The Effects of Literacy on Rural Women in Mali: Transformation through Empowerment

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of a literacy program on its participants and understand how the program empowered and informed the women. Further, the study sought to understand how these women affected changes in their families and how they transformed their community. Using data collected in Lassa, Mali, the article shows how the program has helped the participants to develop positive behavioral changes through consciousness-raising to make sense of their world through sharing experiences, and take actions for positive changes about their lives and the community. The article suggests that when literacy programs and education are built on the experiences, skills, and rich knowledge of people and communities, they can be powerful tools to provide people ways and strategies to break out illiteracy, poverty, and powerlessness.

Introduction and Contextual Background

Mali is a landlocked country located in West Africa with a population of about 13 million inhabitants. It is estimated that more than 70% of the population live on an income of $2.00 per day. Women who represent 51% of the population are the majority living in rural areas and below the poverty line. Rural girls and women in Africa face intertwined problems of poverty, hunger, and disease, which relates to limited access to education and high levels of illiteracy among women (Shibeshi, 2006). Girls in Mali, like girls in most parts of the developing countries, do not have access to basic education, or drop out of school at an early age (Geoghegan, 2005; UNICEF, 2005). Chronic poverty, gender inequality, and lack of school facilities continue to constraint school enrollments. The literacy rate is estimated at 39.6% for females compared to 46% for males (CIA-World Factbook, February 2009). Educating rural populations remains one of the main challenges for the achievement of Education for All, and the Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO, 2007). Adult literacy is perceived as an alternative to fill the gap, but most of the time literacy programs are only designed to teach the participants how to read, write, and do computations. However, by participating in a literacy program, *Yiriwaton*, a group of rural women in Mali, was able to make sense of their lives, improve the living conditions of their families and their community. *Yiriwaton* is a basic literacy program implemented in Bambara, the Mali national language. *Yiriwaton* was created in Lassa in 1998 with the cooperation of Luxemburg and Mali to provide functional literacy skills to women of Lassa. The program was developed with the philosophy that literacy skills alone are not sufficient to prepare learners for their active participation in the socio-cultural, political, and economic decisions related to the development of their families and their community. It is a participatory and empowering program for non-formal adult education in rural Mali. The program for women, which started as a literacy program was developed to reinforce the socio-economic activities leading to the well-being of the family and the community.
Presentation of Problem, Purpose, and Research Questions

Education for rural girls and women has a great impact on the socio-economic development of a society because girls and women are the pillars and backbones of their communities. Although African girls and women are responsible for the survival of their families, they do not have access to basic education or they drop out of school at an early age, due to socio-cultural and religious factors. It is assumed that Yiriwaton has had a major impact on the lives of the women of Lassa because of an increase in literacy rates, positive behavioral changes, open-mindedness, and socialization among women (Keita & Diallo, 2001). However, little empirical research has been conducted to find out how the program has empowered its participants and their community. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of a literacy program on its participants and understand how the program empowered and informed the women. Further, the study seeks to understand how these women affected changes in their families and how they transformed their community. This study answered the following questions: (1) what motivates the women to join the literacy program? (2) What is the impact of the literacy program on the lives of the women? (3) What is the significance of a literacy program in community development and empowerment? What are the women’s perceptions of empowerment and transformation?

Methodology

A qualitative case study research design was used to provide a descriptive research account of women’s experiences with Yiriwaton (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lancy, 1993; Reinharz, 1992, Yin, 2003). Stake (1995) defines a case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). The study sought to understand rural women’s experiences and perceptions of education, empowerment, and transformation. I conducted the fieldwork in Lassa, a rural community in Commune IV of Bamako, Mali in 2007. I recorded personal narrative accounts of women who were married, had children, young, and old. Data were collected by means of document analysis, participant observation, community dialogue, and individual tape-recorded interviews. The participants in community dialogue were selected purposefully to provide variation in age, family size, marital status, and experience.

Results

Based on the research questions, this article has four sets of finding. The first finding relates to the motivation of women for joining the literacy program. The second finding deals with the impact of the program on the participants’ lives. The third finding presents the results regarding the significance of a literacy program on community development and empowerment. The fourth and last one reveals the participants’ perceptions of empowerment and transformation.

Women’s Motivation to Join the Literacy Program

Based on the participants’ accounts, poverty was one factor that pushed them to join the literacy program. Most participants believed that illiteracy was the cause of their lack of financial resources and they thought that by learning how to read and write, they could gain rich
knowledge and skills, which could open doors for them. Nassira stated: “I never attended formal education and I always believed that illiteracy was the cause of my poverty. When I heard about the program, I jumped on the opportunity, hoping that by getting literacy skills I would be able to get a job that would allow me to get some money.” Macani added: “To tell the truth, I joined the program because of money. We, the women of Lassa are poor. We thought the program would solve our poverty.” This view corroborates with Raditloaneng & Mulenga (2003)’s finding that states that poverty is associated with illiteracy and gender inequalities. Therefore, women’s low levels of functional literacy and lack of appropriate training inhibit their ability to contribute meaningfully to reap economic gain from their labor and to access leadership positions and take part in decision making in their families and their communities.

