

The interplay between literacy skills, literacy use and the personal lives: An assessment of women of rural Dagbon

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ABSTRACT

This paper assessed the impact of adult literacy on the lives of women in rural Dagbon. Interviewing, focus group discussions and questionnaires were administered for data collection from two communities each from Tolon and Kumbungu districts of Ghana as well as the literacy providers. The sample respondents included 60 women who have successfully graduated from a literacy programme and 40 other community members included elders and immediate family members of beneficiaries. Key informant interviews were conducted to gather data from the literacy service providers. The study revealed that the acquisition of literacy skills enables the women gain organisational abilities through which they formed stronger social networks for solidarity, income generation and advocacy skills, to speak out on issues that directly affect their lives. The study revealed that adult literacy programmes do have the positive impact of empowering women, and that, scaling these programmes up, with more support, would contribute to the overall sustainable development of Dagbon in particular and Ghana as whole.

Key Words: Rural women, Empowerment, Adult Literacy, Dagomba ethnic group, Northern region

Background

Literacy is the heart of learning, core of the Education For All (EFA) strategy and central to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a fundamental human right and prerequisite for the development of every society (Hussain, 2005 and UNESCO, 2008). Access to quality literacy and the development of a literate environment are essential components for poverty reduction, gender equality, economic development, environmental protection and achievement of sustained democracy. Anyanwu, et al. (1985) also believes that people cannot learn the useful information required for their survival and happiness in the society without literacy.

Literacy initially was narrowly defined as the ability to read, write and understand and compute simple sums, (UNESCO, 2008) but Sarumi, (2005) argues that the definition should be broadened to include adaptation to global information, skills, attitudes and knowledge. As Jakalia and Amo-Mensah (forthcoming) also note, literacy and numeracy have broader meanings as social practices and foundations for lifelong learning, linked to key competencies such as critical thinking, negotiation and communication in complex and diverse networks of relationships. Literacy thus is a fundamental component of learning to know, to do, to live together and to be what you want to be. The World Bank, (2000) identified four key elements as the core objective of literacy programmes for empowerment. These are; to assist people gain access to information, inclusion to participate in decisions that affect their lives, hold institutions accountable and gain local organisational ability.

Adult literacy has been advocated as one of the keys that unlock the potentials of rural women to empower and contribute to community and national development. The eradication of illiteracy, poverty, disease and social inequality has been identified as the major challenges facing developing countries (UNESCO, 2008). Factors responsible to this situation are varied, complex and highly contextual. Chambers (1987) noted that women mostly suffer from the effects of underdevelopment and this requires the active participation of all members of society to fight it. He therefore suggested that, one way by which this can be achieved is through education and literacy. However, not everyone is able to access formal education, hence adult literacy programmes remains another viable option for developing countries.

In Ghana, many interventions have been employed to reduce the effects of illiteracy on the people, often with minimal success (GoG, 2010). Literacy, education and training have been identified as one of the most effective tools to achieve sustainable development, through the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills for problem solving necessary to achieve growth and social equity. In much the same way, Roudi-Fahimi and Moghadam (2003) also argued that education is key amongst the strategies to improve the individual's well-being and the economic and social development of a nation and literacy is central to education and communication and a fundamental condition for accessing knowledge in modern societies.

The problem of illiteracy in rural Dagbon can best be described as gender biased. The Ghana Living Standard Survey (GLSS, 2008) reveal that about half (49%) of the adult population in Ghana can neither read nor write in the language they are most proficient in (whether English or mother tongue). It also states that, only 30% of adults in the Northern Ghana have been to school. The 2003 Core Welfare Indicator Questionnaire (CWIQ) and 2008 GLSS also show that less than one-quarter (22.6%) of adults (15 years and older) in the Northern Region are literate, compared to the national average of 67%. The Dagomba settlements, recorded the lowest adult literacy rates of 16.1% for males and 3.2% for females.

