
ADULT LITERACY: BRIDGING THE GENDER DIVIDE TO EMPOWER RURAL
WOMEN FOR GHANA'S DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *Women in rural Ghana have been at disadvantage in all aspects of life since time immemorial. Cultural stereotypes have always kept women in the background or at best at the fringes of socio-economic and political activities. The patriarchal cultural stereotypes have been a barrier to the education of girl children in rural Ghana. In most cases the boy child is sent to school and the girl is either denied that opportunity or covertly and overtly encouraged to drop out of school to learn home chores in preparation for marriage or motherhood. This cultural practice does not only militate against women's true participation in socio-economic and political activities but also makes them dependent on men. It is assumed that lack of basic education i.e. illiteracy is a serious hindrance to rural women's initiative and participation in the country's development and without bridging this cultural divide the country's development might continue to be hindered and slow. The authors used the results of a qualitative research approach to validate the above assumption. Six hundred rural women from three regions in Ghana were randomly selected to participate in the exploratory study. The study found out that lack of basic education among rural women is a great hindrance to Ghana's socio-economic and political advancement. The paper therefore recommends an effective national literacy drive to empower women for effective participation in the country's development.*

Key Words: Patriarchy, stereotype, culture, rural women, social, economic

Research Area: Social Science

Paper Type: Research Paper

1. INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial women in rural Ghana have been at disadvantage in all aspects of life. Cultural stereotypes have always kept them at the background or at best at the fringes of socio-economic and political activities. The patriarchal cultural stereotypes have been a barrier to the education of girl children in rural Ghana and it has been a cultural practice among most ethnic groups in the country where many parents do not like to take the girl child to school. While parents are often ready to take the boy child to school the girl is either denied that opportunity or covertly and overtly encouraged to drop out of school to learn home chores in preparation for marriage or motherhood.

This situation might be the general attitude of most parents in the country but it is worse in the rural areas where majority of parents' cultural beliefs are very strong because most of them are illiterate. This cultural stereotype does not only militate against women's true liberation and participation in socio-economic and political activities but also makes them vulnerable and dependent on men. Education is a right and should be enjoyed by all children both males and females. As Aggrey (1875-1927) aptly puts it 'if you educate a man you educate an individual but when you educate a woman you educate a whole family'. The authors assume that lack of basic education is a serious hindrance to rural women's liberation, initiative and participation in the country's socio-economic development and without bridging the gender divide the country's development might continue to be slow

and hindered by keeping women on the fence. Basic education in this paper covers literacy, numeracy, small business set up and management skills, family planning and HIV/ AIDS awareness programmes for rural women. The authors used the results of a qualitative research approach to validate the above assumption. One thousand rural women from three regions in Ghana were randomly selected to participate in the exploratory study.

1. BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Women in general and rural women in particular have very little contribution to make to the country's socio-economic development because of illiteracy and lack of skills for employment. Despite the UN's Education for All (EFA) policy no efforts have been made by the government of Ghana has not put in place measures to provide illiterate adults, particularly women with basic education as an empowerment drive towards rural women's liberation and full participation in the socio-economic activities of the country. All over the developing world basic education has been identified as the tool for socio-economic development and all progressive governments are making it available and accessible to adults, particularly women because of its value for in development.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Basic education for adults, particularly rural women, has much social and economic value in human development hence it has become a constitutional right in most developing countries. It has been widely accepted all over the world that basic education for women is a catalyst for a country's development. This means in a country where there are more women than men without basic education for them that country's development can be slow if not stagnant. The problem this paper seeks to address is: How can the government of Ghana use basic education to bridge the gender divide in rural areas to empower women play active part in the country's development?

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to explore the value of basic education in bridging the gender divide in Ghana and thus empower rural women to contribute to the socio-economic development of the country. The desire to explore the value of the basic education on the rural women motivated this exploratory study.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper advocates for the use of basic education as a tool to bridge the gender divide in order to empower rural women to effectively participate in the socio-economic and political development of Ghana. It is therefore grounded in the theory of Critical Pedagogy of Paulo Freire. The theory emphasizes the objective and unbiased reflection on existing knowledge and practice [Glass, 2010: 15]. Critical pedagogy postulates that education should be a process and practice of setting people free from socio- economic and political ignorance and slavery. It is a call for reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire 1974: 36). Critical pedagogy offers lessons for the socio-economically and politically downtrodden such as the illiterate, the unskilled, the marginalised, the depossessed, the poor and the vulnerable women in society. The above mentioned groups of women may find home in critical pedagogy because it encourages them to seek immediate practical solutions to transform their circumstances through basic education. Literacy and skills learning [basic education] could liberate rural adult women from ignorance, poverty and helplessness because they are capable of learning if they are given the opportunity. Every human being, no matter how ignorant or submerged in the culture of silence s/he may

be, is capable of learning or has the right to learn (Freire,1974). The theory affords people the opportunity to read, write and learn from themselves i.e. to engage in a culture of questioning that demands far more competence than rote learning and application of acquired skills (Giroux 2010:2). The theory advocates for providing adult learners the opportunity to relate learning to their lived experiences and thereby writing themselves in the concrete conditions of the daily lives.

