self-determination. Indigenous education—in the formal sector too—goes beyond the educational realm, linked to land and the political struggles of indigenous peoples, with the *choice* of language and pedagogies seen as a means to restoring dignity and identity as a group. Rather than just guaranteed access or participation in education systems, *control* over the educational system and structures is seen as the issue at stake. As we discuss later, this distinction could be identified as the difference between adult education for indigenous people (suggesting access into mainstream educational structures) and indigenous adult education (implying control over the curriculum and learning practices).

Within the discourse on indigenous peoples' struggles around education, we found it surprising—given the emphasis on redressing unequal power relations and control—that gender identities are rarely mentioned and never prioritised. Even when compared to the dominant instrumental approach to mainstream adult women's education described above, indigenous adult education programmes can appear to adopt 'gender blind' approaches. In this paper, we explore the reasons for this through both an analysis of the nature and purpose of policy commitments and research studies, as well as recent field-level programmes. We focus particularly on case studies from South and South-East Asia because of our familiarity with this region.

In the next section, we first explore the absence of gender from both policy and research on indigenous education and the reasons for this.

¹In the international policy arena, 'indigenous' status is being claimed by many 'politically marginalised, territorially based ethnic groups... who are culturally distinct from the majority populations of the states where they live' (Minority Rights Group website). Recognising that the term 'indigenous people' is not used in many of these contexts, we have tended to use the specific terms used in the countries described.

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