Despite the numerical strength of Ghanaian women of which Dagbon is a part and the significant roles they play in national development, they still occupy a lower socio-economic status in society (Offei-Aboagye, 2000). It is against this background that, the paper assessed the impact of adult literacy programmes on the well-being of women and their families in Dagbon, in the northern region of Ghana. The rest of the paper is organized into three main sections. A methodology for the study is presented in section 2. The results and discussion is presented in section 3. Section 4 presents the conclusion and recommendations for promoting adult literacy for women in rural communities in northern region of Ghana.

Methodology

The study design was mainly descriptive in nature. The study was conducted in Tolon and Kumbungu districts in the northern region of Ghana. In all, 60 interviews were conducted to gather data from women graduates from literacy programmes, 3 key informant interviews were conducted to gather from the programme officers of the literacy service providers in the study areas and 8 focus group discussions were held with the elders and family members of the graduates. Proportional random sampling technique guided the selection of the women graduates while the programme officers were selected purposively. In all, 8 focus group discussions were held with graduates and their immediate family members. In this case, the members conveniently selected. Desk reviews of reports, journals and published and unpublished materials also provided a rich source of secondary data. The data were transcribed and analysed using SPSS Version 16 and Microsoft Excel 2007.

The Results and Discussion

Women, who constitute a marginalized group, need to be equipped with skills that can empower them to function as effective, efficient, productive and diligent in national development effort (Olufunke, 2011). UNESCO (2008) and Okpoko (2010) argue that empowering a woman through literacy has potential benefits for her family, her immediate community, her nation and the world at large. This implies that the acquisition of literacy skills empowers the individual to think positively, take good decisions about her life and the society and acquire other skills that can assist her economically, politically and socially. 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 and ignorance, which is associated with poverty.

The study revealed that there are three main literacy service providers in the study area and they adopted different methodologies for achieving their objectives. These literacy providers included Literacy and Development through Partnerships (LDP) who stress the acquisition of reading and writing skills for an effective functional life by the learners; School for Life (SfL) adopts a mop up strategy of getting younger learners (between ages 9 and 15) back to formal school by providing them with 9 months of literacy training; and the Non-Formal Education Department (NFED) emphasise on the acquisition of functional skills. The study revealed that, LDP enrolled over three quarters (78%) of the respondents (women graduates), the NFED (12%) and the SfL (10%). All these respondents had successfully graduated from their programmes.

Previous literacy programmes targeted women as a homogenous group but there is now a more understanding of the differing needs of women according to age, marital status, location, economic situation among others (UNESCO, 2008). Key informant interview revealed however that when women are targeted as a group, they learn from each other's experiences and share joys and griefs. On its own, literacy would make less of a difference to a person's life, nevertheless it enables them to do things that liberate them to address poverty issues, access information and use services that reduce vulnerability, disease or ecological change and could lead to poverty reduction.

The female participation in the adult literacy programmes in all the target communities was found to be a little over 50%, which is good considering the cultural challenges that women in Dagbon face. The reasons for participation ranged from socio-cultural to economic and spiritual. Culturally, a women's role in the house of her husband or father is supportive and does not require literacy. These roles normally leave them physically too tired to go for classes which are usually held at night. The study also revealed that, some husbands are suspicious that the male facilitators could seduce their wives; consequently some prevented their wives from participating in the classes.

The study revealed that, 30% of the respondents attended classes thrice a week, 40% attended about once a week, 28% attended once in a while and 2% registered but could not attend. Respondents were motivated differently to participating in the classes. Majority (86%) of the respondents (women) reported that, they were

motivated by the fact that through these classes they can acquire the skills and art of reading and writing. A few (10%) of the respondents also reported that they wanted to learn new ideas and new ways of doing things while 4% of the respondents also indicated that they wanted to gain new knowledge.

The Dagbani word for literacy is *'neesim'* literally translated as 'light' or 'clearness' and an illiterate is referred to as *'zugusapbli'* literally translated as 'dark or black headed'. The ability to read, write and enumerate is equated to being in the light where issues are viewed with clarity. Participants considered themselves to be in darkness or blind in their state of illiteracy. Thus, in order to be enlightened, they sought literacy or education. The adult literacy programmes have given them some of this light.

