Women, Literacy and Development

Alternative perspectives

Edited by
Anna Robinson-Pant

Women, Literacy and Development

Alternative perspectives

Edited by Anna Robinson-Pant

© 2004 Anna Robinson-Pant, selection and editorial matter;
individual chapters, the contributors

Typeset in Baskerville by Wearset Ltd, Boldon, Tyne and Wear

Women, Literacy and Development

Are literate women more likely to use contraceptives or to send their children to school? This is a question that has dominated much development research and has led to women's literacy being promoted by governments and aid agencies as the key to improving the lives of poor families.

However, high drop-out rates from literacy programmes suggest that the assumed link between women's literacy and development can be disputed. This book explores why women themselves want to learn to read and write and why, all too often, they decide that literacy classes are not for them.

Bringing together the experiences of researchers, policy makers and practitioners working in more than a dozen countries, this edited volume presents alternative viewpoints on gender, development and literacy through detailed first-hand accounts. Rather than seeing literacy as a set of technical skills to be handed over in classrooms, these writers give new meaning to key terms such as 'barriers', 'culture', 'empowerment' and 'motivation'.

Divided into three sections, this text examines new research approaches, a gendered perspective on literacy policy and programming and implementation of literacy projects in African, Asian and South American contexts. With new insights and groundbreaking research, this collection will interest academics and professionals working in the fields of development, education and gender studies.

Anna Robinson-Pant is a Lecturer at the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia. As a development planner, teacher trainer and researcher with various international aid agencies, she has spent much of her working life in South Asia. Her publications include *Why Eat Green Cucumber at the Time of Dying?* (2001), an ethnographic study of women's literacy programmes in Nepal which won the UNESCO International Award for Literacy Research.

Routledge studies in literacy
Edited by David Barton
Lancaster University

1 **Women, Literacy and Development**
   Edited by Anna Robinson-Pant

Contributors

Gillian Attwood is a lecturer in the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand. She received her BA and Honours degree in African Studies from the University of Cape Town, and her Master's degree in Adult Education from the University of the Witwatersrand. She is working on her PhD degree through the same university. Her research interests include community education, gender and development issues. She has published in South African and international journals, and in 2000 was selected by the University of Georgia, Athens GA, to participate in the Cyril O. Houle Scholars in Adult and Continuing Education Program.

Julia Betts completed her doctorate, an ethnographic study of literacy and livelihoods in rural El Salvador, at the University of Oxford in 2000. She subsequently worked for the UK Department for International Development for three years, in India and Malawi, before deciding to relocate home to the United Kingdom. She works in local government in Northumberland.

Lalage Bown worked in adult education from a university base for forty-four years, thirty-one of which were spent in African universities (in four different countries). Research interests have included adult education and development; the use of the media in adult education (including television centres for women's literacy); gender and literacy; higher education. She had programme responsibilities in Africa from 1960 to 1980 and in Scotland from 1981 to 1992 and has always been interested in working with policy makers in government and international agencies.

Donna Bulman is a PhD student at the University of Nottingham. Her thesis topic relates to how women in Atlantic Canada learn about HIV and how they may learn about it more effectively in the future. Her research interests include women's learning, HIV, gender-related issues

and literacy. She completed a Master's degree in Adult Education from Saint Francis Xavier University in Canada, where her focus was on literacy education for women with disabilities. She has presented papers at a variety of international conferences.

Jane Castle is an associate professor in adult education at the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg. Her teaching and research interests lie in adult literacy and development, HIV/AIDS in social context, experiential learning and qualitative research design.

Priti Chopra is completing a PhD at King's College London. Her research is based on an ethnographic study of communication practices for women in three north Indian villages. She completed a postgraduate degree in Language Studies and Adult Education from Lancaster University. She has been working as an adult education practitioner and researcher in the United Kingdom and India.

Marc Fiedrich studied in Hamburg (Political Science) and Brighton (MPhil/DPhil Development Studies). He is working with the European Commission in Abuja, Nigeria, focusing on Good Governance issues. He was previously involved with a long-term research project for ActionAid Uganda, analysing women's engagement with literacy programmes. He has experience as a trainer of trainers using the REFLECT approach and as an educator for children and adults with special needs.

