

Literacy: A Potent Tool for Women Empowerment

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Abstract

The paper examined the issue of literacy as a potent tool for empowering women in the Nigerian communities. The paper was premised on the fact that when women are literate, they will be more active in their various communities. Their voices will be heard as opposed to their faces being seen and this will instill in them the confidence to make progress in this advancing world. The study made use of descriptive survey design. The population for the study consisted of all the women in Ibadan North Local Government while 211 women were randomly selected as samples for the study. A self designed questionnaire of 20 items was designed to elicit responses from the subjects of the study on their views on literacy, good living and empowerment. The data collected were subjected to statistical test at 0.05 level of significance. The study discovered that literacy is a weapon for fighting poverty, diseases, and ignorance and when all these are fought, an average woman becomes empowered to participate actively in issues of development in her community. The study therefore recommended among others that women should show interest in literacy as where there is a will, there is a way and the government at all levels should make efforts to fund literacy programmes and encourage women to take active part in literacy programme.

Keywords: Literacy, Empowerment, Social Mobility and Women.

Introduction

Education, which is a tool for social mobility is important for everybody in the community. It is only through education that the present power structure can be broken. Upward mobility and empowerment are only made possible through the process of education. To emphasize the importance of education in a fast growing world, there was the World Declaration on Education for ALL (EFA), the summit which took place at Jomtien, Thailand (March 1990) and later renewed at the Dakar World Education Forum of April 2000 with the involvement of the National government of all developing countries. The point of emphasis of education for all is

for everybody in every nation to become literate as literacy brings power; it brings about alteration in the stratification/segmentation of the society. It is a weapon that guarantees equity in the society. It is a means of empowering the vulnerable groups – girls and women whose traditional age long occupation is supposed to be in the kitchen. It is therefore important for women to be exposed to literacy so as not to be alienated in this world of wide information and knowledge.

This paper therefore examined the concept of literacy in the light of empowering women. For when women are empowered, they are taken from a state where only their faces are seen and their voices remain unheard.

Literacy Defined

The EFA declaration of Cairo 2005, stressed the main reason for the world's much emphasis on literacy. The focus is stated below as quoted by Hussain (2005):

Literacy is a fundamental human right and a prerequisite to the development of society. Literacy is at the heart of learning, the core of Education For All (EFA) and central to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Access to quality literacy learning opportunities and the development of literacy environments are essential strategies for poverty reduction, equality, economic development and environmental protection and in general a prerequisite for achieving democracy.

The above view shows literacy as being essential for empowerment which spans through all areas of human endeavour. With literacy women would become active participants in political issues, they will be empowered economically, socially and they will be able to feature amongst their fellow women folk; their level of awareness would have increased leading them to have a claim on their rights.

Literacy for women empowerment is of immense benefit to all societies because women bring up future leaders of any country being the first known teachers of children at home and the best for that matter. This is why Okpoko, (2010) believes that women education is a key to development and that empowering women through literacy is an asset to her family, her immediate communities, her nation and the world at large. This implies that the acquisition of literacy education empowers an individual to think positively, take proper decision about her living and the society and acquire other skills that can assist her economically, politically and socially.

Anyanwu, Omolewa and Sidique (1985) believe that people cannot learn the useful information required for their survival and happiness in the society without literacy. This is corroborated by UNESCO (1997) that literacy is a human right and an essential ingredient to achieve equity, development and peace. Thus, if literacy is a human right, it must therefore not evade women.

The purpose attached to literacy is to develop in people, the skills, attitudes, abilities and behaviours considered desirable in the society. Exposure to myriads of information builds and empowers people. It enables and ennobles them to have the

power to control their situations. Women's literacy is thus of utmost importance in that once literate, they are freed from the hold of taboos and superstitions that keep them in the background, once they attain a level of literacy, ignorance which is associated with poverty is driven out of their lives as they will be able to think in the right direction and coupled with their functional literacy skills, they will reach a level of empowerment that would improve their living standards and make them recognized in the society.

In empowering women through literacy, Asaolu (2010) is of the view that vocational education must be an integral part of the education to be planned for them for it is this that will set them on the part of self-reliance; a stage whereby they will be able to add voice to their faces. In the same light, Iogwu (2010) believes that educated adults empower their families to develop socially, economically and politically. This is why enlightened families form the bedrock of community and national development. Women, important members of families of the world, must be made literate and not given away to rotteness with their endowed potentials.

