FUNCTIONAL LITERACY A TOOL FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: This paper examines the concept of empowerment in relation to functional literacy. A symbiotic relationship exists between the two terms with regards to women and girls rights for sustainable development of Nigeria. The presentation was in three parts. The first part discusses empowerment as a life-long process. While the second part discusses literacy that could be used to empower women. The third and final part suggests practical ways in which functional literacy can be used more especially in the African context to empower women.

Keywords: Empowerment, functional literacy, continuous process, self awareness, skill, horizontal and vertical

INTRODUCTION

Mainstreaming gender into organizations has become topmost development priority in Nigeria. Women and girls constitute 75% of Nigerian total population, yet literature and reports show that literacy rate of women is not encouraging. Aderinoye, (2004) citing UNICEF Report, 2002; (Federal Ministry of Education Status Report, 2003), it is imperative, therefore that this category of people (women) in our society should be functionally literate. If we really want to achieve a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, and equitable access to Basic and Continuing Education for All adults as stated in the six goals of education for all in the Dakar Forum, 2000. Empowerment of women through functional literacy is much desired to raise the status of women to the level at which they would be relevant to the development of Nigerian.
Concept of Empowerment

Empowerment is a continuous and life long process and therefore should be in form of a systematic set of continuous, continued, sustained, never ending (but ever improving) goal – directed effort. Griifferi and Sharman (1995) in their view said that empowerment means a degree to which or a process in which the disadvantage groups define their own needs and determine the response that is made to them e.g women in the market, the destitute (the poor) etc. All these summarizes that no matter how beautiful a programme is, if it does not meet peoples demand, that means such a project could not empower people. The use of the word “empowerment” does not mean that people do not posses power already, rather it seeks to see the people as a whole entity or in groups and whose attempts in development process helped from being marginalized and increase their level of participation. Thus an empowered individual is one, who experiences self confidence and self worth, who critically analyses his/her social and political environment and who is able to exercise control over decision that affect his/her life.

Strongquist (1999) noted that empowerment entails a process of changing the distribution of power both in interpersonal relations and institutions. Thus at the individual level, empowerment can be perceived as the ability to direct and control one’s own life. It is the process in which women gain control over their lifes by knowing and claiming their rights at different levels of the society. Knowledge and understanding are part of the empowerment of women, the knowledge of self-awareness, acquiring the visible tools of power and a positive self concept cannot be achieved over night. Empowerment is a continuous process. This means that each stage in the process of empowerment should be a preparation for the next stage. Obanya (2004) noted that the basic skills that may be required of an empowerment scheme deserving functional literacy include basic literacy skill, i.e literacy, numeracy, graphic and life skills which include self-awareness development, analytical skills, decision-making skills, organizational skills and technical skills. Others are socio-economic, comprising vocational skills acquisition, vocational skills improvement, sustainable income generating skills and learning to learn skills. He further confirmed that empowerment is a lifelong learning skill for social support, continuous learning, life skills and socio-economic skills. Figure 1 explains further
ESSENTIAL INPUTS INTO AN EMPOWERMENT PROCESS

From the diagram, it is clearly explained that the process of empowerment can be said to have its horizontal (spatial) and vertical (temporal) dimensions. The knowledge and skill are needed for self awareness acquiring the visible tools of power and a positive self concept will change with place and time. This means that each stage in the process of empowerment should be a preparation for the next stage. These processes can only be attained through functional literacy.
Concept of Functional Literacy

The concept of purposeful or functional literacy has undergone some form of evolution in the last three decades. In the past, functional literacy was conceived of as working or work oriented literacy. However, the evolution of the concept over time still focuses on making the new literate to house his/her skills in changing peoples standard of living. However recent development and discoveries show that there is distinction between literacy that empowers and literacy that domesticates. Literacy that empowers seeks to combine both conscious raising and participation so that (the new literates) not only understand the causes of their oppression but also take steps to ameliorate their condition, (Anita Dighe 1995). In order words, functionality of a literacy undertaking is the extent to which it is able to empower the beneficiary. Four major dimensions are needed to enhance the functionality of a literacy programme for women empowerment. Figure 2 shows this:

Figure 2: Dimensions of Functional Literacy

Adopted from: The dilemma of education in Africa by (Pai Obanya 2004)

Functional literacy is a continuous process A, B, and C of the diagram which will have to be continuously, updated and adapted to the changing and diverse circumstances of life.