Claudia Flores-Moreno is at an advanced stage of her PhD at the Institute of Education, University of London. Her research is concentrated on an ethnographic study of how activists become teachers, and on the micro-politics of popular schools in Mexico. She took her MA in Education, Gender and Development in 1998/99 and developed an interest in gendered literacies and numeracies.

Sujata Khandekar is a founder member and Director of a Mumbai-based NGO, CORO for Literacy. An electrical engineer turned development activist, she has been working in urban slums for capacity building of Dalit (scheduled caste) community women since 1989. She completed her MA in Education, Gender and International Development at the University of London, and is a fellow of MacArthur Foundation. She has authored a book in Marathi, *Aashevin Aasha* (Hope without Hope), a social documentation of urban slum life in Mumbai.

Juliet McCaffery has worked in the field of adult literacy for over twenty-five years. Since 1995 she has run Consultancy & Training Services, a small consultancy firm, specialising in gender, adult education and social development. She has worked in many countries in the Middle East, Africa and the Indian subcontinent, designing and advising on

basic education programmes and training adult literacy facilitators. She joined the literacy campaign in the United Kingdom at its inception, working at the Friends Centre (NGO) in Brighton, in a team developing a variety of literacy programmes for adults. She worked in adult education in London before moving to the British Council to develop a gender policy for its global operations. She was Chair of the British Association for Literacy in Development. She is an elected councillor with responsibility for basic education and is also undertaking doctoral studies at the University of Sussex on the education of marginalised communities.

Juliet Millican is a freelance educational consultant and a lecturer involved in widening participation at the University of Brighton. She has worked as a project manager and adviser with a range of international development projects in the area of literacy, adult education and capacity building, in North, West and Southern Africa, India and Nepal. She has written a number of training materials for field workers and policy makers and is enrolled on a doctorate of Education at the University of Brighton.

Archana Patkar is a consultant with JunctionSocial, a small consulting firm based in Mumbai. After studying social policy and planning for a Master's programme at the London School of Economics, she engaged in consultancy work in many countries and especially in South Asia. Among her interests are poverty and equity, girls' education and the use of ICT for development.

Anna Robinson-Pant is based at the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia, where she teaches research methods courses and co-ordinates the PhD programme. She is researching children's and teachers' communicative practices within school councils as part of an action research project in Norwich primary schools. She has spent much of her working life in Nepal, working as development planner, researcher and teacher trainer. Her particular interest has been in adult literacy and the assumed links with 'development' – she completed a DPhil on this topic at the University of Sussex, published as *Why Eat Green Cucumber at the Time of Dying?* (2001).

Alan Rogers is an independent consultant in adult learning in development. He holds visiting professorships at the Universities of East Anglia and Nottingham. He has engaged in fieldwork in many countries, especially India, and has written extensively on adult learning and literacy.

L.S. Saraswathi is an independent consultant in literacy and social development. Based in Chennai, India, she has worked in many countries.

Her main interest lies in anthropological studies of women, especially rural women.

Chizu Sato is a Japanese doctoral candidate at the Center for International Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and has a graduate certificate in advanced feminist studies. Her research examines how women participants' subjectivities in adult literacy, microcredit and legal advocacy training are formed through their participation in those activities in Nepal and what consequences these formations have on those subjects as well as ourselves.

Suzanne Smythe is an adult literacy researcher and educator who lives in Vancouver. She has worked in community-based literacy projects in South Africa and Vancouver and is project manager for a national community literacy initiative in Canada. She is completing her doctoral dissertation, a feminist history of advice to mothers about their children's literacy development.

Brian V. Street is Professor of Language in Education at King's College London and Visiting Professor of Education in the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. He undertook anthropological fieldwork on literacy in Iran during the 1970s, and taught social and cultural anthropology for over twenty years at the University of Sussex, before taking up the Chair of Language in Education at King's College. He has written and lectured extensively on literacy practices from both a theoretical and an applied perspective, and has a long-standing commitment to linking ethnographic-style research on the cultural dimension of language and literacy with contemporary practice in education and in development. His books include *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1985), the edited volume *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy* (1993), *Social Literacies* (1995) and *Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives* (2001). He is also involved in research projects on academic literacies (co-editor of *Student Writing in the University: Cultural and Epistemological Issues*, 2000) and on home/school literacy and numeracy practices (co-author of *Numeracy Practices at Home and at School*, forthcoming).

