

## Library Strategies for Literacy Improvement of Women in the Asia-Oceania Region

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### Abstract:

*The cultural, economic, and social status in some areas of the Asia-Oceania region has led to poor literacy levels among the women community. Considerable gender gaps in literacy exist in these countries, especially among girls from low-budget families, rural communities and ethnic minorities, as well as those living in conflict zones.*

*This paper discusses the obstacles to literacy achievement of women in the Asia-Oceania region, and presents the benefits that literacy offers. Section 2 presents an overview on the status of illiteracy in the Asia-Oceania region, and points to the gender gaps in literacy achievement. Section 3 discusses thoroughly the obstacles, while the benefits of literacy for women are highlighted in Section 4. Section 5 focuses on the role of libraries in improving literacy, and presents several strategies to be used in this context.*

*These strategies include a broad range of ideas, such as policy-making trends; provision of high quality education; collection and analysis of disaggregated literacy data; development of locally-relevant and learner-oriented literacy programs, as well as educational materials and learning assessment tools; development of education in mother-tongue languages; acting as the jointing points of governments and civil society organizations; development of facilities to encourage women's participation in literacy programs; development of society-based literacy environments; integration and effective implementation of literacy in plans; and finally, allocation of sufficient funds for women's literacy programs.*

**Keywords:** Women's literacy, Asia-Oceania region, literacy obstacles, literacy benefits, library strategies.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Being in the 21st century with its breakthrough technologies, it might sound extremely surprising to say that near 800 million adult persons lack basic literacy. Two thirds of these are women, many of whom live in the Asia-Oceania region. This situation is the result of many issues; among the most

important of which are restrictions to movement, poverty, early marriage, domestic work, discrimination, violence, non-ownership of assets, and political disenfranchisement [1].

A number of activities will have to be undertaken to improve the situation. Eradication of illiteracy should be considered a key priority by governments, which should heavily invest on the issue and demonstrate strong support for women's literacy through partnership with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This cooperation will lead to quality basic education, life-long learning, and affirmative literacy programs for women. However, in order to overcome the illiteracy problem, many other efforts other than direct engagement in literacy programs should be made as well. Among these efforts, one can point to those related to gender responsive policies in sectors such as labour, health, environment, agriculture, security and development, as well as gender-sensitive budgeting.

This paper will discuss the above issues in detail, and suggest some strategies via which libraries can help improve the situation.

## **2 ILLITERACY IN THE ASIA-OCEANIA REGION**

Literacy is the ability to read, write, identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute using printed and written materials. It involves a continuum of learning to enable individuals to develop their knowledge and effectively participate in society.

The essentiality of literacy is clear to everyone. It enables people to have sustainable livelihoods, and participate actively in the social, economic, and political age. Literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision-making, personal empowerment, and active and passive participation in the global social community. However, unfortunately near 800 million adults suffer from illiteracy. This is due either to not being taught literacy fundamentals; or for those taught, not having the opportunity to maintain their abilities.

Over 500 million of the illiterate adult population lives in the Asia-Oceania region. 65% of them are women. Most of this population is located south and west of this region, with over 400 million people; more than half of the world's total. A large part of the reason for women being the majority among the illiterate population in this region has to do with gender disparities [1].

Studies show that the percentage of illiterate women in 2015 would be 63% of the whole illiterate population, which is the same as the corresponding percentage in 1985. This means that, unfortunately, no progress has been made during this period of approximately 30 years.

### **2.1 Gender Gaps in Literacy Achievement**

It is clear that literacy can be promoted by ensuring young people have access to education. Although nowadays girls have far better access to schooling compared to the previous decades, and we are going towards gender parity in this context, they still face a considerable gap in learning achievement. This gap is more evident among girls with lower family budgets, who have very limited access to books and other reading materials. These girls frequently have limited literacy, and have to leave school early. For example, while in India and Pakistan boys and girls from high income families have equal literacy rates, in families at the bottom income level boys receive an average of five more years of education than girls.

Many other parameters affect women illiteracy in the region; among them are ethnicity, geographical distance, and other factors such as disability. For example, while the literacy rate in urban areas is around 70%, in rural areas only about 50% of the adult population is literate. Urban-rural disparities compound gender disadvantage as well. For instance, studies show that the literacy rate of men living in the urban region of Kathamandu Valley in Nepal is 93.6%, while only 28.1 % for rural women in the Central Terai - leading to a gap of 65.5%.

All together, progress towards halving adult's illiteracy rates by 2015 has been disappointing at best, and desultory at worst. Insufficient governmental funding is a major reason for this not-acceptable progress. While financing for education in schools witnessed tremendous leaps in the past ten years, investment for adult literacy has remained at minimal levels. In many Asia-Oceania countries, the share of the national educational budget allocated in the past decade to adult education ranged from less than 1% to 2.9%, which is below the benchmark of 3% recommended by the Global Campaign for

Education. And through all these years the status of women regarding literacy has always been notably worse than that of their man compatriots.

