

A discussion of literacy as a vehicle which enables women from urban Afghanistan and rural Nepal to overcome societal challenges and participate in society

In the literature, education is seen as a means to encourage the sustainability of a country (Arogundade, 2013; Little and Green, 2009; Gough and Scott, 2008). A few ways in which this can be achieved is through raising the standard of living of a country in the form of enhancing agricultural productivity, enhancing environmental protection, reducing population rates and improving the status of women (Hopkins and McKeown, 2002). The attainment of primary education contributes greatly towards the sustainability of a country (Gupta et al., 2002) as literacy is seen as the key to development (Rogers, 1999). This is illustrated through educating females to a primary level which has been shown to bring more benefit to a country than that of educating males to the same level (Psacharopoulos, 1994). This is demonstrated by the decline of birth rates and infant mortality rates as women are able to make informed decisions about their lives and the health of their children (Cleland and Van Ginneken, 1988). This view is supported by Coleman (2004) who states that focusing on women is 'the best way to reduce birth rates and child mortality; improve health, nutrition, and education; stem the spread of HIV/AIDS; build robust and self-sustaining community organizations; and encourage grassroots democracy' (p.80). However, there are certain factors which may hinder the attainment of education, especially that of females (Nussbaum, 2004). For the purposes of this assignment, although I acknowledge that both genders face difficulties in achieving education, I will focus on the challenges women face in attaining education with reference to the country contexts of urban Afghanistan and rural Nepal. I have opted to discuss these groups of women as they have been identified in the literature as being amongst the most disadvantaged women in Asia (Puri et al., 2011; Acharya et al., 2010; Rostami-Povey, 2007a; Margesson and Kronenfeld, 2006), as both countries face similar challenges in achieving quality education for women (Rostami-Povey, 2003; Wallendorf, 2001).

In order to analyse the global literacy challenge, I will first provide a discussion of what literacy is. In recent literature, it has been stated that there is no agreed definition of literacy (Hanemann, 2015). This is due to the many different understandings presented (Street, 2011; Bartlett, 2008; Papen, 2005; Wallendorf, 2001; Gee, 1998). Firstly, the word *literacy* may generate the idea of being able to read, write and count (Robinson, 2005). However, Wallendorf (2001) presents the idea that 'literacy is a continuous, multidimensional indicator of proficiency in using written language with its higher levels reflecting an ability to draw logical inferences and think critically' (p.505). This definition is supported by the view of Hanemann (2015) who states that literacy is not only about the acquisition of knowledge and the development of reading and writing skills, but it also includes 'attitudes, dispositions and motivation [and] values' (p.5). In addition to this, literacy is viewed as a social construct which is determined by the society's understanding of what it means to be literate or illiterate in a particular culture (Hawisher and Selfe, 2000). With regard to the terms *literate* and *illiterate*, the views in the literature suggest that a person cannot be completely illiterate, as being literate holds different meanings in different

cultures and contexts (Maddox, 2001). Different cultures require different levels of literacy to function, thus making it difficult to create a universal definition which applies in all contexts and cultures without putting some cultures at a disadvantage (Street, 2011; Robinson-Pant, 2004).

Secondly, functional literacy is seen as a higher level of literacy than basic literacy as it is used in order to increase the possession of higher-order decoding and reasoning skills in society (Wallendorf, 2001; Limage, 1999; Levine, 1982). This view is supported by Gray (1956) who states that when functional literacy is applied, it has the ability to effectively engage the users in literacy which is normally used in the culture. It is viewed that literacy is most likely to be successful when it is acquired through practices which are integrated within the social reality of the learner (Hanemann, 2015; Capra, 2007; Auerbach, 1989). In order to use literacy effectively to participate in society, the views present in the literature state that a *real literacies* approach should be adopted in adult literacy learning programmes (Street, 2014; Papen, 2005; Hamilton and Barton, 2000; Rogers, 1999). Real literacies adopt the social view of literacy (Papen, 2005), in the sense that literacy skills are transferred to the daily lives of participants through daily literacy practices.