The study results revealed that the impact of adult literacy manifest itself in a numbers ways across the study area. Communities which hitherto women views attracted least attention now attracts greater attention. The impact of women participation in adult literacy in rural Dagbon is discussed under capacity building, health, governance and leadership, advocacy, fostering, and peace and conflict resolution as well as challenges faced by both participants and service providers.

Kabeer (2000) and Mosedale (2003) agree that all women are marginalised in one way or the other and are therefore constrained by norms, beliefs, customs and values through which societies differentiate between them and men and thus manifest itself through lower incomes relative to men in some communities. According to Young (1992), empowerment is about people taking control over their lives by gaining the ability to do things, setting their own agendas to change events in a way previously lacking, including the way they act either consciously or unconsciously which also brings about changes in behaviour.

The level of empowerment varies according to age, class, ethnicity, wealth, family position and so any analysis of power (Young, 1992). However, all the 60 female respondents indicated that they had acquired the skill of reading and writing in the mother tongue and also some basic words and greetings in the English language. This was confirmed when respondents were made to write their names. Most (80%) of the respondents were able to construct basic sentences in English with minimum mistakes. All respondents indicated that, they have become better informed on important issues that affect their lives such as knowledge of rights and responsibilities as citizens as well as issues related to health, education and politics.

Vocational/apprenticeship training requires literacy skills such as reading labels and writing out measurements. A family member testified that his wife graduated from one of the adult literacy programmes and was able to continue in the formal educational system she is now a qualified nurse serving at one of the community clinics in the district, providing a social service and earning income.

All the female respondents said that with the literacy skills and capacity building on how to produce better quality products, they are able to earn more income, because they receive better prices. They are also able to compute their production costs and this helps them to determine how much to sell in order to make a profit. By making more income, they are able to contribute financially to family expenditure and other social responsibilities entailing the community's welfare. This has increased the respect for women and their views since they are seen to be contributing more in the family and the society as whole. Mothers are also able to pay for their children's school fees and for others to go through vocational training.

Female learners and graduates have integrated well into the elite society of their communities and this has improved their confidence levels and pride in their ability to read signposts, identify hospital cards and provide vital information to family members when needed. Their literacy skills have positively impacted their livelihood activities, for example they are able to follow the teaching from workshops and other fora where they learnt how to process better quality products such as shea butter, rice and the traditional seasonings (dawadawa and kantong).

Having experienced the benefits of literacy, they now send their children, including their daughters and nieces, to school. To prevent their children from trekking long distances to school in the next community, members of Bognayili community have built a kindergarten through their own initiative and engaged young senior high school leavers to assist in teaching them, while they appeal to the District Coordination Council to help absorb the school into the mainstream educational system.

The decision to build a kindergarten in one of the communities and a vocational school in another underscore the recognition of the impact of education in the socio-economic development of the beneficiary communities. The majority of the adults in these communities, for one reason or another, could not go to school and have suffered the effects of illiteracy. For this and other reasons, respondents indicated that they now send their children to school, confirming Heward and Bunwaree's (1993) argument that a woman with just primary education will ensure that her children go to school than the one who did not get any literacy training.

There is a strong relationship between good nutrition and good health (Toraitich-Ruto, 1999), which is a very necessary ingredient in attaining sustained development. There is evidence that adult literacy improves the lives of beneficiaries in a holistic way. Many (85%) respondents indicated that, they are making conscious efforts to provide their spouses and children with balance diet and register them onto the National Health Insurance

Scheme. The respondents indicated that they are now attending ante-natal and post-natal clinics regularly, spacing child births and generally observing personal and environmental hygiene and as such has improved their health status. This finding is consistent with Toroitich-Ruto (1999) that female literacy leads to improved child feeding practices, high child survival rates, the adoption of family planning and delayed marriage.