### **3 OBSTACLES TO LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT OF WOMEN**

The difficulties in having quality education, as well as cultural and structural barriers in some parts of the Asia-Oceania society, have disadvantaged girls and women for generations. Beliefs and practices against girls reduce their interest in attending school, or make them leave it early to work or to get married. Some of these barriers are discussed below.

#### **3.1 Limited access to education**

One of the main obstacles to women's literacy in the studied region is the limited access to quality education. Although, according to government laws, in almost all of the countries in the region primary schools are financially free to attend, side costs which have to be paid by families for the education of their children may be sometimes more than they can afford. According to the study reported in [2], this amount is about 8.6% of an average family's annual income. For this reason, families from low income levels and having more than three children generally have to send just some of them to school, and their selection is typically their boys.

#### **3.2 Exclusion of indigenous women**

Another problem is the one related to girls and women belonging to cultural minorities. Due to lack of diversity programs and mother-tongue language education, most of these people have a poor chance of becoming literate. For example, as stated in [3], in 2001 about 476 million (approximately 60%) of the world's non-literate community have been those with lesser-known languages.

#### **3.3 Low quality education**

Low quality education is one of the main obstacles to literacy achievement, irrespective of genders. Children from poor families, rural communities, ethnic minorities, and those living in conflict zones generally don't receive quality education. In India, for instance, only 27% of the enrolled children aged 10 and 11 can read a simple passage, do a simple calculation, and handle money [4]. This scenario occurs in almost all low and average income countries.

#### **3.4 Differentiation of genders**

Another obstacle is the gender stereotyping which is to some extent seen. As an example, even some of the teachers in the region do not have interest in working with their own daughters. Also, text-books are written in a gender-oriented manner and are generally more suitable for boys rather than girls; for example, they include more information about man-oriented jobs such as working in mines, etc.

#### **3.5 Living in rural areas**

Being from a rural area adversely affects girls' literacy. In these areas girls cannot typically attend secondary schools, because the local culture makes them switch to household tasks. Many of them marry at a young age, and leave school as a result.

### **4 BENEFITS OF LITERACY FOR WOMEN**

It is obvious that literacy affects quality of life by expanding the abilities and opportunities of people to communicate, work, and make an impact on society. It leads to better social, financial, and political states of women. The issue can be further analyzed through some different contexts.

#### **4.1 Health issues**

One of the major impacts that being educated will have on women is related to health issues. Studies show that in developing countries where illiteracy rates are high, women are 36 times more likely to die from pregnancy related diseases than those living in developed countries [5]. Literate women can read cautions related to safety and health, and this is a big point to be noted.

#### **4.2 Follow-up of children's educational status**

The next benefit to point at is the effect that women's literacy has on children. Literate women are far more involved in their children's education. They help them with their homework, visit their schools periodically, and can follow up their educational issues on a regular basis.

### **4.3 Securing of funds**

Literacy helps women to have access to information which increase their productivity. Evidence for this can be given in the field of agriculture. In Asia, women make 43% of the agricultural workforce. However, while it has been proven in [6] that women are as efficient as men, they are less productive in agriculture just because they can control less land, deploy fewer inputs, and have access to less extension services, such as training which calls for being literate. And it is clear that any increase in productivity directly leads to higher income which can be secured for literate women. Educated women can also better use their numeracy skills to manage their economical status and so on.

### **4.4 Expansion of interaction and social activity**

It should also be considered that literacy programs are generally good social spaces for women to interact with each other, learn, and provide and receive support. These sorts of spaces give them capabilities such as expressing themselves and building up confidence. The exposure to exchange during literacy programs also encourages women to participate in community activities. The social benefits have also been shown to be enhanced when these programs are accompanied by supportive interventions such as credit facilities and skill training.

## **5 LIBRARY STRATEGIES**

Considering the issues mentioned above, in what follows we will discuss some strategies via which libraries can help improve the literacy status of women in the Asia-Oceania region.

### **5.1 Policy making trends**

A favourable policy environment is crucial for the promotion and expansion of women's literacy. These policies can play a considerable role in removing gender disparity and inequality regarding literacy. Group literacy programs can provide social places that help women develop their social skills as well.

Libraries can be a major driver for these policy making trends. Librarians may be able to cooperate with governmental and other organizations to initialize programs focused on women's literacy, learning, and decision-making. Among the policies to be made are those related to changing family attitudes towards boys and girls - this would enhance household perceptions about their daughters' capabilities and value.

### **5.2 High quality education provision**

One of the most important steps towards decreasing women's illiteracy rates is providing proper education at primary and secondary levels. However, considering the generally low income of families in this region, it might be difficult for them to buy the required books and study materials for their daughters. Libraries can help families overcome this problem by developing programs to provide and lend more books to women and girls. It should also be noted that literacy acquisition and development goes far beyond normal schooling, and should be conceptualized within the framework of lifelong learning. Development of informal literacy programs for women, irrespective of their age, is among other services libraries can provide.