**Impact of the Literacy Program on Women**

The women agreed that the program was a significant tool that provided them education and life skills. By participating in the program, the women experienced positive behavioral changes that led to individual and social empowerment and community development. Most participants said that they secured privacy in life, improved family conditions, and developed growing interest in children’s education. Nassoumba felt good about being able to write and read her letters without seeking for the help of anybody. By doing so, she was able to have a private life. The women showed great interest in the education of their children, especially the education of their daughters. Their participation in the literacy program and the changes they experienced as a result of their literacy education taught them the importance of educating their children, and especially their daughters for better life and families. The program has also helped the women to be aware of the knowledge they received about their health, their children’s health, and the health of their families.

Based on their testimonies, it is clear that the participants were aware of the importance of literacy to improve their livelihoods and open-up new doors for their children and a better life for them and their children. By engaging in learning and acquiring life skills, these women were able to understand the circumstances that shaped their lives and made decisions for themselves, which can be referred to conscientization (Freire, 1970). As a result of their participation in *Yiriwaton*, the participants developed self-confidence and self-esteem through consciousness-raising (Lephoto, 1995). They talked about losing their shyness and their participation in decisions affecting their lives. This result corroborates numerous findings that education is a means of empowerment of women (Freire, 2000; Kreisberg, 1992; & Stromquist, 1993, 2002). By participating in *Yiriwaton*, the women acquired skills, which allow the women to generate income to take care of themselves, their children, and help their family financially. The program taught the women how to process food, dry fruits and vegetables, make fruit juice, dye clothes, do gardening, and cattle breeding. They also operate a cooperative where they sell cereals such as rice, millet, maize, and other food related items which is beneficial to the whole community. Yassa stated: “I never developed any skills that could allow me to make money. The program taught me skills that can allow me to generate income if I work hard”. Through consciousness-raising the women as a group were able to reflect and act within their social setting and initiate income-generating activities. Through these activities the women were able to improve their economic conditions and change their life experiences. They were also able to help their children have access to school.
Significance of Literacy Program in Community Development and Empowerment

_Yiriwaton_ became not only a learning site where the participants received knowledge and skills, but also a social space where women meet to discuss the issues that affect them and their community. Through theater production, the women organized plays, songs, dances, and sketches as means of entertainment at the village assembly place to share with the community members the information they had learned in the program. In so doing, they informed and raised the community members’ awareness about specific issues such as family, health, and environmental issues. They also participate actively in cleaning the village on a regular basis and their contribution in providing the needy with food in form of a loan is a big help for the community. They raised money and helped one-another with social activities such as their daughters’ weddings, funerals, and naming ceremonies. They also raised money and contributed to any activity toward the improvement of their community.

Women’s Perceptions of Empowerment and Transformation

Economic independence was a form of transformation that had occurred in the women. Based on the interviewees’ accounts, transformative learning took place as a result of their participation in the literacy class, income-generating activities, and women’s informal discussions. The participants dared to leave the home, which is the main place for a woman in the Mali culture to attend activities and meetings. In so doing, the women transformed the family culture in spite of alienating their in-laws. This corroborates with Freire (1970) who states that empowerment does not occur freely to the oppressed, but at a price. The women confirmed that the development of the learning and income-generating skills led to discovery of positive self-esteem and awareness of their potential and capabilities, which made them, see themselves differently from other women who did not participate in their program. They related the activities of the program to their own advancement and that of their families and their community. They believed that collective action allowed them to maintain solidarity, sisterhood, and friendship with one another, which is an evidence of empowerment to them. The women noticed some changes in their lives and families after they learned how to read and write in Bambara.

Conclusion and Implications

The context of this study is a literacy program dedicated to empowering women through literacy skills and income-generated activities in Mali. Girls and women play a significant role in the development of a nation. Educated girls and women can contribute to reducing the poverty of a society and enhancing its human health system. The research is important to the practice of adult, continuing, extension and community education because in addition to reading, writing, and doing computations, rural women need skills that help improve the livelihood of their families and their community. The results of this research will influence the mind-set of the Malian policy makers to increase investment in literacy programs for rural girls and women. Illiteracy is a big challenge that adult educators must face in order to facilitate women’s empowerment in the Third World, and especially in post-colonial Africa. Literacy training can play a significant role in the women’s movement for social change, for it is an important tool for conscientizing the disadvantaged in support of organizing them to take action for their development.
The results will inform adult educators about the importance of designing literacy programs in ways that help the participants acquire skills leading to decision-making strategies and community development. This study expands the researcher’s understanding of the situation of rural women and girls in Mali in terms of literacy education for survival. The result will contribute to relevance, effectiveness, and impact of empowering literacy programs for rural women and girls. Such literacy skills will allow them to acquire knowledge that will help them understand their world, challenge the patriarchal norms in Mali, and create strategies for change for “literacy is seen as one of the mechanisms through which adults come to understand the world and through the process of becoming literate, become empowered to act rather than being acted upon” (Freire, 1970). Freire articulates that literacy training plays a crucial role in the women’s movement for social change especially in developing countries. It is a primary tool for conscientizing the poor for organizing themselves to take action necessary for their emancipation and development. This literacy termed by Freire (1970) as emancipatory literacy can allow the rural women to develop strategies that will help them to be more self-confident and self-reliant and teach them how to mobilize their resources.

References


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