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# FUNCTIONAL LITERACY: A VERITABLE INSTRUMENT FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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By

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## **Abstract**

*Education in Nigeria is an instrument 'par excellence' for effecting national development. This statement corroborates United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) position that literacy is a fundamental human right and a prerequisite to the development of the society. Thus, functional literacy which is a component of none thermal education must not evade the women. This paper therefore, examines functional literacy as a veritable instrument for empowering women for sustainable national development. It focuses on the concept of functional literacy empowerment in relation to empowering women to have power over socio-economic, political, psychological, health and cultural situations. The paper recommends that awareness campaign should be the top priority of government and non governmental organizations to raise the consciousness of women and that enabling environment should be created for women to participate in all education programmes.*

**Key words:** Functional, literacy, women, empowerment

The importance of the role of women in the development effort of the society calls for their empowerment at all levels. Women and girls constitute about 75% of Nigerian total population and make the greatest contribution in the agriculture sector yet the literacy rate of women is not encouraging (Gender in Nigeria Report, 2012). The contributions of women to the socio-economic and political activities of their communities and society are often not felt because of their marginalization. Lack of empowerment among women manifests itself in all aspect of human endeavour, including social, economic and political (Azikiwe, 1992). Women are treated as second class citizens; they are not expected to participate in decision making process even in

matters that concern them. This act automatically denies women a lot of privileges enjoyed by men and make them appear inferior to men.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization notes that in the 1980s majority of women were illiterates (UNESCO, 1998) and are still because they were denied having access to education. This lack of education has kept them in a state which leads to their ignorance on several issues that concern them, their families and communities. For women to rise above the shackles of ignorance and illiteracy, marginalization, and disempowerment; they must undertake literacy education programmes that will help them proffer solutions to their problems. According to Opoko (2002), no community or nation can move forward in terms of development if her women follow remain marginalized. Opoko (2002) further stated that female education is the key to development and that the educated woman is an asset to her family, community and the society. Thus, the extent to which women should have enabling power to participate, contribute and benefit from development becomes imperative. The paper therefore, examines functional literacy as a veritable instrument for empowering women for sustainable national development.

### **Overview of Functional Literacy**

Originally, functional literacy was conceived as a level of literacy which would enable the non-literate to function effectively in his or her society. The concept however, was changed in 1965 by the World Conference of Education Ministers held in Tehran and the experimental word functional literacy programme promulgated later by UNESCO. Functional literacy is referred as 'work-oriented or as relevant literacy' which is comprehensive enough to teach economic skills and offer immediate use of the recipients in participating in important political and personal matters. According to the UNESCO, Egonu (2000) stated that:

1. literacy programmes should be incorporated into and correlated with economic and social development plans;
2. literacy programmes should be preferably linked with economic priorities and carried out in areas undergoing rapid economic expansion;
3. literacy programmes do not imply only reading and writing, but also professional and technical knowledge, thereby leading to a better participation in economic and civic life;
4. literacy must be an integral part of the overall education plan and educational system of each country, and
5. the literacy of this kind should aid in achieving main economic objectives, that is, the increase in labour, productivity, food production, industrialization, social and professional mobility, creation of new manpower and diversification of the economy.

The above view shows that functional literacy is crucial for individual and societal development and calls for different programmes and instructional objectives and strategies within a context of development which should be linked with economic activities. Functional literacy should be part of an-over-all educational plan in order that the recipients; in this case women, may become active members of the society.

Functionality of literacy activities is the extent to which it is able to empower, combines awareness creation and active participation so that recipients will understand the subordination and take steps to redress their conditions (Olaleye & Adeyemo, 2012). This may be why Bhola (1993) asserted that without literacy development will only limp on one leg.

### **What is Empowerment?**

The term empowerment is derived from the word power. To empower means to give authority to, to enable a person or group of persons gain power. According to World Bank (2002), empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to ample choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Adebola (2004) defined empowerment as a person's ability to take active control of one's life in terms of being well informed and equipped with education, finance and relevant skills to take decisions without any external influence. Grifferi and Sharman (1995) in their view defined empowerment as a degree to which or a process in which the marginalized groups define their own needs and determine the response that is made to them (e.g., women). Summarizing these definitions in the context of this paper, empowerment simply implies a process of helping the marginalized women to have power to control their situations and add to their faces.

The concept empowerment came into popularity with the feminist movement whose demand was that women became empowered to take control of their own lives, to set their own agenda of what to do and how to do things that affect them. In order to pursuing these objectives, the United Nation (UN) devoted the year 1985 as the decade for women issues and development. The main focus was to empower women to develop their own potentials and contribute meaningfully to the development of their communities and the society. Thus, an empowered woman is one, who experiences self confidence and self reliance in her socio-economic and political activities positively and gains control over her situations.

Medel-Anonuevo (1997) summarized the goals of empowerment to include challenging, transforming the ideology and practice of women's subordination to enable them gain access and control over material and knowledge resources. In order to achieve these goals, the women must be empowered through literacy instruction programmes to control their situations. The main purpose attached to literacy is to

develop in people the knowledge, skills, attitude and behaviour considered desirable in the society. Thus, empowerment; in this paper, is the process whereby the women can be enhanced through functional literacy education which could enable them improve their living standard and participate actively in the socio-economic and political development of the community in which they live.

### **Literacy and Women Empowerment**

Education is recognized in all the countries of the world as the main instrument for promoting and improving the status of women. It is a weapon that should be provided for women to enable them fulfill their roles as responsible members of the society (United Nations, 1995). The uplifting of the status of marginalized women can be achieved through functional literacy education. Functional literacy education, a component of non-formal education provides skills and training to recipients to enable them utilize their potentials and capabilities to the fullest for improvement of life, and to solve their immediate and general problems involving income, family planning, agriculture and food production and health care (Azikiwe, 1992).