Literacy is a tool that enables citizens to take their rightful position in the community. This fact is supported by Bhola (1983) that without literacy, development only limps on one leg. When talking of development, it should not be one sided, it should come from the efforts of both men and women in the society. Literacy for women must therefore be encouraged as it is a tool that helps and equips one to face his or her challenges without an exception of any group of people in the society. Everybody needs to be literate to function properly in the society and to bring about development that is on the lips of everyone.

It is unfortunate however, to note that illiteracy is still rampant among women across the globe. Egunyomi (2000) considered the position of illiteracy in Nigeria to be gender biased with women forming the bulk of the percentage of the Nigerian Population. The 1991 census presented women to be 44,053 out of the total population of 88,514 million illiterate people in Nigeria (NPC, 1994). In addition, a World Bank Document reports the latest position of women in illiteracy – that illiterate adults and youths as at the year 2000 was 880 million out of which 60% were women. Illiteracy among women must therefore be fought if poverty is to be reduced and gender equity achieved.

The type of literacy education to be given to women should be a life long one. This is the type that will give them total knowledge and understanding on how to deal with problems of survival and supporting lives in their communities, how they should act towards themselves and their fellow, what clarity they need to make in order to enjoy a satisfying and enriching life, in what direction they may try to shape their future, articulate and deliver solutions to specific problems they face (Aspin and Chapman 2007). This type of education to them is:

- (a) Flexible, adaptable forward looking to enable it to feed its citizens and give them a reasonable quality of life.
- (b) The education that gives the need for people to be made aware of their rights and duties open to them in their communities.
- (c) It is education that gives individuals an informed awareness of a range of options of activities from which they can construct and reconstruct, satisfying,

personally uplifting patterns of life for themselves. This type of education could lead to:

- (i) Building beneficiary capacity
- (ii) Increased effectiveness in all spheres of endeavours.
- (iii) Information sharing which helps to facilitate individual and collective action.

With good education, women are able to make concrete decisions and initiate necessary actions concerning their empowerment (Paul, 2007).

Summing up the various definitions of literacy as used across the world, Hunter in Obi (2006) sees literacy in three ways: (a) literacy as a set of functional skills, aptitudes or capacities (b) literacy as a process for improved quality of life. (c) literacy as an expression of structural and political realities. All these itemized types of literacy efforts should be embarked upon to make a woman total and complete if truly they are to be empowered as literacy can no longer be defined as the ability to read, write and compute alone but it must include adaptation to global information, skills, attitudes and knowledge (Sarumi, 2005).

The study is therefore out of examine what literacy education could do to raise the lot of women in our various societies.

Statement of the Problem

Literacy is commonly defined as the ability to read, write and understand simple sum. However, Sarumi (2005) believes that literacy can no longer be seen as the ability to read, write and compute alone, but it must include adaptation to global information, skills, attitudes and knowledge. On this basis women who form part of the marginalized group must be equipped with literacy education to empower them to function as effective and efficient mothers of future children leaders, as good wives and as responsible, diligent and contributing citizens of the nation. The main question for the study therefore is “how can women be empowered to function effectively in the societies in which they live through literacy education?”

Hypotheses

Three hypotheses were generated for the study:

1. There is no significant effect of literacy on freedom from poverty.
2. There is no correlation between literacy and women empowerment.
3. There is no significant relationship between literacy and improved standard of living among women.

Methodology

A descriptive research design was adopted for the study. The population consisted of women in all the local government areas of Ibadan, the capital city of Oyo State, Nigeria. These local government areas cover both urban and rural areas.

Sample

The sample for the study consisted of two hundred and eleven (211) women drawn from both the urban and rural areas of the location under study.

Instrumentation

The instrument used for the study was a self designed twenty (20) item questionnaire tagged “Literacy Education for Women Empowerment” (LEWE).

Validity

The items were validated by experts in literacy education of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria and an expert in literacy education from the University of Ado Ekiti.

Reliability

The items were pretested on thirty (30) women in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria twice. This yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.68 which was deemed to be good and reliable.