From the literature, it can be assumed that literacy is much more than knowledge and skill. It is about the values and attitudes present within a person as well as how the person in question uses literacy in his/her social realities (Hanemann, 2015; Limage, 1999). For the purpose of this assignment, I will use the basic definition of literacy provided by Robinson (2005), in the sense that literacy is defined as the acquisition of foundation skills which include the ability to read, write and count. I will explore whether the acquisition of basic literacy enables women in urban Afghanistan and rural Nepal to acquire essential life skills which enable them to overcome societal challenges and participate in society.

Moreover, now that the meaning of literacy within this context has been established, I will discuss the challenges presented in attaining global literacy. The global literacy challenge aims to address the gaps faced when attempting to achieve basic education for all by increasing literacy rates. This includes children, youth, adults and certain groups of people who do not have access to literacy. For example, indigenous populations and marginalised groups (UNESCO, 2008). According to the UNDP (2015), the global literacy rate for adults aged 15 and over is a mere 81.2% with 775 million adults lacking basic literacy skills, with women being much more likely to be illiterate than men (Nussbaum and Glover, 1995). With this in mind, the United Nations have created the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which 'cover[s] a large gamut of human life and circumstances' (Robinson, 2005:438). The second MDG focuses on achieving universal primary education. However, this goal was criticised as it neglected achieving universal adult literacy (Robinson, 2005). The MDGs were also criticised for burdening developing countries as all goals, bar the last goal, are aimed at developing countries (Muchhala and Sengupta, 2014). Due to this, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) replaced the MDG after its deadline in 2015. Although, the SDGs aims to provide a universal framework, it should be noted that a critique of the SDGs is that the universal framework does not distinguish between a developed country and a developing country. This suggests

that developing countries may face difficulties in implementing the SDGs as they will not have the 'adequate policy space to carry out their plans' to implement the SDGs even though they may have the financial and technological support (Muchhala and Sengupta, 2014:2).

Moreover, the fourth goal of the SDGs aims to provide inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning. This goal is split up into subsections which aim to address different issues which all relate back to the initial goal of providing inclusive education for all. The subsection which I will focus on for this assignment is Goal 4.6 which is to ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy (United Nations, 2016). This goal aims further than the second MDG of providing universal primary education for all children (Sachs and McArthur, 2005) as Goal 4.6 targets adult literacy. As Member States of the United Nations, both Afghanistan and Nepal have agreed to try to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

Despite the SDGs efforts of providing a universal framework, within each country, certain factors may hinder the attainment of education for all, especially that of women. The most prominent challenge being a lack of empowerment amongst women. A lack of empowerment here being used to refer to a lack of agency, whereby women are unable to make life choices and put them into effect (Kabeer, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2002) thus being unable to practise the essential life skill of being independent (Mathur et al., 2001). The issues which obstruct educational attainment in urban Afghanistan and rural Nepal could be due to cultural practices which hinder women from attending school or completing their primary education which results in an absence of basic literacy skills (Sharp, 2014; Stark, 2009; Stopler, 2003; Rostami-Povey, 2003).

Moreover, in Afghanistan, discrimination against women has been documented, especially regarding the perception of female education (Gouda and Potrafke, 2016). Under the Taliban reign, the challenges women faced, in regard to acquiring basic education, include the banning of schools by the Taliban and the forbidding of women leaving their houses without wearing a *burka* (head to toe covering) and the requirement of always being escorted by a *mahram* (male family member) when in public (Rostami-Povey, 2003; Schulz and Schulz, 1999). The restriction on Afghan women's movement under the Taliban rule resulted in over 80% of women in unemployment thus being unable to participate in society (Goodson, 2001). Due to the ban on female education a generation of Afghan women have been left without basic literacy with a mere 32.1% being literate (UNDP, 2015). Oates (2009) states that in some parts of the Afghan community, educated women are seen as disgraced and unmarriageable with time spent outside of the home corrupting young women and making them bad wives, this may explain why Afghanistan has a very low rate of female literacy with a mere mean of 1.2 years of schooling for females (UNDP, 2015).

