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Using Community and Extension Services in Enhancing the Women Literacy Programme: Implications for Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

Taiwo Omojuwa

This paper focuses on the problem of illiteracy in Nigeria. It takes a look at how the Nigerian university, through its various centres and institutes, can contribute effectively by means of community and extension services, towards the eradication of illiteracy. It then examines the literacy programmes run by the defunct Centre for Adult Education and Extension Services (CAEES) of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Samaru, Zaria. The Centre was running diploma and certificate courses and programmes before it was permanently scrapped in 1996.

If community service is a prerequisite for the university, then it is necessary that ABU should take another look at its programmes, especially as their absence has negative effects on illiterate women. One of the recommendations made was the urgent need to review and revive the Adult Education Section because of the huge contribution it had made in the past (and the enormous contribution we envisage it would make in the future) towards mass and, most especially, the women literacy programme (WLP). It was also suggested that a needs assessment survey should be carried out so that the Centre can make provision for their various needs in order to offer them not just basic literacy skills, but productive vocational training so that they can become skilled in income-generating activities that would help to raise the living standard of their families.

Education has been identified as the greatest investment the nation can make for the quick development of its economic, political, sociological and human resources. The government pledged that:

Education will continue to be highly rated in the national development plans, because education is the most important instrument of change as any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an educational revolution . . . (*National Policy on Education (NPE)*, 1977; 1985:8)

This, however, has not been the case for as Umar Aji, the Executive Secretary of National Commission for Mass Literacy observed in Calabar in 1996, 'no fewer than 40 million Nigerians are illiterates'. Education, as a means of national development, is one of the revolutions of our time and there is no gainsaying the fact that women are a key process in this factor.

Women and education

Women education, especially in recent times, has been globally recognized as a basic and fundamental human right by various international bodies (UNICEF, 1993). Unfortunately, this is only in theory in developing countries, especially in Nigeria where, according to Ahmed (1993),

43.61 million Nigerians, 60.5% of which are females, are illiterates. The World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) (1990:155) claims that more than 960 million adults, two thirds of whom are women, are illiterate.

Since motherhood is considered to be the ultimate role of a woman, particularly in our society, it is necessary to point out that literacy is a tool of empowerment for women in this modern times of advanced technology. Literacy, among other reasons, helps women to improve their family's health and diet; it increases their productive ability, thus raising their family's standard of living, it improves women's social and cultural status, and enables them to discharge their responsibilities more effectively (UNESCO, 1981).

The Mass Literacy Programme which was launched in 1982, and partly sponsored by the United Nations Development Project Programme (UNDP) since 1995, was meant to eradicate illiteracy first by 1992, then by the 'magic' year 2000, when everything will be available for all, whether we work for it or not. The programme caters for learners who have enrolled for the Basic Literacy, Functional Literacy and the Remedial/Continuing Education courses. Before this programme was launched at the national level in 1982, the Centre for Adult and Extension Services (CAEES) of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, was running a list of programmes as community and extension services.

A university, broadly speaking, is an institution for teaching, research and dissemination of higher learning. Yesufu (1973:41) reports that:

A truly African university . . . must be one which, while acknowledging the need to transform Africa into the twentieth century, must yet realize that it can best achieve this result by completely identifying itself with the realities of a predominantly rural 'sixteenth century' setting, and the aspirations of an unsophisticated, but highly expectant, people . . . It must be accountable to, and serve, the vast majority of the people who live in rural areas.

Community and Extension Services in ABU

The CAEES, ABU, Zaria, was established in accordance with Statute 23 in 1971. Its objectives and functions include ' . . . promotion of links between the university and the community . . . provision of teaching, research and experiment in Adult Education . . . collaborating with Faculties, Institutes and other units in order to provide extension programmes not offered elsewhere in the university' (ABU Calendar, 1984/86:254). Its radio and television broadcasts 'was known as 'University of the Air', the first such programme by any university in Nigeria . . . It is indeed pioneering work in the mass media for university adult education purpose' (Braithwaite, 1985:216).

According to Braithwaite (*op. cit.*) the Centre had a series of broadcasts which catered for different groups of people. Educational broadcasts were prominent, since 'educational programmes are systematized broadcasts tied to a syllabus or geared towards a specific exam' (Salau, 1982). Women education series, which were broadcast and then re-broadcast, 'focused on the place and role of women's education in the overall development of self, community and the nation' (Braithwaite, *op. cit.*:216). Among others, it handled the Adult (Mass) Education aspect, Diploma (in Journalism and Adult Education respectively) programmes, etc. The Bayero University, Kano and Universities of Jos, Maiduguri, Sokoto, among others, run similar Adult Education programmes.

The Women Literacy Programme (WLP) is the major focus of this paper. The definition of

literacy continues to change as societal needs change. This is hardly surprising as the world continues to move towards more and more advanced technologies. UNESCO, in 1988, defines illiteracy as 'a gross violation of the basic human right to learn, know and communicate' (see Omojuwa, 1993, for a more detailed discussion).