Hussian (2005) quoting the EFA Declaration of Cairo states that literacy is a fundamental human right and a prerequisite to the development of society. Literacy is at the heart of learning, the core of education for all (EFA) and central to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Access to the quantity literacy learning opportunities and the development of literacy environments are essential strategies for poverty reduction, equality, economic development and environmental protection, and in general a prerequisite for achieving democracy.

Going by the above view, functional literacy is an instrument for empowerment which cuts across all areas of human endeavour. With functional literacy programmes women will be equipped with desirable knowledge and skills which will enable them to take their rightful positions, increase their level of awareness, be able to feature among their women folk and be freed from the holds of taboos and superstitious beliefs. All these will lead to improvement in their standard of living.

Azikiwe in Okpoko (2002) stated that there is a clear linkage between education of women and girls and positive development impart. Okpoko stated further that research evidence shows that women education leads to:

1. improve family care, health and nutrition;
2. higher rate of child survivals, growth and development;
3. higher aspiration for education and welfare of their children;
4. low fertile rates;
5. increased opportunities for women earnings, and
6. increased efficiency in the management` of agricultural and environmental resources and many other benefits.

Anyanwu, Omolewa and Sidigue (1985) supported this view when they note that people cannot learn the useful information required for their survival and happiness in the society. Thus, empowering women through functional literacy programmes make them participate actively and benefit in the social, economic and political developments of their communities in particular and society in general. With functional literacy women would be exposed to myriads of information which empowers them to control their situations, fight ignorance, poverty and its associated ills and make them to be recognized in the society.

Functional literacy education programmes given to women should be continuous. This is to enable them update, renew, adopt and adapt to the changes and challenges of life. Thus, functional literacy education should be dynamic, flexible, learner-centred, pragmatic and practical. With good education, women are able to take concrete decision, initiate and champion necessary actions concerning their empowerment. Functional literacy programmes will empower women to build strong groups of diligent and committed women to sight the cause of their right. Vocational education should be part and parcel of education programmes planned for work as this will make them become self confident and self reliant and be able to add voice to the face.

A successful agenda for the empowerment of rural women requires the dismantling of values, structures and processes that maintain women's subordination and that are used to justify inequality in access to political, social and economic resources. Education plays an important role in this process. Studies in many countries have shown that education for girls is the single most effective way of reducing poverty, although it is not sufficient by itself (Millennium Project, 2005). Inequalities in education and skill acquisition can explain the fact that women benefit less than men from economic opportunities as well as the trend towards the increase of women among the poorest in the population (Pearson, 2000).

Gender inequalities in access to education are well documented in rural areas. The situation varies considerably between countries and regions, and although there is no exact data about the situation in rural areas, global figures indicate that approximately 60% of the illiterate people in the world are women, with only 69% of women over the age of 15 being literate, compared to 83% of men (Population Reference Bureau, 2002).

The needs and opportunities for livelihood diversification within the context of globalization place increased time demands on rural women and girls. Increasing reliance on the labour of girls may jeopardize their education or even result in their complete withdrawal from school. Other factors that contribute to reduced enrolment

rates and increased dropout rates for girls include school fees and the lack of girl-friendly environments, including lack of female teachers, gender-sensitive teaching methods and materials, transport and sanitation facilities. For example, a survey of education in Yemen in 1997-1998 found that only 20% of teachers in rural areas were women and identified this fact as a major deterrent to girls' enrolment and retention in school in rural areas (United Nations Development Programme, 2008). Reduction or abolition of school fees and special monetary incentives has resulted in increases in school enrolment of girls. For example, in Bangladesh the launching of a nationwide stipend programme for rural girls in 1994 had a significant impact on their enrolment, which increased from 27 to 54% (Herz & Sperling, 2004).

In addition to increasing women's access to the formal education system, it is important to provide women with access to training, including on marketing, rural entrepreneurship, farm and household management and financing. Rural women's access to training and education is essential if they are to develop livelihood strategies that build on the opportunities created by globalization.

Women, although they constitute half of humanity, are socially, economically and politically marginalized. They are seen primarily as wives, mothers and homemakers rather than as workers, because their reproductive role is given prominence over their productive role. This has kept them away from playing a significant role in the public domain in almost every part of the world. The large amount of work they do in looking after the home and family is unpaid, unnoticed and unrecognized. Not only this, but a large amount of income generating work that they do in and around the house also goes unnoticed and is not computed in national income statistics. When they do step out of their homes to seek work in public spaces, they are discriminated against, exploited and become vulnerable to harassment and violence. In some society's right from her birth till death, the female receives an unfair deal in comparison to her male counterpart. The situation is worse in the less developed world, where poverty, malnutrition and certain social customs worsen her plight.

### **Conclusion**

From the forgoing, it is evident that functional literacy serves as an instrument for empowering women for sustainable development functional literacy raises the consciousness of women, equip them with skills to enable them participate actively and meaningfully to the social, economic and political developments of their communities and society empowering women through functional literacy education liberates them from ignorance, make them overcome poverty establish an reinforce democracy, enhance economic and social well being, improve health and ensure food security in the society. Indeed, women education is a key to development and empowering women

through functional literacy is an asset to her family communities, her nation and the world at large (Okpoko, 2010).

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made

1. Government should encourage women to enroll in literacy class and programmes as to eradicate literacy among them.
2. Awareness campaign should be the top priority of government and non-governmental organizations to raise the consciousness of women.
3. Enabling environment should be created for women to participate in all education programmes.
4. Seminars and workshops should be organized for women to enable them update, renew their knowledge and skills.

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