Shirin Zubair is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Baha-ud-Din Zakariya University, Multan, in Pakistan. Her PhD was on women's literacies and multiple identities in rural Pakistan. She used qualitative and ethnographic methods for her research, which resulted in several papers in journals and edited volumes. More recently she was based at University of Texas, Austin, as a Fulbright Research Fellow. She is researching issues relating to Pakistani women's identity, literacy and higher education; recent publications include articles in *Changing English* and *South Asia Research*.

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction

Anna Robinson-Pant

Are literate women healthier, wealthier and even wiser than illiterate women? This is a question that has dominated debates on school and adult education in countries of the South.[1] Women's and girls' education has been taken up by many governments and development agencies as the key to improving the lives of poor families. In particular, women's literacy classes are often run as the entry point to other development interventions, such as family planning and child nutrition programmes. High drop-out rates from such programmes suggest however that the assumed link between women's literacy and development can be disputed. Do women themselves feel that they need to read and write in order to learn about contraceptives or to find out about immunisation for their children? What are the real reasons why some women want to come night after night to study in literacy classes? Do they want to learn to decipher the labels on medicine bottles or to read religious texts or to write about their lives? This book, collecting together experiences from countries as diverse as El Salvador, India and Uganda, tries to answer some of these questions.

The belief that literacy will contribute to women's greater participation in development has resulted in a proliferation of women's literacy programmes run by both governments and NGOs. Researchers and evaluators have attempted to measure the impact of literacy on women's lives, using indicators as varied as 'empowerment', child mortality or fertility. Policy makers have focused on the barriers to women's participation in education, the high drop-out rates in literacy programmes and poor long-term retention of skills. Only recently have questions been raised about the purpose of educating women, challenging the efficiency arguments of the past. Is it only so that women can become better mothers and wives?

This edited volume brings together writing by researchers, policy makers and practitioners working within a new paradigm of gender, development and literacy. Though working in contrasting contexts and countries, these writers share a concern to promote literacy as a human right,

for women (and men) as individuals, not only as parents or workers. Rather than seeing literacy as a set of technical skills to be handed over in classes, these writers explore how the processes of literacy, gender and development are interwined and interact. They expand the debate beyond 'literacy for women' to consider, for example, gender issues implicit in the choice of a certain language as a medium of instruction or analysing literacy programmes in relation to gendered everyday literacy practices. The contributions reflect the richness of research and practice currently to be found in innovative literacy programmes and give a new meaning to key issues identified in previous discussions on women's literacy, such as 'barriers', 'culture', 'empowerment' and 'motivation'.

Background to this book

In 1990, Lalage Bown conducted a survey of women's literacy programmes to analyse the 'impact of female literacy on human development and the participation of literate women in change' (Bown 1990). Her report, *Women, Literacy and Development*, was the first systematic attempt to bring together research on adult women's literacy (as distinguished from school girls' literacy) in order to inform government and NGO educational policy. Over the 1990s, the emphasis widened to a research and policy focus on Gender (rather than 'Women'), Literacy and Development, where 'literacy' does not just mean reading and writing in the classroom but also in everyday life, and where 'development' is seen less as a definable outcome than as a process with a specific discourse that determines what can be measured or counted.

Research on women's literacy has gained momentum and diversity, no longer focused on statistical correlations between literacy rates and indicators like child mortality or fertility rates (see Chapter 1). Theoretical developments in the field of literacy, notably the New Literacy Studies (Street 1993), Real Literacies Movement (Rogers 1999) and REFLECT (Archer 1998), have influenced the kind of research carried out and the methods of analysis. Whereas ten years ago Bown's study was one of the few qualitative research studies on women's literacy, there are now numerous ethnographic studies from around the world. This volume is intended to complement Street's *Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives* (2001) by bringing ethnographic accounts of literacy programmes more directly into the arena of development and gender policy. Several of the contributors (Chopra, Zubair, Street and myself) to Street's 2001 volume have taken up the challenge, posed by Rogers in the Afterword, to explore the relevance of their findings to planners and implementers of literacy programmes.