Critical pedagogy has great lessons for adult educators because the ideas expressed in the theory have made enormous contribution to educational transformation in our time. The fact is, the struggle for socio- economic and political emancipation of the oppressed still draws from the insights provided by the theory. The ideas and thoughts expressed in Ferire's book, the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, in 1974 is as needed today as when it was first articulated and published. The scaring poverty and marginalization of thousands of rural women in Ghana almost six decades after political freedom might be the direct consequence of lack of access or inequality in access to education during their childhood.

Although Ghana was the first African country south of the Sahara to attain political independence in 1957, cultural stereotypes which denied rural women basic education have kept them from participation in the formal economy. This discrimination which has created a gender divide is evidenced by the lack of knowledge and skills for employment among most women in the rural communities in Ghana. The ignorance, poverty and vulnerability among many rural women in Ghana today might be greatly due to the effect of cultural imperialism. Cultural stereotype denied and continue to deny most rural women access to education and they therefore lack knowledge and skills for full participation in social and economic activities in the country. This deplorable situation in which rural women now find themselves in because they were denied formal education when they were young demands a critical reflection and provision of basic education as compensation to them and to ensure equality and social justice. The theory encourages adult educators to teach basic knowledge and skills to rural illiterate women to enable them appraise and be inspired to transform their situations.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study aimed at exploring the value of literacy and how the government of Ghana can use it to bridge the gender divide.

6. RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative explorative (Creswell, 2007; Meadows, 2003) method was employed to explore the possible value of adult literacy (basic education) for rural women in Ghana. In doing so the researcher employed both ethnographic and phenomenological approaches in order to describe the phenomenon [i.e. the target group] as it is. The phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to understand the participants' personal meanings they might construct from their daily or 'lived experience' (Johnson & Christenson, 2000) as adults who have been denied basic education. Welman, Kruger & Mitchel (2007) add that while ethnographic study uncovers and explicates the ways a group of people understand their settings and take action to improve it the phenomenological study attempts to experience phenomenon as the individuals involved experience them personally. It was for this reason the authors of this study involved rural illiterate women in this exploratory study.

7. SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

The researchers employed the snow ball sampling technique to purposively select 1000 rural illiterate women from 3 regions of Ghana to participate in this exploratory study. The breakdowns of participants per region were: 34 Ashanti, 33 Brong Ahafo and 33 Western Region. Under the snow ball technique one purposively selected participant referred the researchers to other illiterate women in her community where they were interviewed on the phenomenon under investigation.

The researchers spent two months collecting data through one on one in-depth interview. The interviews were held in the homes of participants.

The semi-structured interview included the following items: age of participants, marital status, why they did not attend school in their childhood, what they do for a living, experiences as illiterate, what they think need to be done and who lead it.

8. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from the participants were analysed manually through the use of open coding approach. The aim of the analysis was to understand the various constitutive elements in the data through an inspection of relationships between concepts, constructs and variables and to see whether there were any patterns or trends (Mouton, 2004). To make the analysis simple and manageable the data were broken down into smaller units with each of the units arranged under an appropriate and a specific theme.

9. TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness, that is, the level of dependability or reliability of the data gathering instruments, the process followed in gathering the data, the quality of data gathered and their validity is very important to researchers using qualitative methods. To ensure trustworthiness in this research the researchers transcribed verbatim (i.e. wrote down) all responses. Journals were kept in which whatever was heard, seen and observed during the field work was recorded. They employed various techniques to achieve and maintain dependability and credibility of the final product of the investigation. In doing so the researchers frequently requested interviewees to repeat or clarify their responses to ensure that only the correct answers were recorded. Again triangulation was achieved by comparing the responses of the participants from the three different regions.

10. ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The researchers ensured that the study adhered to important ethical principles and considerations. The researchers obtained an informed consent from all the people who participated in the investigation. Again to ensure confidentiality and anonymity the researchers did not record names and voices of participant in the investigation. The participants were also made aware of the fact that their participation in the study was voluntary and any of them could pull out at any time they wanted to do so.