Administration of Questionnaire

Copies of the questionnaire were personally distributed by the researcher with the help of some assistants. Two hundred and fifty three (253) copies were distributed while only 211 were valid.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using Pearson’s Product Correlation Coefficient Statistical tool.

Presentation of Results

The results are presented below:

Table 1: Pearson’s Product Correlation Coefficient of Correlation among Variables tested

Variables		Literacy	Poverty	Empowerment	Standard
Literacy	Pearson’s correlation	1	.683**	.558**	.623**
	Sig. (2 tailed)	-	.000	.000	.000
	N	211	211	211	211
Poverty	Pearson’s correlation	.683**	1	.751**	.590**
	Sig. (2 tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	211	211	211	211
Empowerment	Pearson’s	.558**	.751**	1	.518**

	correlation Sig. (2 tailed) N	.000 211	.000 211	211	.000 21
Standard of living	Pearson's correlation Sig. (2 tailed) N	.623** .000 211	.590** .000 211	.568** .000 211	1 21

The table above shows the statistical analysis of the responses on the variables tested.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant effect of literacy on poverty reduction.

Table 1 above shows that $r = 0.683^{**}$, $P = 0.000$ at 0.01 level of significance. Therefore the hypothesis that there is no significant effect of literacy on freedom from poverty is rejected. The alternative hypothesis that there is a significant effect of literacy on freedom from poverty is therefore upheld.

Hypothesis 2

There is no correlation between literacy and women empowerment.

The results on table 1 shows that $r = 0.558^{**}$, $P = 0.000$ at 0.01 level of significance. The null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between literacy and women empowerment is rejected and the alternative hypothesis that there is significant relationship between literacy and women empowerment is upheld.

Hypothesis 3

There is no relationship between literacy and improved standard of living among women.

Table 1 shows that $r = 0.623^{**}$, $P = 0.00$ at 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between literacy and improved standard of living is thereby rejected. This means that there is a significant relationship between literacy and improved standard of living.

Discussion

The study is based on the importance of literacy in the empowerment of women folk. This study revealed that with literacy education, there will be freedom from poverty. With literacy education the cycle of poverty will be broken. Going by the view of Aruma (2006), literacy is a tool that assists people to acquire relevant knowledge and skills needed for professional development in contemporary society so as to improve efficiency and productivity. Literacy education accompanied by vocational education will help women to live above poverty level. Lack of education would not give them the courage to have access to credit information, and they will lack the technical know how of the skills that would make them buoyant to rise above poverty level. Lack of literacy skills would bring about poor organizational and accounting skills which are all germane to women enterprises that could raise her above poverty level. The essence of this discovery is that literacy is the key to the ultimate development of

women. Priority must therefore be accorded programmes in literacy education because progress in other sectors depends on the resultant effect of literacy on women, their children and families.

The issue of women literacy education should be given more priority as one of the expected outcomes of the United Nation Literacy Decade 2003-2012 is improved quality of life, poverty reduction, increased income, improved health, greater participation, citizen awareness and gender sensitivity among those who have participated in the various educational programmes under EFA (UNESCO, 2006).

The study also showed that there is a significant correlation between literacy and women. In this wise, women should be empowered through literacy education as they form an important part of the society world-wide. Literacy would help them to be aware of new productive opportunities in the areas of entrepreneurship skills acquisition, greater income generation and better opportunities in the world of employment greater income opportunities to better their lot in the world wide communities.

The above goes to confirm the discovery that there is a significant relationship between literacy education and improved standard of living. The acquisition of literacy will empower women to think positively, air their opinions and take firm decisions concerning their health and work life. There will be an improvement in their livelihood as livelihood comprises of the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living. Giving functional literacy, women's livelihood will be sustained as they will be able to cope with stresses and shocks that might come their way (Sabetes, 2008)

Recommendations

The following recommendations are put across. Women should be encouraged to enroll in literacy programmes. They should be encouraged to know that the benefits that would accrue to their being literate is greater than the economic benefits they are currently enjoying and so they should take bold steps to leave their trades at the stipulated time for literacy classes.

Every educated woman should be involved in seeing to it that a woman becomes literate around her as this would bring comfort to all and sundry. Awareness programmes should be floated on posters, and media houses and children in schools should be made to encourage their mothers on literacy education. The government at all levels should fund literacy programmes, make it interesting to women so as to entice them to enroll for literacy classes.

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