My own personal journey through 'development' also lies behind this

book. From training women facilitators and developing materials for a girls' literacy programme in the far west of Nepal, I moved gradually into a planning and policy role with various international and local NGOs. After conducting ethnographic research on women's literacy for my PhD, I found myself adopting a more critical stance on my previous work as planner and teacher trainer. I questioned, for example, the assumption that women would want to learn literacy only in their mother tongue, as it became apparent that they equated learning English or the national language (Nepali) as a higher-status 'male' education (like that provided by the local schools). I became aware too of conflicting discourses: that language policy decisions were generally made on educational and economic grounds (which literacy would be more accessible to women and how materials could be provided cheaply), rather than taking into account issues of power and status.

Now that I am working as a lecturer in a United Kingdom university, I am all too aware of the barriers set up by us as academics concerned with theoretical constructs of literacy on the one hand, and by policy makers, on the other hand, who dismiss any evidence that is not quantifiable as 'anecdotal' and regard 'efficiency' as the only measure of success. I hope that this book – written by people who have crossed these assumed boundaries with their multiple identities as planners, implementers, trainers and researchers – will help to develop a shared language and understanding about how literacy and development interventions could respond to the needs of women and men in a diversity of settings. Although the book is focused on poorer countries, Bulman's case study from Canada serves to illustrate that many issues around gender and literacy policy objectives are similar in countries of the North too.

From research to policy and practice

Though this book is divided into three parts, there is much overlap between the issues that arise and approaches described in relation to research (Part I), policy (Part II) and practice (Part III). By establishing boundaries in the form of these three separate parts, my intention is to illuminate the ways in which the same issues are discussed in different contexts (e.g. research and policy) and to follow through how issues addressed in research studies have been addressed in educational programmes. The danger of dividing the book in this way is, of course, that the reader who is a researcher will read only the first part and the policy maker only the second!

Adopting new research approaches, as Part I illustrates, involves 'speaking back' (Chopra) to the dominant literacy discourse. Throughout the book, the stereotype of the 'illiterate woman' which has informed most

policy on literacy development is countered through case studies of women who are confident, have developed other strategies to survive without literacy and, for those who do attend literacy classes, challenge the assumptions of planners and trainers. The writers in Part I not only analyse the ways in which the 'illiterate' woman has been constructed, but also look critically at their own representations and question how researchers can encourage the participants to shape their text and research agenda (see Sato's chapter). Because of the desire to reflect what is important to the non-literate women they describe, some of these writers do not focus on literacy per se. To a large extent, this section is defining what literacy and development have come to be about (from the perspective of the individual women involved) and this is reflected in later parts of the book where several accounts focus on the non-literacy aspects of projects (Khandekar, Fiedrich, Attwood *et al.*). These researchers also take a more holistic view of literacy practices in the communities they study (Betts, Chopra, Street). The ethnographic accounts here have direct implications for the policy issues raised in Part II: for example, would the personal literacy practices (such as journal writing) of women in the Seraiki community (Zubair) be promoted as 'functional' literacy (see Rogers *et al.*)?

Taking a reflexive approach as a researcher has become accepted practice within qualitative studies. However, planning and policy formulation still tend to be seen as a 'technical' role and it is perhaps less usual to reflect on how the individual's values and identity shape educational structures, policy objectives and literacy teaching methods. The writers in Part II explore how to adopt a more reflexive approach to training and planning in order to respond effectively to women and men's literacy needs. Looking at literacy interventions through a gender lens reveals the limitations of a functional literacy approach which focuses on only one kind of work-related literacy, and Rogers *et al.* suggest ways in which literacy support could be developed to recognise women's varied roles (both leisure and work). Part II suggests that the conventional learning structure of the literacy class is valued by women in particular, because of providing a new space where they can meet together and raise issues not normally addressed in public (Attwood *et al.*). There are however constraints in running women-only programmes, not least in terms of finding female facilitators and risking gender-stereotyped activities and materials (McCaffery; Rogers *et al.*).

This part brings out the difficulties of developing programmes for women as a group, too – their multiple identities imply multiple literacies, which are rarely acknowledged in the traditional literacy packages for women. As Part I showed too, women participating in programmes have differing desires and needs according to factors such as age, family