11. RESEARCH FINDINGS

After collecting the data the researchers arranged and analysed them under the following themes:

Demographic profile of participants

a) Current and ex-students

The ages of the participants ranged from 21-80 years with majority of them i.e. 75% (n=750) being in their early 50s and 15% (n=150) below 50 and 10% (n=100) above 55 years. A large number, 57% (n=570) of the participants were either divorced or widowed, 30% (n=300) were never married but single parents, and 13% (n=130) married. The average number of children of the participants was 3. Of the 1000 participants 65% (n=650) never went to school and 35% (n=350) dropped out of the elementary school.

b) Occupation of participants

Being illiterate in an ever changing developing country the rural illiterate women who seem to be totally marginalized are peasant farmers who till the land for their livelihood. The investigation revealed that participants grow foodstuffs such as cassava, yams, tomatoes, plantain to feed their families and sell the surplus to maintain themselves and families. Throughout the interviews it became clear that the participants had no choice but to cultivate the land. A confirmation of the frustration of the rural illiterate women which was produced verbatim reads:

What else can you do apart from peasant farming if you never attended school? I do not work myself out by choice but there is no option for me. I do not want to see my children in this situation but there is no money to give them good education.

c) Experiences as illiterate

Being illiterate in knowledge based economy of a globalised world could be very challenging. All the participants (n=1000) concurred that find life very difficult not being able to read and write. They seem be marginalized in every aspect of life- socially, economically and politically. One participant lamented:

Most of us in the rural areas were not enrolled at school. We looked after our younger siblings, accompanied parents to the farm and did home chores. Now we completely cut off from the modern life because if you cannot read and write you are not different from the blind!

The above response sums up the difficulties experienced by illiterate women in rural Ghana, they cannot seek employment in the formal sector, could suffer various abuses from the family and cannot participate in political activities in a country where English is the dominant language used in everything.

d) What should be done to improve the situation

The respondents agreed that it is not late for them to learn reading and writing in basic English and Akan, their indigenous language. The general view of the participants was that government should intervene in the plight of the illiterate rural women by opening literacy programme and making it compulsory for them. One of the respondents said:

If the government really wants us to be part of this country then it should provide us with the opportunity for basic education. Those of us who did not attend school during our youth seem to have been forgotten by the leaders of this country.

The above response is an indictment on the successive governments of Ghana. While school education is provided successive governments do not make room for the education of adults who either dropped out or never got the opportunity to attend school. The non-formal education which seems to be on hold did not reach those who really needed it. This lack of basic education in the education system for adults could be the major cause of high illiteracy among the adult population, particularly women.

e) *Why they want to enroll for basic education.*

Modern society emphasizes democracy with its focus on rights, responsibilities and opportunities for citizens to exercise their rights in order to lead useful and contented lives. The participants said they need basic education to liberate themselves from ignorance, vulnerability and poverty. As the response from one of the participants affirmed;

If I attend basic education class I can understand and fit into the world around me. I want to access and disseminate information for myself.

Thus the desire to read and write to enable rural women to access information for themselves and fit into the social, economic and political life of their respective communities make participants yearn for basic education.

The participants concurred that as rural women they like to learn reading, writing in home language, basic English, family planning and basic scientific agriculture (i.e. crop production, gardening, poultry keeping and animal rearing), dress making, sewing and cookery. In multi-ethnic country in a globalised world the ability to write and speak English would not only ensure understanding and fitting into one's environment but may also enhance business transactions such as buying and selling of essential goods and services.

The participants agreed that they want the kind of basic education which forms the basis for lifelong learning. Eighty-five per cent (n=850) revealed to the researchers that they would like the kind of basic education that can provide them with the opportunity to enter the mainstream formal education system to get Junior or senior school certificate.

Over 90% (n= 901) of the respondents indicated that as women living in rural areas and engaged in peasant farming practical skills acquired in scientific agriculture lessons could assist them to grow vegetables, tomatoes, pepper, onions for sale and home consumption. As two of the participants confirmed; Scientific farming methods may not only assist us to increase our farm yields but can teach us also poultry keeping. This may provide our children with nutrition and some income.

12. CONCLUSION

The responses provided by the participants emphasised the socio-economic benefits of adult basic education in the context of the rural poor and marginalised women. The respondents affirmed the fact that without knowledge and skills they could be cut off from the socio-economic activities of the country. For example they would not be able to engage in income generating activities thereby remaining in perpetual ignorance, vulnerability and poverty. The responses from the participants affirmed that knowledge is power because once rural women acquire basic knowledge and skills they could be redeemed from ignorance. The paper concludes that for the government of Ghana to bridge the gender divide it must make basic education a priority for rural women because basic education is a tool to empower and liberate the poor and the marginalised rural women.

13. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings the study recommends a serious campaign by the government of Ghana to emphasise the importance of basic education for illiterate women and encourage them to enroll for the basic education courses. Again both local and regional governments should rethink the use of adult basic education as the best tool for bridging the gender divide in Ghana.

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