

The Implications Of A Gender Perspective In Literacy

1990, International Literacy Year (ILY) presents an opportunity for reflection on the feminist challenge to literacy. It offers an opportunity for emphasizing literacy as one of the primary aspects of the emancipation of women in the world. The main relationship between the issue of literacy and women can be traced to the fact that the majority of illiterate people in the world is female.

The official estimate of illiterate women in the world is 561 million (UNESCO, 1988). In her paper, **Literacy: A Tool For Empowerment Of Women?** presented at a symposium on **Women And Literacy: Yesterday, Today And Tomorrow** in Stockholm June 1989, **Agneta Lind** reports that sixty percent of the world's approximately one billion illiterate people is female⁽¹⁾. Lind also reports that the proportion is steadily rising and that the greatest increase is in Asia (109 million between 1960 and 1985).

Arab female illiteracy is also substantially high. In their paper, **Trends In Women's Education And Employment In The Arab World**, **Byron Massialas** and **Jamileh Mikati** confirm this fact⁽²⁾. They present statistics which show the comparative rate of illiteracy by sexes between various Arab countries. Thus, female illiteracy is highest in the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), Somalia, Morocco and Saudi Arabia. On the

other hand, it is lowest in Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar and Jordan.

According to Massialas and Mikati, these countries attempt to combat illiteracy by employing non-formal educational means. For instance, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), initiated a National Literacy Campaign in 1982. However, in spite of efforts, only 20% of the participants were females. Iraq's mass literacy campaign initiated in 1976 was more successful and included 70.6% female participation. The importance of this program is that it employed a repertory of strategies such as broadcasting, peer pressure, legislation and the like to encourage women and men to participate in some 23,804 literacy centers. Another successful female literacy program was established in Bahrain in October 1985. The curriculum of this program consists of basic skills in reading, writing, arithmetics, sewing and handicrafts. In Lebanon, various programs to promote literacy, social awareness and improvement of the living conditions of war afflicted families are sponsored by International organizations (UNICEF, Save the Children Federation, Catholic Relief Services, Terre Des Hommes, Medecins Sans Frontières and the International and Lebanese Red Cross).

Faced with the fact that 80% to 90% of Arab Women are illiterate, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) in Beirut decided to meet the challenge by developing the "Basic Living Skills Program." This non-formal integrated program includes material on health, child care, home management, civic education, family planning, nutrition, environment and legal rights. The kit contains eight volumes of self-explanatory lessons written in simple Arabic and accompanied by audio-visual material in the form of colored slides and hundreds of illustrations. The BLSP has been well received by many different groups and proved to be successful. The next step is to develop simple reading materials based on available texts for new literates to read.

Rates of Illiteracy in the Arab States for Individuals Over 15 Years of Age by Sex

Country	Year	Total %	Males	Females
Algeria	1982	55.3	42.7	68.3
Egypt	1976	61.8	46.4	77.6
Libya	1973	61.0	38.7	85.2
Morocco	1971	78.6	66.4	90.2
Kuwait	1980	32.5	27.2	40.9
Lebanon*	1970	—	21.5	42.1
Qatar*	1981	48.9	48.8	49.1
Saudi Arabia	1980	75.4	65.5	87.8
Syria	1970	60.0	40.4	80.0
UAE	1975	46.5	41.6	61.9
Yemen	1980	91.4	82.4	98.5
Mauritania	1978	82.6	—	—
Somalia	1980	93.9	89.4	97.3
Tunisia	1980	53.5	38.9	67.7
PDRY	1973	72.9	52.3	92.1
Jordan	1979	34.6	19.9	49.5

*ages 10+

Source: Statistical Yearbook, UNESCO, 1984.

Source: Women and Economic Development in the Arab World. Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Beirut, Lebanon 1988.

- 1) Agneta Lind, **Literacy: A Tool for Empowerment of Women?** Taken from **Voices Rising**. A Bulletin About Women and Popular Education, Volume 4, No. 1, January/February 1990, pp. 4-7.
- 2) Byron G. Massialas and Jamileh F. Mikati, **Trends in Women's Education And Employment In The Arab World**. Taken from **Women And Economic Development In The Arab World**. Coordinator: Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr and Irene Lorring, sponsored by **The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World**, Beirut University College, Beirut, Lebanon, 1988.