The current situation of women & girls in Nigeria shows that Females constitutes the majority of illiterates at all level of education.
UNESCO (2006) reported that girls make up 60% of all out of school children and represent two third of illiterate adults. Most Nigerian females live in rural areas and they are either semi-illiterate or non-literate. (Aboyade, 1987 and Onwubike 1999, UNESCO, 2003).

A survey carried out in 2005 shows that 33.3% of females had no formal education in the North Eastern States of Nigeria (Borno, Yola, Adamawa and Bauchi). In the North Western States (Kano, Kebbi, Sokoto and Jigawa) 87.8% of females had no formal education. In the South Eastern States (Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Rivers, Imo, Cross-River, Anambra) only 36.2% of females had no formal Education. In the South West (Ogun, Lagos, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti) at least 26.1% of females had no formal education. In the Middle Belt States (Plateau, Benue, Taraba, Niger and Kogi). They are in between the south and North in terms of average figures of female literacy (Adelabu & Adepoju 2007), (FMS 2005). Women are completely powerless in areas where females had no formal education and only a small proportion is really functionally literate and possibly ready for total empowerment.

All stakeholders in education should aim at the formidable but highly desirable task of raising the status of Nigerian women through literacy for empowerment programmes. A Holistic approach to literacy for women empowerment is necessary for sustainable development of Nigeria.

Figure 3 Explains further how a holistic approach to literacy for women empowerment programme can be used.

![Figure 3: A Holistic Approach to Literacy for Women Empowerment Programme](image-url)

Empowerment of women should be part and parcel of a more embracing national enterprise. Affirmative action was taking by Nigerian government recently that women will occupy 35% at least of all political positions in Nigeria. This is a right step in empowering women.

**Ways of Empowering Women through Functional Literacy.**

Every African nation has to promote WID (Women-In-Development) not only in words but also in deed. Women should become more fully involved in the decision – making process at all levels. They should be proportionally...
represented (in demographic terms) in decision making positions in all sectors of public and private life. All pronouncements by the government on women should be officially documented and implemented.

Enabling environment should be created for women in all education programmes. Especially market women should be encouraged to arrange their programmes to receive functional education programme. Social mobilization is necessary for women to change their attitudes. Gender equity in access, completion of education should be vigorously promoted in the entire formal education system. In using functional literacy to empower women, the programme should be seen in a holistic sense. The overall goals should be considered, the specific objectives have to be stated and the content methods have to be relevant to the needs of women. In raising the social, economic, political, cultural and health conditions of women, inculcation of basic literacy—numeracy and graphically skills are necessary. Development of analytical reasoning and decision making skills are also important for their self development.

Furthermore, promotion of income generation and project management skills through women cooperative activities, promotions of information—searching and related skills, with a view of inculcating the learning to learn habit should be the specific objectives of the programme.

The content/method/materials of the programme should involve the learner in reading/writing, numeracy, home management and development of vocational skills. Materials needed should include a good mix of audio visual, textual and semi-textual materials, draw from a life experiences of the learner. A self instructional material that promote independent study should be supplied.

The methods to be used include: Participatory approaches, learner led groups, practical projects aimed at easing the hard life of women, improving skill generating and sustaining income. These methods if applied can assist in empowering women. The case of empowerment of women should be built into the literacy programme from the first day of the programme.

CONCLUSION

Women achievements and women achievers should be stressed as much as possible. The facilitators should not necessarily have to be conventional teachers only a wide variety of professionals such as health and agricultural extensions workers, leaders of cooperative societies all should be involved. More importantly, women in a variety of conditions can be a useful resource in this programme.

Functional literacy is a forum for empowering women to build strong groups of diligent and committed women. It should therefore be encouraged and reinforced by a favourable policy framework that will create an enabling environment in which women will contribute to the economic growth of the nation.
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