Tahir (1994) sees extension education as those educational programmes that are specifically tailored to 'teach' adults the knowledge and skills required for efficient utilization of available resources to better cope with their constantly changing environment.

In the mass literacy (education) section of the CAEES, the courses were graded and designed especially for adults who did not, or could not, go through the formal school setting. Although it was meant for adults, the younger ones also enrolled. First, was the Basic Literacy Programme (BLP) as well as the WLP which was run alongside the BLP, and it was meant specifically for women in purdah. These programmes admitted girls and women, on one hand, and men on the other hand, who could neither read nor write. They attended classes three times a week and at week-ends (when it was considered to be more convenient for them) from Thursday through Sunday for 2 hours each day. The university operated what was called 'Tutorial Assistantship' then. This implies that the university had a vote meant for community and extension services for the Centre. Funds from this vote were used in paying the teachers and staff who participated in the programmes. The language of instruction was Hausa. Most of the women were married and they were taught simple Arithmetic, Hausa, Arabic, Religious Studies, Primary Health Care, Arts and some Home Economics courses. Some vocational skills were taught but the women considered these inadequate. The duration was one year. The men in the BLP, on the other hand, could move about freely, unlike the women who sometimes had to come with their children. The men were allowed to come for their lessons at night since they had to provide for their families during the day. Unfortunately, some of them would fall asleep as soon as the lesson started and, with time, most dropped out of the programme.

The Adult Primary Education went beyond basic literacy. Since it was more advanced, the duration of the course was 3 years at the end of which the First School Leaving Certificate was awarded. The third stage was sub-divided into two: The Adult Secondary (Junior) is a replica of the Junior Secondary School (JSS) in the formal school system. It lasted for 3 years and the syllabus was the same as that of the JSS. At the end of the 3 years, students wrote the JSS examinations along with students from different schools and they were awarded the JSS certificate. The Adult Secondary (Senior) also required that students spend 3 years at the end of which the Senior Secondary School Examinations (SSCE) were written. Some of the 'graduates' of this programme are reported to be in higher institutions today.

When the CAEES (or is it the university) ran into financial problems, the programme became self-funding. This meant that the students paid 'fees' which was actually a token of ₦5.00 when it started was and later reviewed, several times over a long period, to ₦20.00 per month. The implication of this system is that the fees generated would be used in paying teachers, buying chalk, etc. Remuneration was so low that, as at 1994, teachers were being paid as little as ₦30.00 per hour and because the programme could not generate enough money to pay teachers, some were being owed a backlog of 2-3 years pay.

The women were very anxious to learn, at least most of them. Some came with their babies and even children because there was nobody to take care of them at home. Some had to hawk their

personal possessions in order to generate school fees because their husbands refused to co-operate. Some were clearly over-worked due to the multiplicity of their roles as wives, mothers, students, etc. Some, however, attended too many ceremonies and this proved detrimental to their studies. Most of them, because they were married women, were either pregnant or nursing babies virtually every year.

By the time the Centre was permanently scrapped in 1996, about 3,000 girls and women were registered for the course and it (the Centre) had about 72 classes in about 18 learning centres in places like Yakawada, Kaya, the Emir of Zaria's palace, etc. When it was shut, the Diploma in Journalism students were transferred to the Department of Mass Communication, while the Adult Education students went to the Institute of Education. No provisions were made for the women who are trying to free themselves from the grips of ignorance, illiteracy, poverty, disease, etc. Due to lack of education, a large number of women are found in 'low productivity' jobs that require little or no skills and as such, attract very low wages which further relegates them to the bottom of the social ladder (Seymour, 1992).

A woman who is literate, on the other hand, would be able to do a lot of positive things for her family. For instance, she can go through the children's report cards for information concerning their progress in school; help her children with their home work; read drug labels; she would have an enhanced self-esteem, etc. It was observed in an on-going research on the Mass Literacy Programme in Zaria and its implications for women empowerment, that one woman responded to an item concerning social status by claiming that illiterate women move in groups because they lack the confidence and self-esteem to walk on their own. She further argued that even when crossing the road, they cross together and that their steps are not sure-footed, but because she is now literate, her self-esteem is enhanced and she can walk confidently. Huston (1979:14) puts it this way: My mother would have had a greater influence on me if she had been educated. She would have helped all of us. But she can't teach us anything because she is so ignorant'.

Discussion

From the foregoing, it is clear that improving the conditions of the immediate community in particular is a prerequisite for the establishment of any university. In the past, ABU contributed a lot in this area, but now, this service has been discarded. The university is still doing a great job as far as agricultural extension services are concerned through the Agricultural Extension Research and Liaison Services (AERLS), but even the most prolific farmer needs to be literate to enable him to take advantage of the various technologies available for high productivity and minimal loss. Specialists and researchers in the area of mass literacy have argued that teaching these women how to read, write and add is not enough and that the literacy programmes hardly make people literate as most of them forget these skills soon after they leave. (See for example, Bello, 1980; Aboderin, 1993; Anyanwu, 1994; and Tahir, 1994 for further discussion on this.)