In the case of personal hygiene and good sanitation practices, about 50% of the respondents indicated that they have acquired better attitude towards personal hygiene and good sanitation practices. They reported that, they now keep their houses and environment clean, bath their children and washed their clothes regularly than before. A respondent confessed that she previously thought guinea worm and severe malaria were acquired through witchcraft, but through the adult literacy programme she now understand that guinea worm is a water borne disease while severe malaria is also caused by mosquito bites.

Adult literacy has not only impacted on the graduates or learners socially and economically, its influence had permeated the whole community, changing attitudes and challenging negative cultural values such as not sending girls to school and the notion that women are daft and cannot think for themselves. Focus group discussions revealed that respect and appreciation for women has increased. All the respondents outlined the importance of eating a healthy, balanced diet. They said this has reduced the chances of falling ill, and they now know what to do to remain strong and healthy and this knowledge has also contributed to the reduction in the frequency with which they attend hospital. Children also grow fast and become very intelligent when they eat good food.

There is a perception that when women are involved in governance or in leadership, there is fairness in the distribution of resources and less corruption (Offei-Aboagye, 2000), but Miranda, (2005) has challenged that perception, citing factors such as the socialisation processes that women undergo, beliefs and societal perceptions that shape their way of life and how they address challenges. The findings of this study, however, discount Miranda's notion, as some of the women testified that they are now able to decide on who leads them politically without the influence of their husbands and family. This agrees with Khasiani (2000) that when women are well informed of the critical issues in the electoral processes, it enhances their interaction and enables them to make informed decisions and participate effectively in the processes.

Recognizing that women have certain virtues, men now encourage women to vie for and accept leadership as assembly members, amongst other positions. Female participation in family and community decision making processes and partisan politics has increased in the study area as a result of the confidence that beneficiaries have acquired through the literacy programme. The study revealed that many of the women, who were hitherto timid and shied away from assigned responsibilities, are now outspoken on issues of interest and vie for political office and other leadership positions in the community. They are now able to make informed decisions and choices about who leads them politically. Some graduates have ventured into governance as assembly women and political party and group association executives. This has brought about competition among female and male political office aspirants and an improvement in their leadership qualities and with this they are able to advocate on social issues and vices.

The women respondents indicated that through the literacy programme, they have developed social networks that bond them together to advocate for better services that will enhance their ability to contribute more meaningful to family and community development. One of the difficulties that women face in accessing assistance from financial institutions was requirement for collateral which they did not have and had to rely on their husbands to provide. Some husbands capitalised on that to intimidate and "borrow" the money from them without paying back thus putting them in debt. The group solidarity which they have built through the adult literacy classes can be used to access assistance from some NGOs such as Action-Aid Ghana and many micro-financial institutions that demands for group solidarity as collateral for accessing financial support.

It was reported that traditionally, Dagombas do not invest resources in the education of the girl child because she will eventually marry and the benefit would be enjoyed by her husband. Also, the eldest Dagomba child was not trained by their biological parents. They believed that inexperience in child rearing and deep emotional ties with the child would not allow the young parents to give the children the training and discipline needed for successful future lives. Consequently, these children were fostered to their uncles in the case of the male and aunts in the case of females to be trained in housekeeping and to learn a trade.

While fostering has social and economic benefits for the child, the foster parent and the extended family (Kuyini et al, 2009), it also has some negative effects. Some fostered children, for example, do not receive the same opportunities for formal education and other benefits as the biological children, especially where resources are scarce (CREATE, 2010). The effects of these on such females are lower self esteem, low levels of literacy and disempowerment. The result indicates that apart from having fewer chances of being sent to school these foster children are sometimes over-age for their grade and are more likely to drop out of school, especially if they are girls, thereby lowering literacy rates.

Oppong (1973) highlights the unity that fosterage engenders within the extended family which is still very important today. However, with the influence of modernity, fosterage has to be redefined. CREATE (2010) reports a significant reduction in fosterage in the Savelugu district as a result of education, parents now take personal care of their children regardless of sex, and only send them to relatives in the urban areas where there are better quality education opportunities to school. This was confirmed in the study communities.