Although the literacy rate of Nepali women – 77.5% (UNDP, 2015) - is higher than that of Afghan women, the factors which affect the lack of education of Afghan women are also present in Nepal (Wallendorf, 2001). As Hinduism is practised in Nepal, there is a caste system in place with Dalits, also known as 'untouchables'

(Vishwakarma, 2002), placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. Due to this, many women from Dalit communities are placed at a disadvantage with regard to their educational attainment as Dalits are discriminated against at every level due to their social standing and are unable to participate fully in society (Upreti, 2010). An additional factor which hinders the attainment of education for women is the religious practice of Chaupadi Pratha which is the practice of isolation during the menstruation period (Lamichhane et al., 2013). To expand on this practice, women, including young girls, are 'forced to stay in the shed for thirteen days during their first and second menstrual cycle, seven days in their third cycle and four days of every other menstrual cycle' (Bhandaree et al., 2013:141). As a result of this practice, girls miss out on vital education due to the forced isolation which is imposed on them, thus resulting in the failure to acquire basic literacy and resulting in illiteracy as adults. In some circumstances, girls are expelled from school as they are viewed as 'impure'. This practice is not restricted to communities faced with poverty as even literate girls from communities which are higher up in the caste hierarchy are also victims (Kadariya and Aro, 2015).

In Afghanistan, the acquisition of basic literacy helped women overcome societal challenges such as the banning of schools by the Taliban (Bhutta, 2002; Goodson, 2001). This is illustrated through the creation of secret schools set up underground and in the homes of women which were created to continue the education for children of both genders and of women (Rostami-Povey, 2003, 2007a; Barakat and Wardell, 2002). This included providing basic literacy and numeracy training as well as the opportunity to study subjects at different levels, these included biology, chemistry, engineering, English, German, Arabic, Quranic studies, cooking, sewing, knitting and even hairdressing (Rostami-Povey, 2007b). In Kabul, a Women's Vocational Training Centre has been active for over twenty years and offers women courses in English and German as well as in computing (Rostami-Povey, 2003). The centre provided courses which created income-generating activities such as handcrafts, animal husbandry and honey making. After the fall of Taliban rule, the secret schools turned into organisations which challenged patriarchal gender relations in Afghanistan, thus allowing women to reclaim their rights and actively engage in rebuilding their society by creating opportunities for women to learn skills and better their lives (Amiri et al., 2004; Rostami-Povey, 2003). Ahmed-Ghosh (2003) suggests that by equipping Afghan women, who would normally strike a 'patriarchal bargain' (Unterhalter, 2005:14) in order to take part in their society, with literacy, skill training and employment, these women can create a generation of women who can be economically empowered as they are able to make their own life decisions and put them into effect, thus overcoming the societal challenges of patriarchy and lack of agency (Kabeer, 2005).

In Nepal, women are overcoming societal challenges through the introduction of literacy classes where there is a strong desire from the community. Classes are held in areas that are easily accessible for women and at times that are easier for women to attend (Comings et al., 19992). This can be seen in the South of Nepal in Tharu (Guneratne, 1998). A sustainable literacy approach (Hanemann, 2015) is used within these classes as they are based on the local language as well as local culture

and knowledge (Cadena et al. 2015). The material used in the classes is relevant to the everyday lives of the learners, thus creating more engagement with the content (Street, 2014). By acquiring literacy skills, the women's existing role as mothers and wives were improved as they felt that they had a new voice and more agency (Robinson-Pant, 2000). Additionally, in order to combat the disadvantages that certain social groups face, for example Dalits, minority ethnic and those living in remote and inaccessible areas, the government has given these disadvantaged groups priority to literacy programmes so that their quality of life can be improved (Wallendorf, 2001). Prior to this, in 1984, a National Literacy Program was created to provide 'minimum basic education to all adults and children not served by the formal system' (Comings et al., 1992:213).