Literacy, as a means of self-improvement, must be stressed in our society because it is a practical necessity which is economically advantageous. It also encourages the literate to go through books – religious and entertainment – at her own pace and leisure. It then ensures that the woman can perform certain duties unaided such as reading a voter's register, sorting out hospital cards, writing and signing cheques, etc.

The question may be asked: why was the Centre shut? A committee, headed by Dr. A.M.

Mohammed, was set up in 1996 to look into the allegations of 'mismanagement, ineptitude and corruption' in the CAEES by the Sole Administrator, Major General Mamman Kontagora (rtd). (*ABU News Bulletin*, March 25, 1996).

On June 10 the same year, *ABU News Bulletin* informed its community that: 'Collapsing CAEES may soon have its leadership changed and programmes reviewed, following an indictment of the Centre in a committee report submitted last week'. The Centre was indicted on several of the alleged accusations which include maladministration and misappropriation of funds. Among the recommendations made by the Committee were that:

1. All part-time programmes in the Centre be suspended.
2. A total of N1.21m be refunded by fraudulent members of staff.
3. A complete re-organization and restructuring of the Centre was necessary.
4. University Management and Senate keep a close watch on the performance of the Centre by insisting on annual reports.

From the above, it is clear that all was not well with the Centre, and that something decisive had to be done in order to curb the myriad of problems plaguing it. It should be noted that all the Centre's programmes were non-degree programmes which the National Universities Commission (NUC) has declined to continue to fund, probably due to financial constraints. The Centre's failure to pay its teachers show that it could not fulfil its 'self-funding' conditions. Then, staff of the Centre later called on the university authorities to change its name from CAEES to Centre for Continuing Education. In addition, they 'urged the university administration to re-examine the Centre's programmes (in order) to make them more meaningful and competitive for the challenges of the nation's manpower needs' (*ABU News Bulletin*, August 5, 1996).

Rather than implement the recommendations made by the Committee, however, the university administration probably due to all the negative reports, coupled with its inability to survive as a self-funding unit as well as NUC's position on non-degree programmes, 'permanently scrapped' the Centre the same year.

Conclusion and recommendations

The primary concern of this paper was with the WLP run by the Centre. This programme had a high concentration of women, and women education is our major focus. It was observed that literacy alone cannot solve the women's problems, and that a literacy certificate in this era of 'diploma disease' can hardly get one employment in the highly competitive labour market. It is, however, very necessary to encourage the WLP as much as possible.

The paper also noted that government is not willing to fund non-degree courses and that it appears as if government only focused its attention (as far as mass literacy is concerned) on agencies and ministries, etc. whereas the specialists who have been trained and are well versed in this area are not actually involved. It is not surprising, therefore, that even the mass literacy programme, financially assisted by the UNDP, is not achieving desired results. A dearth of reading materials was further observed in the area of mass education. The new literates, with nothing to task their newly-acquired skills, regress after sometime.

A number of recommendations easily come to mind. The women literacy programme in ABU needs to be reviewed and revived in order to assist the 'rural' women in the locality. The

recommendations of the Dr. Mohammed Committee should be implemented, including the change of name proposed by staff. To make the programme more relevant to women in the university locality, a needs assessment survey is imperative. Also, achievement-oriented, economically viable and productive vocational skills should be taught, such as: sewing (e.g. children's uniforms, mending clothes); knitting (using both needles as well as machines, of caps, sweaters, baby things, especially for the harmattan season), how to bake (for home and commercial purposes); poultry-farming; pottery; how to make tie-and-dye materials; soap-making; vaseline-making; child-care (in case it is necessary for them to work in a day-care centre); etc. Furthermore, there should be a regular newsletter in Hausa, to start with, and then English, as an incentive for the new literates, and as a motivating factor for the up-coming ones.

The mass media should, as their own contribution, encourage women to participate in the WLP, through slots in radio and TV programmes. Women should be invited and given slots, e.g. in talk shows, where they can encourage other women to persist in their search for education. Bill boards, notice boards, etc. should be placed in strategic locations, encouraging women education. The radio and television programmes, which gave birth to its 'University of the Air' should be revived. The university should seek assistance from global organizations such as UNICEF, UNDP, World Bank, etc. for the purpose of promoting mass literacy. However, in the absence of funds, the programme should be made self-funding, while government should be encouraged to revive its tutorial assistantship method. Voluntary organizations and philanthropists could also be contacted for financial assistance. In addition, men should encourage girls and women to be literate as this would be of benefit to the women themselves, their husbands, children, their families and the society as a whole that needs all the manpower it can get as it goes into the 21st century.

The World Declaration on EFA (*op. cit.*:159) sums it up:

The most urgent priority is to ensure access to, and improve the quality of, education for girls and women, and to remove every obstacle that hampers their active participation. All gender stereotyping in education should be eliminated.

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