

Literacy Programs for Women in Nepal: Constraints and Remedies

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Introduction

In all regions of the world, without exception, there are more illiterate women than men. The literacy gap between the sexes, which grows in proportion to the rate of illiteracy, is most pronounced in the developing countries (Malmquist, 1992). The same is true in the context of Nepal. In last three decades, though the female literacy rate is increasing, the gap between male and female literacy rate is ever widening. In Nepal the female and male literacy rate was 3.9 and 23.6 in 1971, 12 and 34 in 1981, and 25 and 54.5 in 1991 (CBS, 1995). Thus, the gap between male and female literacy rates was 19.7 in 1971, 22 in 1981 and 29.5 in 1991.

Everybody agrees the fact that no country can develop socially, economically and politically if majority of women population is illiterate. Hence, a great effort should be made to raise the female literacy with due consideration given to quality. In this context an Indian statesman states: "to awaken the people, it is the woman, who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves. "Similarly it is an

often quoted statement that if you educate a woman, you educate a whole family.

For a few years literacy programs have been directed towards empowerment of women. Mill, 1982 (as cited in Luitel, 1996) states empowerment is capacity to implement and change, that is becoming able. In continuation to this, Luitel, 1996 argues that an empowering literacy program should generate the hidden capability in individuals and develop a sense of confidence. In fact, women have potential but that has not been fully seen, recognised or valued. Through literacy programs their potentialities have to be brought into action for their own welfare and the betterment of their community. In this regard Leve, Leslie and Manandhar, 1997 state:

Literacy empowers women by setting in motion a series of individual and community changes that work against traditional modes of oppression and for enhanced opportunity and development Never a state to be reached or defined, empowerment is a process of struggle and change. (pp. 2 & 27).

To put it in a simple way, empowerment is a process which tries

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to enable the women to give opinion on the decision making related to their family, expend wisely for the welfare of the family, work collectively with others to remove ill practices prevalent in the village, help the children in their learning, participate in women groups, demonstrate their capabilities in meetings and training, build up self confidence etc. (Mahila Shakti, 1999).

2. Women and literacy programme in Nepal

For last ten years, various special programs have been launched by governmental organisations (GOs) and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to raise female literacy. These programs were: Women Education of Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP), Chelibeti Program of both Seti Project and National Non-formal Education Council, Health Education and Adult Literacy (HEAL) of World Education, Women Literacy of Advantist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Literacy Program of Production Credit for Rural Women, and Women Reading for Development (WORD) Project of Private Agencies Collaborating Together (PACT). These days, various GOs and INGOs are further conducting literacy program exclusively for women viz. Women's Empowerment Program of PACT, Women Education of Non-formal Education Centre, Ministry of Education, Women Literacy of ADRA etc. Furthermore, other literacy programs of GOs and INGOs viz.

Adult Education Program of Non-formal Education Centre (NFE centre), Regenerate Frerican Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT) of Action Aid, Participatory Literacy and Action of Save the Children/US, Empowerment Education Program of Lutheran World Federation and Community Literacy Project of World Education have given top priority to women participants. Of them, Adult Education Program of NFE centre is the notable and prominent one which is being conducted in all 75 districts of the country. It is being run as a campaign in some selected districts.

It was found that 40 to 62% of the total enrolled participants dropped out without completing the program and among those who continue the program, only 15 to 57% of the final test takers were found to have been fully literate and literate category (New ERA, 1987, New ERA 1987, New ERA, 1989 and New ERA, 1990, CERID, 1996). It implies that very few of the total participants enrolled in adult literacy program turned fully literate and literate.

3. Constraints preventing women from literacy acquisition

As there are growing literacy programs exclusively for women, scarce resources of the country are also expending on them. Thus, maximum benefit from these programs should be obtained. However, there are several constraints preventing women from

literacy acquisition. Specially, women often face practical barriers to their participation in literacy programs. These constraints/barriers are presented below:

3.1 Participant-related constraints

- Lack of child-care facilities
- Frequent illness of oneself, children and family members
- Lack of time after family and household commitment
- Marriages
- Frequent pregnancies
- Shame and embarrassment
- Unfavourable attitude towards

3.2 Family and community-related constraints

- Hostile family or community attitudes
- Local traditions and ancestral customs about their role in society

3.3 Facilitator-related constraints

- Improper selection of facilitators
- Improperly trained facilitator
- In some cases, one gets training but the program is run by untrained one.
- Not facilitating the learning of the participants as they are trained according to the facilitator's guide
- Facilitators do not get remuneration in time, which adversely affects their motivation.