Also, women's education should be of considerable quality. For this purpose, all aspects of education, such as teacher education, curricula and materials, and learning assessment systems have to be constantly developed. Libraries can contribute by collaborating on teacher training programs, as well as by feeding back their book management experiences to those who write and prepare school textbooks. This may lead to these books to consider learners' diversity and to be gender-responsive.

### **5.3 Collection and analysis of disaggregated data**

In order to develop better educational programs in the region, national data should be collected and rigorously analyzed for probable disparities in literacy by gender, ethnicity, geographic location, disability, and economical and social status to be identified. These data should be studied to find out the literacy needs of girls and women in the region at the national and local levels. Libraries can play a role in monitoring, evaluating, and assessing women's literacy achievements to better understand local learners' profiles.

#### **5.4 Development of locally-relevant and learner-oriented literacy programs, educational materials, and learning assessment tools**

It is important to ensure the relevance of literacy programs to learners' needs. Besides learning alphabets and numeracy, women also need to be made self-confident and strong. Furthermore, considering that many of the women have to perform household tasks besides taking care of their education, the time and space in which they learn in should also be flexible. What they learn should enhance their levels of communication, negotiation and networking skills. Libraries can hold an outstanding position here - not being schools, but places which are literacy-oriented, libraries can help to start and hold classes with flexible times and contents. Courses relevant to the specific needs of women, rather than those officially offered in schools and colleges, can be taught there. The methods of teaching can also be different from what exists in official schools where teachers teach lessons in a rigid and formal manner, and students are listeners rather than active parts of the interaction.

#### **5.5 Development of education in mother-tongue languages**

Asia-Oceania is a region with many cultures and languages. However, in many schools and colleges in this region courses are taught in languages other than the local mother tongue. Being unfamiliar with these languages, most of the women cannot benefit from the contents of these courses. The role of libraries in solving this problem can be essential; by both starting initiatives to develop books and other learning materials in local languages, and also by offering classes in which international languages are taught to girls and women eager to take courses offered in those languages.

#### **5.6 Acting as the joining point of governments and civil society organizations**

Programs initiated by non-governmental organizations to educate out-of-school children have long existed. However, while many of these programs had indeed been very fruitful, a large portion of them are not being officially accredited by governments. As a result, those who have attended them cannot use their developed knowledge and skills to continue their education formally in governmental schools and colleges. Libraries could effectively act as skilled referees in knowledge assessment, being the joining point between these organizations and governments. They can assess the knowledge of those attending non-governmental programs using some predefined tests jointly proposed by librarians and governmental delegates, and issue official qualifications for those who pass them. Holders of these qualifications would then be eligible to promote to higher levels of education in governmental institutes and colleges.

#### **5.7 Development of facilities to encourage women's participation**

Many women who would like to attend educational courses see their desire hindered by having to perform household tasks and take care of their children. Libraries may be able to partially solve these problems via different approaches; for example, by starting educational classes for women in the same schools as their children's, and setting up care centres in their buildings for the children to be taken care of while their mothers are in educational classes in the library.

Literacy programs developed by libraries should also set up support systems such as ones in which women are counselled by women, or women's groups that provide psycho-social advice. Women who participate in such programs develop confidence in themselves and their ability to learn beyond their homes. Of course, these are just some of the ways libraries can be beneficial, and many other approaches can be thought of as well.

#### **5.8 Developing society-based literacy environments**

The sustainability of what women learn can be highly increased if their learned materials can be reviewed in their everyday life; this is one of the core ideas in life-long learning. Libraries can, for example, design posters to be installed in social places such as shops or metro stations, build reading centres in different locations in the area, and make women partners of publishing centres.

#### **5.9 Integration and effective implementation of literacy plans**

Libraries should also place the issue of education of women in their long-term plans. This requires a broad vision and a clear roadmap, and should not be considered just as a by-service. These plans have to be in alignment with national strategies of governments and should be integrated with them. Besides lending of books and other such tasks which are among the musts for a library, they should also think

for ways through which they can improve literacy levels of women considering their many special concerns, and find administrative approaches to put these ways into action.

#### **5.10 Allocation of sufficient funding**

Besides the ways libraries can help improve women's literacy levels directly by offering educational classes and so on, they can also allocate a sufficient portion of their funds for this to be achieved indirectly via other organizations. This is particularly important for adult education. As stated before, while international standards for annual funding for adult education is 3% of the total educational budget, in the Asia-Oceania region this portion is generally much less, and the need for further budgeting for this purpose is therefore much more sensed. After all, the aim is to educate women and girls as more as possible, irrespective of where the required fund for this education is received from.

### **6 CONCLUSION**

This paper has highlighted the importance of women's literacy from different perspectives, such as economic, social and health points of view, etc. It has discussed how the illiteracy of women in the Asia-Oceania region leads to many of their difficulties, and investigated the role of culture, economical status, and ethnicity in the corresponding illiteracy rates. Considering these issues, and the benefits of literacy for women which have been hinted at, it is concluded that the problem of women illiteracy in the region is highly serious and a wide range of essential efforts should be therefore made to address it, and that libraries have an important role to play in this context.

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