The socioeconomic benefits of attaining literacy stem from using literacy skills in the social realities of people to achieve real goals (Rogers, 1999; ODA, 1994). In Afghanistan, literacy is crucial to the lives of urban Afghan women as it is needed to vote in order to create a democratic society which represents the rights and acknowledges the values of Afghan women (Coleman, 2004). By using their literacy skills to vote, the election of 2009-2010 saw an active and massive participation from Afghan women and the election in 2014 is the reason for the developing transition of the country (Ibrahim and Mussarat, 2015). Hanemann (2015) states that literacy is increasingly becoming a prerequisite in order for people to adapt and upgrade their knowledge and skills, and respond to 'rapidly changing demands' in social life (p.9). This suggests that in order to participate in the 21st century, basic literacy skills are needed. However, participating in society is not the sole benefit of becoming literate as Hanemann also states that 'literacy is a key condition for poverty reduction, inclusion and sustainable development' (2015:15). Under the Taliban rule, poor women in urban areas were unable to leave the country. Due to this, women with literacy skills were able to continue to participate in society through the creation of underground schools and were paid for their services by neighbours (Rostami-Povey, 2003). Regarding the benefits of implementing the real literacies approach, Diamond et al. (1999) found that a woman's school attainment is linked to birth and death rate and the utilisation of health and contraceptive services as their literacy skills influence the level of comprehension of 'health messages in print and over the radio as well as their abilities to understand medical instructions' (Levine et al. 2004:874). This is illustrated in the Afghan society as women use literacy for health matters as literacy skills enhance health awareness (Saeed et al., 2014), thus improving the health of women and their households (Glewwe, 1999) which is an essential life skill.

With regard to rural Nepal, the acquisition of literacy has enabled women to participate in society as they are able to transfer their literacy skills and use it in their daily lives (Rogers, 1999). By adopting the *real literacies* approach in adult literacy programmes, women are able to engage with the learning content (Gray, 1956) as it relates to their daily lives and provides opportunities for women to discuss the basic information presented on topics such as 'health, conservation, family planning, agriculture and social problems' (Comings et al., 1992:214). Women are then able to contribute positively to society as they are made aware of issues apparent in their

community and can start a dialogue in order to combat them. This supports the view of Coleman (2004) as women are then introduced to development issues and can create a discussion on ways to find solutions for them. Nepali women successfully contribute to society as they play key roles in their communities as entrepreneurs and running bazaars when their husbands migrate to neighbouring countries for work (Brown and Connell, 1993). Through the acquisition of literacy, women are able to implement literacy practices in their lives such as account keeping and writing letters to aid agencies (Robinson-Pant, 2004). Due to the rise in female education, employers are able to employ cheaper female workers which boosts investment and, in turn, the economic growth of Nepal (Klasen, 2002). This is reflected in the high rate of labour force participation of females in Nepal which currently stands at 79.9% (UNDP, 2015). Moreover, regarding health literacy, Levine et al. (2004) found that the retention of literacy skills of women in adulthood influenced their health behaviour. By acquiring the essential life skill of health literacy, women are able to take control of their reproductive health by choosing to postpone childbearing (Nair, 2004; Mathur et al., 2001). A literacy programme created by the organisation Save the Children encouraged mothers in rural Nepal to keep diaries of family health records (Rogers, 1999). The organisation provided the mothers with certain headings in order to encourage mothers in their acquisition of health literacy, thus ensuring that women are actively taking part in health awareness. Diamond et al. (1999) suggest that education may influence fertility as women are able to make independent decisions based on the assessment of the likely costs and benefits of their actions, thus effectively participating in society as they are able to calculate whether their actions would benefit themselves and society. This relates to Hanemann's view (2015) that literacy includes the attitudes and values that people have.

To conclude, with regard to addressing the global literacy challenge, the SDG 4.6 of ensuring that a substantial amount of men and women achieve literacy and numeracy is in the process of being achieved. This is seen through the literacy programmes dedicated to women who have missed out on education in rural Nepal (Comings et al., 1992) as well as the use of underground schools in urban Afghanistan which have transformed into organisations which the patriarchal gender relations present in the Afghan Society (Rostami-Povey, 2003). The acquisition of literacy skills for women in Afghanistan and Nepal enables women to overcome societal challenges such as discrimination against women (Lamichhane et al., 2013; Rostami-Povey, 2007a; Stopler, 2003; Wallendorf, 2001) as well as enabling them to acquire essential life skills such as health literacy (Saeed et al., 2014; Diamond et al., 1999). This enables active participation from women, and the creation of the early stages of empowerment amongst women, as the acquisition of literacy, increasingly, gives women the agency to make their own life choices and put them into effect (Kabeer, 2005).

3317 words

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