- Marriage of the female facilitators

3.4 Program-related constraints

- Irrelevant literacy programs
- Insufficient teaching materials
- Poor monitoring and evaluation

4. Constraints preventing literacy programs from amelioration

In the context of Nepal, several constraints which prevent literacy programs of both sexes from amelioration have been identified. Mainali, 1997, threw light on some reasons for being dropouts from literacy classes viz. (i) fake names are included in the participants list and naturally they do not show up in the exam, (ii) names of school children who are already literate are included in the list, and (iii) neo-literate whose names are entered in the list of beneficiaries on more than one occasion.

It was found that, in majority cases, the community support was found trifling. On the contrary, in some cases, the so-called local party politics affects adversely the running of literacy classes.

As regards the programs run by INGOs, there appeared a question of sustainability. Supporting this fact, Bacquellaine and Raymaekers, 1990, state that such programs fall into oblivion once funding is cut. They further caution that the lack of evaluation and critical reassessment of the programs of both GOs and INGOs hinder their improvement and lead to

constant repetition of the same errors. Recently, a trend of getting the literacy programs evaluated through evaluators and research centres, albeit sporadically, has been seen. However, the feedback system is quite unsatisfactory.

5. Remedies for eliminating constraints

Once the constraints, no matter how big or small, have been identified, it will be easier to suggest how they can be eliminated. Having reflected upon these constraints, the following ways have been suggested to eliminate the constraints, which prevent women from acquisition of literacy skills and allied skills incorporated in the literacy program.

5.1 Publicity

Publicity can be made through several media viz., radio, TV, pamphlets etc. However, at the grassroots level, street drama and video shows could be even more effective means of publicity. The aim of publicity should be to arouse the feeling of necessity of becoming literate among the prospective participants. Once they are self-motivated to become literate, the success of literacy program can be ensured.

5.2. Information system

At present, there is an acute shortage of up-to-date information regarding the participants who completed the literacy program, who dropped out of the program and who never participated in the program. In this

regard, a careful deliberation should be made to establish Management Information System economically and effectively.

5.3 Community support

Considering the existing management of literacy classes for women at grassroots level, community support can play vital role for their successful implementation. The community, at least, should manage favourable places for conducting literacy classes. Furthermore, the local influential personalities should check whether the classes are being run regularly. They can help solve the problems, which appear while conducting classes and repeatedly remind both the participants and facilitators to be regular and punctual in the class.

5.4 Strong monitoring and evaluation mechanism

It was found that most of the literacy programs lack strong monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanism. Because of such a weakness, the deviations in literacy program could not be corrected in time. In the present context, M and E activities should be started from the beginning i.e. while determining the literacy classes. Besides, the supervisors should visit the literacy classes regularly to ensure that only trained facilitators are conducting them and they are facilitating the learning of the participants as they are trained to do so. Based on the feedback of the

supervisors, necessary actions should be taken in time.

The summative evaluation should be undertaken through independent evaluators or research centres. The evaluators should disclose the reality of the literacy program without whitewashing the weak aspects. Accordingly, the sponsoring agencies should take necessary actions in time.

5.5 Child-care facilities

The learning of the participants can be enhanced if a provision of childcare facilities can be managed. However, how to make it possible appears to be a challenge.

5.6 Facilitators

Facilitators play crucial role in the success of literacy program. Hence, dedicated candidates should be selected and trained properly. During training period, unsuitable candidates can be identified and replaced by suitable ones.

5.7 Timely change of the facilitators

If a participant drops out of the class, it affects nothing to the class. If a facilitator drops out, the whole class drops out. Thus, if facilitators, especially because of marriage, pregnancies, illness etc., are not in a position to continue the class, substitute facilitators should be assigned as soon as possible.

5.8 Remuneration

To maintain the motivation of the facilitators and supervisors,

remuneration for them should be provide in time.

5.9 Medium of instruction

There should be flexibility in the use of language. The literacy classes should be conducted in the language, which helps facilitate the learning of the participants.

6. Conclusion

The female literacy rate in Nepal lags behind the male literacy rate. GOs and INGOs are launching various literacy programs to reduce such a disparity. Specially, INGOs conduct literacy programs exclusively for women in selected districts. There are also literacy programmes of INGOs conducted in some districts, which emphasise female participation vis-à-vis male participation. Such programmes are implemented as projects and they disappear upon the completion of the projects. Hence, it is equally important to strengthen the governmental regular literacy programs, such as women education, adult education program and post literacy program. Actually, women enrolment in all types of literacy programmes is encouraging. Hence, in order to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of these literacy programmes, the constraints preventing women from literacy acquisition should be eliminated through several remedial measures.

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