The views expressed by most (90%) respondents indicated that adult literacy has provided them with enough appreciation of the negative effects of conflicts and the role they can play as individuals to manage or resolve it. They claimed that they have now become better advocates of peace building in their communities, particularly in the light of the violent conflicts that Dagbon suffered as a result of land and natural resources as well as chieftaincy in recent times (Awedoba, 2009).

A female respondent explained that differences in chieftaincy and political party alignment had formerly created much hatred and mistrust between them in the community. They had perceived their opponents as enemies but, through discussions at the literacy classes, they now appreciate why people should think or behave differently in society and for that matter belonging to different political parties. Respondents indicated that they are now aware that the constitution of Ghana guarantees freedoms and rights of individuals, hence it has raised their tolerance level which is good for peace building.

Discussions on the effects of conflicts on socio-economic development and the benefits of peaceful co-existence in the literacy classes has helped to reorient their attitude towards each other and their views and priorities which is necessary for development. This has attracted NGOs to partner with their communities for training in personal and community development in leadership and advocacy.

Challenges

Respondents indicated their gratitude to the literacy providers for choosing their communities for the programmes but complained that some have pulled out while the vigour of the others has also reduced drastically, thus denying some of their colleagues the opportunity to participate. Some of the providers, for example SfL, explained that as part of their strategy, they have time frames for communities they serve, after which they move to other communities. The LDP cited funding constraints as the cause of the reduction in activities and also the need to cover other areas.

The results show that learners face a number of constraints, for example lack of money to buy books and other supplementary reading materials. Even though the books are sold at subsidised prices, they are unable to buy them to read at home and also in class. Some respondents also complained of the difficulty in making time for the classes. This affects the regularity of attendance and successful graduation. The classes are held at night and they have to finish their household chores, trading activities and other responsibilities before they can attend the classes. Some of the respondents complained that they are sometimes too tired to attend or sleep during the classes. Others cited family and other social problems as challenges they faced. Women play crucial roles in Dagomba social and cultural life, for example at weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies etc. Some of these activities take days and sometimes weeks and so some learners just drop out of programmes when they realise how far behind they are in comparison to their colleagues.

Conclusion

Some critics have argued that adult literacy or education alone cannot take credit for empowerment, especially of women. While that argument may be true to some extent, it is also an undeniable fact that adult literacy has brought a lot of positive changes to the lives of women, particularly those from the Northern part of Ghana, who have been marginalised in part by cultural systems. Globalisation and modernisation through education has brought the world closer together and this has had an impact on lives and lifestyles, but education goes beyond imbibing information, allowing that information to change one's attitude in a positive way and to help one make informed choices and decisions. With the confidence that women gain as a result of the literacy skills they acquire, they also improve upon their lifestyles and contribute towards community and national development. For sustained development to take place, women need to be part of the process. Most of the abuses that women suffer in relationships are as a result of powerlessness and total dependence on their partners and other family members to meet their needs. Adult literacy has the potential to offer them that power and much more.

Even though Ghana is making some progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), it is doubtful that they will all be met by the 2015 target. The study results have proved that much more progress could have been made if adult literacy had been available in all communities. Education is a key requisite for the attainment of the goals and Ghana could step closer towards achieving them if adult literacy was boosted.

Recommendations

Given the challenges faced by both participants and literacy providers identified in the study, the following policy recommendations are outlined:

- Women have the same capacity and potential as men, which, when mobilised, can enhance the socio-economic development of the country, therefore provision of literacy should not be discriminatory in any form.
- Considering the empirical evidence from various sources that education does empower people, the government needs to work closely with adult literacy providers in the country, recognising the complementary role they play in improving lives of rural people, especially women, by providing financial assistance.
- Local authorities and other civil society organisations must also partner with literacy providers to deliver the socio-economic development that the country is hoping to achieve.
- To give a more accurate picture of how much adult literacy has impacted on the target group, a comparative study needs to be done in the future.

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